Robert Fulford's column about David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd

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Half a century ago, you might have heard people at cocktail parties saying: Are you inner-directed? Is he other-directed? Do we know anybody who is tradition-directed? When these words swam into public consciousness, they became a new way to classify humanity. Some of us may not have entirely understood this system when we used it, but as self-conscious, pseudo-intellectual gossip it flowered for years.

It was created, unintentionally, by a work of sociology that has now been re-released in paperback, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (Yale University Press), by David Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney. Riesman wanted to find out how the increasing power of corporate and government organizations influenced national character. He produced a literate and daringly speculative book, altogether different from the narrow and nervously guarded assemblies of statistical data that often make sociology a synonym for dreariness.

In every age, certain personality types rise to prominence. Wars call forth warriors, and an era of expansion calls forth adventurers. What sort of people flourish in the age of organization? Answering that question, Riesman sorted character types into three defined but overlapping categories.

Tradition-directed people, who rigorously obey ancient rules, seldom thrive in modern, quickly changing societies. Inner-directed people live as they were taught in childhood: They tend to be confident and perhaps also rigid. But other-directed people are flexible and willing to accommodate others to win approval. Big organizations find this type essential.

As Riesman wrote, "The other-directed person wants to be loved rather than esteemed," not necessarily to control others but to relate to them. Those who are other-directed need assurance that they are emotionally in tune with people around them. In the 1940s, the other-directed character was beginning to dominate society. Today the triumph of that type is all but complete: It dominates everything from universities to TV talk shows.

The Lonely Crowd turned out to be the first of many books raising questions about conformity and individuality in post-war America. Riesman was suddenly an intellectual fashion, which for an academic is both delightful and painful: The professor, at first happy to be talked about, soon realizes some of the talk expresses professional envy and more of it is based on misunderstanding.

Riesman wasn't comfortable in his role as national character doctor. Many readers assumed a change in the American character meant a change for the worse, which wasn't his point. Riesman had no particular reverence for the tradition-directed and inner-directed types that he saw disappearing.

He didn't like people classifying themselves according to his categories, as if answering a questionnaire in Cosmopolitan. As he said, they "tended to identify with the weaknesses they felt in themselves or in the people they knew." He regretted that his description of the move away from old-fashioned workmanship toward organizational skills supported snobbish attitudes to business.

Riesman also refused to join those who blamed the mass media for flaws in modern character. He thought that before the media existed, people wasted their time in ways that were no more attractive or virtuous.

Passionate admirers of The Lonely Crowd compare it to Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, a book that was on Riesman's mind as he wrote; he quotes it more than any other. The two books have similar ambitions, but Riesman lacks the profound shrewdness of Tocqueville. Riesman is a good writer, Tocqueville a great one. Tocqueville writes in the individual voice of a self-possessed French nobleman; Riesman is an honest American liberal, generous and good-natured, perhaps a bit too other-directed for the good of his style. And Riesman seldom delivers insights as dazzling as Tocqueville's. Writing in the 1830s, Tocqueville predicted almost in an aside that the 20th century would be dominated by conflict between the United States and Russia, the U.S. as a democracy, Russia as a tyranny (he didn't say which would win).

Even so, much in The Lonely Crowd seems to describe the life North America lives today. It doesn't, however, identify one character type we know well, the driven entrepreneur of technology who follows an inwardly shaped dream, works 14 hours a day, and is declared a hero. People in that mould are familiar figures on our social landscape, and probably inspire millions. They await the sociologist who can write about them as well as Riesman wrote about the types he observed in the middle of the 20th century.