

Looking for personality



The freewheelin'
Peter Geyer

Perception, translation, meaning

Recently I met someone at a friend's place who asked me what I did. My reply, 'I teach people about personality' was met with, 'You mean, how to get *more*?'

I found I couldn't respond to that in any detail, in part because 'personality' had for each of us quite a different meaning, and I didn't want to launch into a complex explication. The gap seemed too much, and the situation didn't seem appropriate. So I replied that what I did wasn't much like what she'd said, and left it at that.

I also made a personal judgement on how open this person seemed to be to ambiguity, abstraction, and the ability to listen. That may, of course, have been incorrect, but I'm trying to learn more about when to open my mouth and when to keep silent about what I do and what it is.

One of the difficulties of teaching type is that different meanings have to be provided for its terms. So 'personality' is not about 'more' or 'less', nor even 'having' such a thing: all these relate to the public person, the world of celebrity, fame and notoriety perhaps, but also the expression of affect, dominance (e.g. an 'imposing' personality), and suchlike.

In the same way, 'extraversion' is not like *extroversion*—a more social view—but about personal energy, in tension with the opposite in introversion; 'thinking' is not about intellect; 'feeling' not about emotion, and so on. It doesn't mean that the other definitions are wrong: they simply have different presumptions and uses, and clarify or mislead in their own ways.

Some definitions can be more useful than others, of course, and some presumptions may be wrong, or off-beam. Looking for definitions and meanings seems to be a rare activity these days. At school, that sort of thing was identified as 'critical thinking', part of English studies; but it disappeared from the curriculum soon after I completed school.

I don't know whether it's come back (or whether it ever left in other places), but I found it really valuable. In type terms it's probably introverted thinking (which may account for my enthusiasm for it), but it's essential for understanding type constructs, and for comparison with other psychological, sociological and popular ideas.

This is because, when it comes down to it, psychological instruments are translation devices. We ask a leading question, or a series of them, and speculate on or define the responses. Hopefully this is done in a non-coercive atmosphere, some of which can be deceptively benign, such as completing a survey or an MBTI or similar product in a training or counselling setting.

The answers, in any case, may not be real: there has to be a good translation. However, as Umberto Eco points out (2004), this is not as simple as it seems. Translation has its own difficulties: we still need to know something else, perhaps a *lot* of something, and Eco provides some entertaining and appalling examples of where translation has gone awry.

A friend of mine, whose family origins are in Croatia, said to me that the translations of film dialogue in that language on SBS are not actually what she hears the actors say and often miss the point of what's being said. Perhaps they're going for meaning, rather than a larger slab of words infused with the cultural interpretation.

Even amongst the various Englishes, this is an issue. It's well-known that American and British humour are different. In Australian literature on management and organisation, the emphasis seems more on American than British approaches, notwithstanding our cultural affinity with Britain.

In our everyday language (particularly amongst women, it seems), 'bathroom' now denotes a toilet, even when there's no bath to be seen.

*I promise you, I won't leave a clue
No tell-tale remark, no print of my shoe
Have I reached the point
where I should take my cue
And follow you and your signs?*

Peter Hammill

Even within Australia, many variants of standard terms exist, and it's interesting how many people presume that *their* words are the only ones.

In the 1950s, when I went with my family to Melbourne's Williamstown Beach we all wore our 'togs.' Later, for reasons that are unclear to me, they became 'bathers.' And now the Sydney term 'cossie' seems to be winning out, perhaps because newspapers and magazines use spell-checks, rather than knowledge about 'something.'

So, in using language, we need to know something about culture. And in doing that, we need to know that culture changes: and not because of workshops and other processes that have that aim. The ebb and flow of approaches to life is an example of human adaptability, as well as a sign that, if we really want to find out about people, we should look past specific behaviour or attributes.

Socio-economic frameworks that focus on description come to mind, particularly the 'Generations' (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Y, etc). This has recently been a theme of discussion in the *Melbourne Age*, culminating in an editorial which questioned the usefulness of such generalised terms.

From my point of view, this is progress of a sort: partly because the Generations don't stand up well under critical scrutiny, but also because of the broad range of people who publicly expressed unease at these terms (of whom I was one).

Today we may think of Sydney, rather than Melbourne, as an extraverted place; but in the late 19th century and afterwards, the reverse was the case. Melbourne was seen as more brash, more 'American' (Blainey 2003). The positioning of 'major events' in Melbourne today has also enabled a more extraverted expression of life than was the case when I was growing up there.

It's not that there were fewer extraverts then, simply that there weren't places in the public eye where it was acceptable to express extraversion. Here, social etiquette comes into play.

A simple example is the side of the path or street you walk on. Historically, it's been the custom in Australia to walk on the left, and people did so without thinking about it. In the USA and Europe, however, people walk on the right, and this practice seems to be now in favour, or coming into favour. It's always interesting to me to see people of my age group look confused when I come along on the left side of the footpath.

Mobile phones have their own etiquette (for want of a better term). Any place will do, it seems. Recently I witnessed someone engaging loudly in a mobile conversation whilst purchasing food at a counter. They were quite unselfconscious about it, and oblivious to others. I couldn't believe it.

And anyone will do it. It seems to be the norm that people answer phones and make calls anywhere they choose. I haven't yet experienced someone engaged in a call from the 'bathroom', but I expect it has occurred.

