

Freewheelin' 2

Typical, typical: norms, personality and type

Peter Geyer

Peter Geyer continues his series of 'random thoughts' on personality, the self and psychological type.

I feel like a number.

– Bob Seger

I am not a number, I am a free man!

– Number 6

I'm damaged - I like it.
It made me what I am
I'm damaged; and I like it
The rest is just a sham

– John Shirley & Donald Roeser

Stay! ... Stay! ... Stay!
I will understand you.

– Paul Buchanan & Robert Bell

Do you like where you come from?
Do you swear in the night?
Would it mean much to you
If I treated you right?

– Nick Drake

Personal identity is a key component to any understanding of type and the MBTI.[®] Questions like “Who am I?”, “How am I similar to/different from my fellow human beings?”, “How and why does this matter?” are just the beginning of examining this key aspect of type.

Jung, of course, saw personality as a calling, and emphasised its singular nature. Becoming a personality had no celebrity overtones for him, and it is quite clearly something unusual: something that by definition distinguishes a person from society at large or, as Jung put it, “the common herd” (CW17). It's not necessarily positively rewarding as well.

With type and the MBTI we have a different approach: a standardised instrument capable of being taken by the average person. Because not everyone is a type (a consciousness issue) or is developed in functioning as a type, there are bound to be some problems. Apart from Form J (with its fifth scale, ‘Comfort-Discomfort’), the MBTI doesn't say anything about whether or not I am functioning well as an INTP or INFJ or whatever; it simply indicates my preferences.

When we discuss a type result, or shoot the breeze about the preferences of politicians and celebrities, we use our knowledge and experience of type and the world, as well as generalised descriptions we possess or have read. Unless we stick closely to the cognitive processes themselves, we can land in hot water and make claims about individuals that aren't sustainable, although stereotypically plausible.

Some years ago I commented on a book review published in a type newsletter from another country. I sought to point out an alternative scenario to that presented by the INFP reviewer. My comments were published: but what was interesting was the quite direct feedback given to me suggesting that I go off and talk with all the other INTPs on the Internet. At that stage I didn't even have e-mail, let alone all the other paraphernalia. Even now, I much prefer a book to Internet activity. But I'm still an INTP. I'm sure you can point to your own examples of this sort of thing, mostly from well-meaning people, that are misleading and sometimes hurtful.

Apart from smelling of type *apartheid* (a not unusual occurrence: try to get some introverted space at a conference, or express reservations about group processes), the point here is that generalised data can have severe limitations – even generalised data about type. That's not to say such data isn't useful, simply that there need to be contexts applied to it.

In the world outside type, of course, we are constantly regaled with information about the average person. The Melbourne *Age* of 11 June 2000 presented an American version of this in a brief article on ‘Mr Average’, someone I've never met. These surveys can give some interesting data, even if the standard person doesn't actually exist.

Few of these generalised surveys on men have any relevance to me at all. An INTP, someone 200 cm tall, a woman with size 12 shoes all have attributes that can discount them from standardised results. In terms of personality constructs, being outside the norm, or not being common, usually leads to pathologising: what's *wrong* with you, rather than who you *are*.

If you have a particularly rigid view of what standard human behaviour should be, then you can entertain a world like B F Skinner's *Walden 2*; The Village in Patrick McGoohan's *The Prisoner*; the prevailing economic viewpoint; some views of humanity presented by many geneticists and commentators on the human genome; or the management of Melbourne's Colonial Stadium over the past year or so. This is a pretty debilitating and depressing view of human beings and I can't see that it helps anybody. It's also not particularly accurate.

C.G. Jung railed against this sort of thing in *The undiscovered self* (1960). Jung preferred not to systematise his work, perhaps because of his experience with the somewhat dogmatic Freud, although the development of psychology and various systems throughout his lifetime would certainly have given him food for thought. It might also have been the solipsistic orientation preferred by many INTPs. Whatever the reason, it was clearly easier and more preferable for him to be Jung, rather than a Jungian.

Systematisation, while extremely useful in terms of a complete view of a topic or idea (e.g. quality) can lead to ossification and rigidity. As words are concepts, Jung's ideas, like others in the field, are simply representations or labels of processes; they actually have no inherent content. With respect to types, Jung also said that you could have as many as you wanted, depending on where you wished to draw the line, and that there were no ideal forms of the types (Geyer, 1995). It's hard to systematise if you take that particular point of view.

