Freewheelin' 3

What are people really like, and who's responsible?

Peter Geyer

Nature or nurture? The question has been around for a long time. In the third of his continuing series of 'random thoughts', Peter Geyer contends that it is a debate that should be well and truly settled by now.

I'm going to sing my song and sing it all day long
A song that never ends
How can I tell you all the things inside my head?
<div align="right">- Mike Pinder</div>

It is now known that we are born with considerable knowledge of the world around us: very young infants can reason about motion and spatial relationships.
<div align="right">- Charles Yang</div>

When you use the MBTI®, or type, what sort of person do you have in mind, and what aspects of the person are relevant for you?

In my experience many people use the MBTI for self awareness, or as a 'tool', simply because it works, without considering its underpinning theory of personality all that much. Some (almost entirely NFs) have told me that they consider the theory incidental to helping people, which startles me somewhat. What something *means* surely has an impact on its utility and efficacy – at least to me.

> ## "The real issue as to how we are is how nature and nurture *combine*…"

During a recent MBTI Qualifying Program I was surprised by the lack of reflection on these issues by the majority of people in the group (a variety of types) – and by their active resistance to anything other than a nurture-oriented framework.

I must admit to being surprised that anyone would seriously seek to defend either a *nurture* (society) or *nature* (heredity) position these days, given the current scientific knowledge which indicates that you really can't have a choice. It's not a relevant distinction. The real issue as to how we are as human beings is how nature and nurture *combine*, and for what purposes.

But if you trained as a teacher (as I did, as a mature age student in the early 1980s) you might have been presented with views of psychology that were quite at variance from that – classical and operant conditioning, for instance. Most professionals don't end up revising their foundational training completely, or perhaps revising it much at all.

That tendency is a focus for both Thomas Kuhn (1970) and Bruno Latour (1987) in their quite different examinations of how science works. One of the reasons we have this issue is that researchers and writers generally don't seem to read much outside their specialities. That is one reason why some things don't change much.

The business world is an easy example – *too* easy perhaps: a recent *Four Corners* presentation on the world of work (2000) showed that, if call-centre management is anything to go by, not much has been learned in the past hundred years (not much about people, at any rate). Education, sociology and psychology are also fields where the general ossification of ideas seems all too present. Perhaps people don't have much time, but still …

As an example, the linguist Charles Yang, in evaluating a new book from the celebrated Steven Pinker, seems frustrated by Pinker's approach to human language formation because he doesn't take account of current knowledge. Following on from the quote at the start of this paper, Yang says:

> We have learned a great deal about the unique abilities of individual species, discoveries which point to innate traits and instincts, endowed through millions of years of evolution.

> At the same time, we have learned that human infants and other higher primates can organise patterns, linguistic and otherwise, in apparently inductive, hence learned and empirical ways … Pinker does no justice to the scientific efforts of the past 50 years. (2000, p. 33)

Somewhat paradoxically, Pinker has written a fore-word to Judith Rich Harris' eclectic look at the nature-nurture question, *The nurture assumption* (1999). Having made a living writing textbooks on psychology and child development, Harris reads widely and presents data from various respectable sources. By my reading, she would lump parents into environment, and do a nature-environment interaction. She provides some interesting data on cultural influences, too: nothing radical, but insightful all the same. (Her thesis, by the way, is that parents' influence on their children's person-alities doesn't matter as much as the peer group.)

You don't have to read much of Jung to discover he was a nature/nurture man. It got him into a lot of trouble, but he was right. You can see that in interviews as well as his other stuff. I'd suggest that's one of the reasons why he didn't like the standardising tendency of experimental psychology: it failed to take account of the differences between people (hence his type theory), and the interaction of that with culture (hence the collective conscious and unconscious).

This notion certainly escapes proponents of the 5-Factor model of personality in *www.centacs.com*. In promoting the associated NEO group of psychological instruments (which bear comparison with the MBTI), they stick to the predominantly surface view of personality that instrumentalism prefers (language, not theory).