My point in making this observation is that a few years ago, using a mobile in this way would be seen as an example of extraversion. But now it isn't; it's general behaviour. *Not* using one might not be introversion, either; it might be social circumstances, money, and so on.

We have to take these considerations into account when trying to see type in others. It also depends on what someone says or writes: you need cues to see where the information is leading you.

Ricky Ponting, captain of the Australian cricket team, recently compared the two leg-spinners in his team, **Shane Warne** and **Stuart MacGill**. 'You can make out a little about their personalities by the way they bowl', he said:

Warney is a lot more outgoing with the way he talks and acts around the dressing room. He likes the group environment and atmosphere. That brings out the best in him, whereas Stuie keeps to himself a fair bit and interacts more one-on-one than in a group situation.

That's a fairly good brief description of extraversion and introversion. Ponting goes on further to say about MacGill:

I've never seen anyone read as many books as he does during a cricket tour. If we're batting, he'll pay a bit of attention to the cricket but he'll often be sitting there reading his book, something that is not one of Warney's favourite pastimes.

We might want to know more about what MacGill reads, but you'd speculate that there's an indication of intuition. Finally, Ponting says:

Stuie's really well prepared with all his gear. He's always got his little sweat towels. His whites are always folded and his boots are well looked after.

Shane Warne



You can make out a little about their personalities by the way they bowl



Stuart MacGill

Warney's over in the corner with his gear all over the place. Jocks and odd socks, sweat bands and gloves and things everywhere.

So you'd be looking at J-P. If I were to speculate using other data I've read and seen about these two men ('something about something'), I'd be comfortable suggesting Stuart MacGill prefers INTJ and Shane Warne ESTP.

'Something' where the words need further examination and more knowledge is a brief interview with ABC presenter **Geraldine Doogue**, as part of *The Age's* weekly series 'What I've Learnt', which I recommend as a way of examining culture and preference.

Here's my 'something about something.' Doogue has for some years presented the 'religious' program *Compass*, which is more about belief and values than religion *per se*. This is a field in which I've studied and which interests me greatly, yet I find little in *Compass* to watch.

I've speculated that that's because the programs are generally light on for the content I want to see, either in documentary style or discussions, which seem to me to be fairly shallow. I'd rather watch Kerry O'Brien grapple with Richard Armitage. So I don't test out *Compass* much these days, relying on the little ads somewhat interminably put out by the ABC, perhaps in lieu of content.

On my observations and reflections I had seen Doogue as ENFJ: confident, forthright, people-oriented, bright, intelligent in the NF way. So what evidence does she present for that in the interview?

Well, *extraversion* is easy. She says that:

Sitting around waiting is wasted time.

I probably find it easier to talk than write.

What Doogue likes about herself is that 'I'm not a control freak'; being so inclined is to be 'getting your priorities wrong':

If you are prepared to admit the chaos of letting other people coming into your life, you will, invariably, be a little late.

So we can get to P here. Another excerpt:

I've learned that broadcasting prizes emotion above rational thinking ... It's taken a lot to come to realise that the emotions play such a role and that it is actually entertainment.

An indication here of T perhaps, rather than F. Later on in this statement Doogue talks about her struggle in this way.

I like ideas, I find discussing ideas and concepts very entertaining, but at times I have tried to pack far too much into an item, either a television or radio broadcast.

Sounds N. The 'entertaining' is more E, as I think introverts are likely to avoid that sort of word.

The rest of the article has Doogue talking about physical issues, success for women, Australians' preference for moderates over extremists and disliking of eccentrics (she doesn't see herself as one, but seems to have a liking for them, wishing there were more, at any rate). But no type information there.

Something that intrigued me, though, was her comments on males being needy:

The best-positioned older men, I think, are ones who overtly acknowledge their dependence on women. I still think they are the ones in control, by the way, but I did think that they were much more confident and had it worked out.

I wish men would be more reflective about themselves. I still think men's capacity to be introspective is pathetic, and I think they would be much better if they did genuinely respect a lot of the lessons women have learnt. Having said that, I enjoy their company enormously.

And having read that, I'm having second thoughts about being in Doogue's company with the potential label 'pathetic' (offensive to me)—although I expect that her words came out blunter than she intended (which may mean something). But there seems to be some surprise reflections for her there, and a paradoxical jab at males who aren't reflective at the same time, or can't respect lessons women have learnt.

So I'm left wondering about the sorts of men she's met, and what she thinks are the lessons males can learn from females. I think there are a lot, but they might not be the same ones she's talking about; and there are some reciprocal lessons as well. Listening to each other is a good thing, as listening shows respect.

As to type: I suspect ENFP, but I wouldn't be sure about that. I'd need to know a little, or quite a deal, more about something in order to find out. And that's probably more about language and culture: for me, anyway.

Note

A more sophisticated version of 'ebb and flow' is the idea of saturation and compensation, which uses the Jungian view of tension of opposites. This is an idea of Eduardo Casas, as suggested to me by Danielle Poirier.

References

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At AusAPT's conference in Ballarat in September, Peter Geyer (INTP) will present a session with Ian Ball on 'Type and society: Reflections on differences and how we live.'

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Mailbox



Discussing personality type with regard to job interview behaviour, I asked my group of job seekers what they thought was meant by the term 'Extraversion.'

18 year old Ryan replied:

'Olive oil.'

I think I have some way to go!

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