Experimental psychology and the behaviourist perspective were two of the components of the development of psychology that led to the focus of norms, or standardisation. A definition of normal behaviour can preclude from normality lots of activities or approaches to life that might be acceptable in the broader scheme of things. This is the dilemma we're faced with when we use the MBTI without reference to the broader and deeper theory of type.

The MBTI is essentially a *sort* ('which category do you prefer?'), and so different in intent, structure and purpose to other instruments. Conventional instruments pathologise extremes, because the theory underpinning them focuses on norms; the further away you are from the norm, the greater the presumption that there may be some pathological issues for you.

It doesn't follow that you have any, of course; you may simply prefer INTP or INFP or one of

the other types that tend to gather on the extremes of some instruments. MBTI scores aren't intended to mean anything: only the *clarity* of the suggested preference is relevant.

And of course type's not *skill*. You may clearly prefer judging, for instance, but it does not follow that any of your decisions are any good. The same applies to anybody's intuitions or preference for tangible realities.

Training people in the use of the MBTI requires, by definition, emphasis on the non-pathological nature of the constructs or processes (choose one, depending on where you are theoretically), and the fact that the MBTI is a sort and the scores don't actually mean anything, simply how well you've answered the Indicator. I'm wary of inferring any more than that.

The paradox inherent in this is that the MBTI depends on some notion of norms. Its questions have to attract those with the appropriate preferences, without getting too culturally specific. This is particularly important in Australia, where we use the American forms of the MBTI and also the item weights, where relevant.

There is no academically published data on type distributions in Australia either, simply educated guesses. The Psychological Type Research Unit at Deakin University has preliminary, but skewed, data that suggest that the distribution for females in particular is different, and that the percentage of Australian females preferring T is much higher than American estimates. Culturally, this seems to me to fit.

Currently available to Australian MBTI users are Form G (hand-scored and two self-scoring versions), Form M (hand-scored and self-scored), and Form K (marketed as Step II). All of these are also computer scorable. It is possible to come out a different reported type on each of these three forms, so feedback is more than essential.

The Form G self-scores suffer from a PTRU-documented 10% - 15% error rate in calculation (i.e. your clients can't add up), as well as a lower internal reliability due to the way the questions are ordered for scoring purposes.

Form M seems less reliable than Form G in some ways, perhaps because it has been normed against a different population (a US census), and because of its comparative lack of variety in the questions – although it's early days yet. Form K, of course gives some idea as to why close preferences may be reported, but, by definition, nothing relating to stresses.

Emotional well-being and what it might mean is pretty subjective in any case. I might be feeling good about myself, but that's pretty different to how an ENFP or ISTJ feels when they're in the same spot. Jung's theory isn't a theory of emotions. You might, however, speculate as to how emotions might be attached to extraversion, say, or the inferior function, or even the archetypes.

I suspect that those of us who use the MBTI (and, hopefully, type itself) in specific settings for a specific purpose can sometimes be distracted by the purpose and forget what the MBTI is intended to do (myself included). For instance, type can actually operate counter to some career theories and practices simply by suggesting that there are a variety of ways to live one's life successfully (in a subjective sense), and that time frames for this activity can and do vary enormously between the types.

Meredith Fuller, a prominent careers counsellor in Melbourne, has described how, for INTPs, their career may not come into focus in a real sense until they are in their 40s and 50s (1994). Jung, after all, called personality a vocation.

Optimum career in that sense has to do with how you do what it is you are doing, and for what purpose. In type terms you would expect that this would be in the service of the dominant function.

I once spoke to an INTP shoe salesman who told me of his difficulties in getting work such as he had, because people would claim he was not suited or would get bored. He was doing a Masters degree, which was the purpose of him working. I found him very knowledgeable and helpful, particularly as he was ignoring the stereotypical principles of customer service, which seem to be based around extraverted feeling and so are not necessarily helpful for a number of the types.

A key part of the success of Isabel Myers' work on type is the decades of personal study of these principles, both in the family context before the MBTI was thought of, and in the subsequent development of the MBTI. Professionals and researchers in psychology didn't do this.

To a large extent, this is still the case. It's one of the reasons, for instance, that you can read regularly about research on human evolution, brain activity etc with reference to Freud's ideas, not Jung's – notwithstanding the latter's well-documented scientific interest in the topic with respect to his ideas on personality.

Isabel Myers was ultimately interested in the value and worth of each individual. Although C.G. Jung would have been at odds with her method in the MBTI, he would certainly be in agreement with her aim.

In using the ideas and methods of these people, it's important to attend to the value of standardised data in the context of the variety between each individual, and within each type, in particular, variations in "normal" behaviour and inclination. ☒

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