

# New wine from old casks, and other conundrums

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*Freewheelin'* with Peter Geyer

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*Have I reached the point where I must take my cue  
and follow you and your signs?*

Peter Hammill (1973)

*The contemporary crisis among most young adults  
in industrialised societies is not 'Who am I?', but  
rather 'What will I become' or, more cynically,  
'How much will I be able to get?'*

Jerome Kagan (2002)

If you've been using type for a while in organisations and elsewhere, you may have run into the intermittent refrain of newness. Things like this:

*'What's new? We'll use that.'*

*'The MBTI's old hat.'*

I never know what to make of these statements. Usually they speak of an idea or process tried once, unexamined, as though change or enlightenment happens by magic, not by reflection and work.

Sometimes there are professionally legitimate complaints concerning the lack of well-researched and publicly-available Australian norms for the MBTI that have the publisher's *imprimatur*. I don't have an answer for that, and it's out of my control other than to encourage Ian Ball's public work with the Psychological Type Research Unit. Others might do more, but I don't know who they are.

More importantly, though, it has always intrigued me as to why newness should be such an issue, or indeed, what newness is. If you're studying or teaching in academia somewhere, then pressure is on to be up to date with the research. Even given that, there are seminal papers or monographs, and some fields require attention to primary texts, originals. Even there, there can be some new things said—newness out of oldness.

For instance, the psychoanalyst and essayist Adam Phillips is currently editing Freud's complete works for Penguin. I'm presuming that involves at least some translation from the original German. If so, the results could be interesting, in that it seems that Freud was a lot more random and subtle in his German than original translator Lytton Strachey would allow. Strachey also apparently organised Freud's thoughts more than is apparent from the German originals (Ornston 1992). Freud, of course, is well-known as a language stylist; his Nobel Prize was for Literature.

As an aside, it's a pity that there's no equivalent investigation into Jung's translators, although there are bits and pieces to be gleaned here and there. Jung, much more fluent in English than was Freud, was involved to a large extent in the editing of his collected works, so perhaps there aren't similar issues here, although translation is always to some extent a matter of opinion (Fordham 1993).

Sometimes in these researches it's discovered that the oldness hasn't been investigated all that well, or that unexamined material is now available—lost letters, manuscripts, Cabinet papers, etc—and so the old becomes new.

Academic concerns, though, seem quite different to organisational or business concerns. The history of management theory and practice seems to show cycles of ideas going in and out of favour: emotions, teams; organisational structure. Emotional Intelligence, though based on more recent research, is popular at least partly because of the regular calls for people and organisations to be in touch with their feelings, or to express only the prescribed ones (e.g. Hochschild 1983, Tavris 1989).

T-Groups come easily to mind as a precursor of sorts, while teams in their most radical incarnations tend to appear every decade or so: 11 years, from memory, in one place I dealt with. Everybody's a team these days, and some of them are simply old sections and branches with new labels. So it's hard to see what's a team and what isn't.

A glance at call centres in particular, and activities of government and private organisations in general, will uncover a number of variants of F W Taylor's *One Best Way*. You can even get a degree in call centre management, which startles me somewhat given the treatment of staff in many of those places. It's a reminder that democracy is about voting and not about work, I suppose.

Type and MBTI don't fit easily into many of these scenarios, mostly because of generalisations about personality inherent in some methods and organisational cultures. Obviously, type can give insight into the different ways types express emotional intelligence, as defined (e.g. Pearman 2002), but if you think that everyone's emotional expression should be similar, or that, in the behaviourist style, everyone can learn to be similar, then emotional intelligence takes on a whole new meaning, *and* we're back to Taylor and similar ideas, and no one is helped or satisfied.

Because it doesn't fit into limited and generalised notions of what people are like, type also carries dangers into an organisation that isn't aware of the consequences of allowing people to be themselves, at least some of the time. Control is diminished, greater demands can be made of work in terms of value and interest, some things can take longer and so forth. Some people will leave to do something else that better fits with who they are.

None of that is necessarily bad, of course, but it may be unexpected, and so new in that sense.

This is particularly the case with economic models. If that seems to be fairly arcane and irrelevant, most management models presume something fairly similar, as do politicians and bureaucracies, the stock market, and so on. People are anticipated to behave in this way—*homo economicus*—cognitive therapy for the market.

Understanding economic models also seems to be sufficient for the laying on of the mantle of intellect, if the rise to fame of the ALP's Mark Latham is any guide. An article by veteran journalist Mike Steketee (2002) awarded Latham cleverness, but didn't really provide any evidence. It seems that a statement is enough these days, and maybe there's nothing new there.

Not long ago, the sociologist Donald Mackenzie, in reviewing a book by Philip Mirowski, admitted to testing out such a model on his students:

I've started giving my students money. Not to bribe my way to favourable teaching reviews, but to provoke reflection about the relations between economic and sociological views of human beings. The money is used to play the 'ultimatum game'. A large class divides itself into pairs, who must not be friends or acquaintances. Each pair collects ten 5p coins. One of the pair proposes a division of the coins, and the other either accepts or rejects the proposal. The game is then over: no negotiation is allowed. If the offer is accepted, the students keep the coins, splitting them as agreed. If it is rejected, the coins are returned to me. (2002)

Mackenzie reports what one might expect: that the vast majority of offers are either 50-50 or 60-40, not what the self-interest of economic theory predicts (90-10 may be too generous). He acknowledges that the results are different in economics classes (they fit the theory). However, in order to get a similar result from any student in his sociology groups, he has to import them from elsewhere.

One might draw some interesting conclusions from these results, about economics and the market itself (Mirowski 2002 and Callon 1998 are interesting places to start), as well as the nature of economics and sociology students—in Mackenzie's university, and in general.