So, if we are interested in type, and are using it appropriately, then by definition we are presenting a view of human beings that is *both* nature *and* nurture, not one way or the other. That has a lot of consequences, but that's for a later time.

Isabel Myers, in any case, makes it clear in the *MBTI Manual* that what she's on about is an individual's predisposition to type and the environmental interaction. The fruits of her labour, the MBTI, simply indicates to that view of humanity.

As to *how* the preferences manifest themselves, well that's an environmental consideration. The preferences, in my view, have to be content free: the content comes from interest and experience. You can't be interested in a computer if you've never seen one. And an INTP farmer will probably farm differently to his or her ISTJ neighbour – but the differences may be subtle.

Our descriptions of type preferences have to be trait-based and general, because how else can we get across the idea of difference in written form? But they're simply *examples*, not set in stone: a different culture will provide different examples.

A personal example. In 1996, having succeeded (with the help of others) in negotiating for and establishing the Psychological Type Research Unit at Deakin University, I went to CAPT in Florida to investigate how they were doing their statistical research. I spoke at length with a fellow INTP, open and genial, who operated and continued the development of CAPT's system.

I didn't understand a word he said.

I had to take back diagrams and assorted other things, and try to explain it to others with more expertise in that field.

How people use *photographs* is another example. I take heaps of photographs wherever I go. Some people consider this a sensing activity, notwithstanding that intuitives (particularly NTPs) seem to be over-represented as photographers.

When I was in Whitby, England for four hours in 1996 I took a few hundred photos: aspects of this or that. I had a couple enlarged and framed. They were taken partly for my family (all dominant or auxiliary introverted sensing types) so they could see where I'd been, but they each responded to them in different ways. My mother sometimes ran her fingers over the photographs; my father, the extravert in the family, needed his own space and time to consider them, if at all.

I've put my photos in albums because they reflect my personal journey and I like them to be in some sort of order. There are about 25 albums covering the last ten years or so. For me that's introverted sensing and introverted thinking. But I'm also interested in the *meaning* of the whole trip, and that's both versions of intuition. What's my prime reason? I don't know – I'm still thinking about it.

> **"There can be a number of reasons for doing the same thing"**

The point I'm trying to make here is that there can be a number of reasons for doing the same thing, and it's possible and normal to use non-preferred functions in a positive way but still be a dominant whatever (Ti in my case). The use may be variable, eccentric or spot on, depending on the environment and the individual.

An afterthought: I occasionally use the 'describe the sea' exercise with groups for an explication of S-N. But I don't use it if I'm inland, where people may have to travel hours to get to the sea, because the Ss in these groups invariably give N answers: as the sea isn't real to them, they have to use their imagination. Strange but true.

With respect to *culture*, it has been clear for many years that so-called 'primitive' cultures can in fact be more complex in the way they operate than our Western urban cultures (see, e.g., Kuper, 1991). What we see as cultural development may in fact be (in my view) simply *technology*.

Bruno Latour's *We have never been modern* (1995) is a useful read around this idea, albeit as a post-modern view, with all the game playing that implies. (I don't see most post-modernist views as particularly serious discourse; mainly because they don't seem to consider the notion of a self at all.)

The main issue for type theory and Jung's overall theory is the level of *unconsciousness* of a culture. Jung expressed a view that implied some progression in human development, but, as usual he doesn't seem to have got down to defining it much.

When we study societies there is a tendency to look at them from the view of progress: this culture follows from that, so there is progress, however defined. This view doesn't have much going for it if you're an historian, as there is little evidence to support it outside of wishful thinking and a few value judgements.

It's easy to look back at the end of a journey, or even at a point on that journey, and see a pattern or a line of continuation. But it doesn't follow that the journey itself was as clearly defined as all that. It wasn't inevitable, for example, that Charles I would lose his throne and his life to Cromwell and others. The same applies in some senses to aspects of personal development in terms of the perfection of human nature etc – but that's another topic.

As a person trained in history, and now working in fields I've experienced as reasonably ignorant of history (business, psychology, sociology), I think it's important to check out some facts. In my view, Martin Seligman's book *Personality: What you can change and what you can't* would have had a better introduction (which provided historical content) if he had walked across the campus to check out his statements with relevant historians. A lot of what he said was not really true as history.

Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* is another example, with his inability to translate *homo sapiens* accurately. Some good ideas associated with some bad evidence.

"Change is simply that, not progress"

If you take the continuous view of progress to considerations of the future in a utopian way, there has also been a tendency over recent decades to present one of two views that are not really very accurate. Usually you get the beginning of culture as some hunter-gatherer society, followed by the development of agriculture and cities, and a search for rules and order.

This is 'progress', but on what grounds? It can be *change*, but change is simply that, not progress. If we thought change was inevitably progress, we'd have better managing methods than those depicted in the *Four Corners* program mentioned earlier.

If I may be a little trite, what tends to happen is that the future is depicted either as *technological* (NT) or *love-oriented* (NF) – cyborgs, or the Age

of Aquarius. Kohlberg's hierarchy of values does this sort of thing as well, and there are others. Ultimately, according to the propounders of these stories, humans will be one or other of these types: a genuinely frightening prospect, from this chair at any rate.

Some of the language surrounding the Human Genome Project reflects this view – *we're all the same*, it says, *we have the same wants and needs*. We want to be more organised and efficient, 'motivated to be motivated', as Shelly Gare (2000) said recently in *The Weekend Australian*. I'd like to see a broader range of thinking around that. I see these sorts of frameworks as overly reductionist; there need to be a few more perspectives and knowledge approaches in there for me.

Finally, if we're using type (which is, amongst other things, a theory of consciousness), how would we be certain about how conscious or unconscious people are? Jung had a particular view, but I'm unsure how sustainable that is. We'd also have to have an idea about the level of consciousness (defined in type-like terms) of people in the technological world that many (but not all) of us in the Western world inhabit.

I didn't see too much consciousness from the participants in this year's US Republican Party Convention, for instance; nor in the follow-up Democrat event.

Nor, for that matter, in the somewhat incredible archetypal experience in Australia recently, where the Olympic torch was carried around the country, cheered on by ordinary people braving rain and cold in many places (I did it in Warrnambool, watching in fascination), on its way to a controversially-managed event in Sydney. That seemed to have achieved its synergy almost despite itself.

More likely, though, it had nothing to do with the organisers; the people took it up themselves as part of the Australian collective consciousness and unconsciousness.

Who knows?

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Photograph courtesy of Jamie Johnston, CAPT Library.

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Research notes

Ian Ball

The Psychological Type Research Unit is a joint initiative of Deakin University and AAPT. Unit Manager Ian Ball reports on current initiatives.

Australian Data Archive Project

Before he went to the UK, Peter Malone donated all of his accumulated MBTI data for inclusion in the Australian Data Archive Project. These have been coded and partially analysed.

Type tables based on the primary and secondary teachers data in the Archive are reported on pages 13 and 14 of this issue.

The Archive also includes data from other researchers, including Associate Professor Robin Matthews and Dr Trevor Hutchins.

Research questions

From time to time funding applications are called for, and researchers apply to pursue particular investigations. In seeking funding it would be useful to consider the questions for which AAPT members and Review readers feel most need for clarification.

You are invited to think about these questions and forward them to the Unit at the address below.

Donations

Recently I was pleased to receive a cheque from AAPT′s National Committee for a regular donation towards the upkeep of the Unit.

I have also acknowledged the donations from AAPT members who have chosen to generously support the work of the Unit as part of their subscription package. Thank you all very much.

Occasional papers

The Psychological Type Research Unit, together with the Australian Association for Psychological Type, is involved with a project to publish scholarly material on psychological type as occasional papers.

An international panel conducts blind reviews of papers submitted for publication. For details of format etc, phone or fax Ian Ball on 03 9878 4794, or e-mail gmagpa@bigpond.net.au.

Open day

For the benefit of National Conference delegates and other visitors, the Psychological Type Research Unit will be open on Monday, 4 December 2000 from 10.00am to 1.00pm. The Unit is located at the Burwood Campus of Deakin University.