It's in this area that type can be a force for social change. Why adhere to a model of human beings—the economic model—that's false? Surely that's not efficient? And yet, together with the 'average person' and 'normal behaviour', it pervades our institutions and our lives. Averages, whether true or not, are easier to manage, I suppose—which is sad, really.

Being a force for social change doesn't mean compelling mass completions of the MBTI: that would be fascism. But acknowledging differences in the psychology of human beings, and acting on

them, might produce a better society, although the drugs and syndromes industry may not be all that pleased.

Notwithstanding the quote at the head of this piece, Jerome Kagan would also have us look at more than behaviour. A doyen of the study of early childhood development, his latest book (2002) has him pointing out differences between what is essentially the same behaviour of an infant or a child, and the context in which the behaviour is tested and observed, as well as the child's temperament.

This obviously has consequences for research in general, as well as how we observe people and infer type. It also has consequences for the trait approach to personality, which I'll turn to later.

Regarding research, Kagan comments on the inappropriateness of using rats as a comparison or analogy for human beings, for the reason that monkeys' responses are much more like humans, and some other inferences from rat behaviour are simply wrong.

The core part of the book, though, is about mental schemata and semantic structures. On the basis of this book, type would be seen as one of many mental schemata, rather than something cognitive in the strict sense (that is what I infer; Kagan doesn't talk about type) but these are contexts for knowledge about experience and so are important regarding responses to situations, whether in the laboratory or not. This is admittedly complex, but type users would see a parallel between the way different types respond to the same situation.

Semantic structures have to do with language and meaning, sometimes meaning without language. In these terms, type is a semantic structure of sorts, with specific language and specific meanings and interpretations.

Kagan points out how significant these structures are, not only for the infants researched on, but also for the language used to describe that research. He notes misuses and mis-identifications in his field, and then extends that to the various uses of language at particular times in history. Words and styles; ways of acting come into and out of prominence.

From that perspective, Kagan launches into a critique of self-report instruments, specifically the NEO-PI and 5-Factor (Big 5) model of personality.

The NEO is the conventional instrument considered to be most like the MBTI, although the philosophies and presuppositions vary quite radically.

The Big 5 is the accepted general theory of personality. It's called a theory, notwithstanding the lack of philosophical constructs and presuppositions in a book claiming to discuss theoretical perspectives on the model (Wiggins 1996). Geier and Downey's book on DiSC theory (1989) suffers the same deficit, so it may be a general thing. No wonder the MBTI is out on its own in so many ways.

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Using his framework as interpretation, Kagan says:

...questionnaires represent a very particular type of incentive, for they activate particular semantic nodes of a person's network of self-representations. An individual who activated semantic concepts referring to loss of behavioural control as he read 'Are you angered easily by minor frustrations?' might answer no, while an individual who activated concepts referring to feelings of tension might answer yes to the same question. Behavioural observations might reveal that the two individuals shared equivalent tendencies to raise their voices and become critical when frustrated by another person. (pp 182-183)

Kagan's point is that there's much more to personality than questions allow, and that self-report instruments are no basis for 'inferring personality dimensions' (p 183). He also points out that 'Jung appreciated that the persona displayed to others was not always a sensitive reflection of the private anima' (p 194) i.e. introversion, and introverts are not easily understood by behavioural observations.

I think Kagan's criticisms are relevant for the MBTI, even given that Isabel Myers developed an *indicator* to an already available theory, not a *determinator*, and that her criterion group was successful mature adults, not juveniles in Psychology 101 or Year 10 or 12, as seems still to be the norm elsewhere.

If type is to succeed, or even to last as a view of personality, attention needs to be paid to more than behaviour and the changing nuances of society and language.

Andrew Samuels (1989) points out to us that there isn't necessarily anything new. Following on from an early teacher of his, he says:

... what now looks to us like the intellectual or ideological discoveries of the past are better understood as *descriptions* of the most progressive contemporary practices. For example, Machiavelli did not write a handbook for princes, containing smart new ideas. Rather he described what the most enterprising princes were *already* doing. Adam Smith's importance is not that he promoted capitalism, but that he described (and hence understood) what the new capitalists were doing. You could say that such writers were bringing something to consciousness.

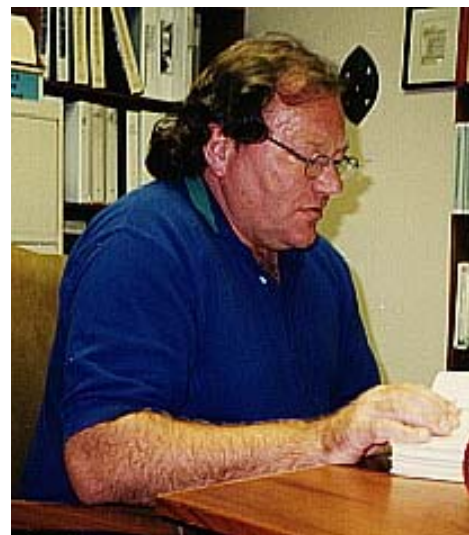
There might be many ways of saying the same thing: but using the same words doesn't imply the same meaning; seeing the same behaviour doesn't imply the same personality.

It's like walking across hot coals: if you take the right direction, it's a cool journey, apparently. That's why it's on offer: the circus part of learning, legerdemain, really.

But you have to work through all the exhortations, directions and distractions, perhaps reflect a little, avoid the gurus, or even reject them. ❖

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*Mark Latham is what the Australian Labor Party has instead of a thinker.*

Bob Ellis, *First Abolish The Customer*