

All in it together ... or is it just for the money?

Some conjectures



The freewheelin'
Peter Geyer

You can tell a lot
about someone if
you label them—
but you may miss
who they are

Peter Geyer (INTP) pursues the meaning of psychological type and other Jungian ideas on personality, often finding them in unexpected places.

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What does it mean to describe an emotion as characteristic of a country or era...? How and how far do we measure its prevalence?

Eric Hobsbawm

One of the problems in saying something about a group of people—whether it be a country, members of a ‘community’, or particular groupings such as what are currently called ‘personality preferences’—is the level of truth in the representation.

In public discourse, generalisations abound regarding behaviour and attitude where ‘we’ (or ‘they’) all fit in as identikit consumers, voters or, perhaps, INTPs (although any type will do).

Styles and labels

Turning up late, for instance (or not turning up at all) can be attributed to someone’s ‘style’, as if it’s something they are bound to do, like a type automaton. But the person themselves might not act in that way at all, or at least infrequently; enquiring about other aspects of their lives might provide insight into where being on time fits. Many years ago, an INFP said to me, ‘I turn up on time because it’s a value’.

It can even be difficult when people act as expected, at least as far as their type label goes. Every so often I meet with a long-time friend, and part of our discussions can be about her philosophically-inclined son, a man in his late 20s. He prefers INTP, and emotional expression isn’t one of his many attributes.

My friend, who prefers introverted intuition with feeling, doesn’t need a type label to identify this, of course. Though intelligent and well-read, she freely admits she ‘didn’t

get’ that many people don’t naturally understand people and emotions, or are unable to take a personal approach, notwithstanding it was all around her in her workplace.

This is, of course, a stereotypical story of an INTP male, with the advantage of being an inferior function issue. But it would be unwise to generalise too much by applying this person’s experience to others, presuming that issues with emotional expression (say) mean that INTPs don’t or won’t hug, for instance. I know a few INTPs who are great huggers, as well as others who keep their distance, or take time to warm up.

So you can tell a lot about someone if you whack a label on them, particularly if it’s a good one, but you may also completely miss out on who they are, if you think of them as that label and nothing else; a one- or two-page transcript, in a way.

Helping individuals

It seems that the fashion these days is to expect that one or other specific therapeutic strategy (CBT, ACT, DBT, etc) will suit most presenting clients, despite the unacknowledged uniqueness of such clients.

Will Pitty

Like ‘interventions’ in organisations and counselling of witnesses to traumatic events, therapeutic techniques can have favoured labels, which may have more importance than their targets. Perhaps this is part of the onrush of efficiencies associated with materialism. The Australian Psychological Society further confuses with its motto of *Good Thinking*, which seems only part of what might be required in helping people in trouble.

Gemma Soames writes about the proliferation of *syndromes* in this way: someone who is shy has ‘social phobia’, or a lack of expression of emotions is problematic (2009). A syndrome is usefully described as something that detracts from the notion of you as a perfect being—implausible in itself, but much research goes into psychological and other notions of ‘perfection’, which seems somewhat distant from living life (2009).

A person becomes a syndrome, then, and, as with any label, loses something of their personal identity. A ‘style’ can appear predictive and determinist of behaviour, and presuming that people do things because of that, and not their (content free) psychological orientation intertwined with their life experience, seems not the best road to travel. I suppose this is a reason why John Beebe thinks it’s arrogant to type people.

National perspectives

The normal observer naively assumes that the world is exactly as he sees it.

Segall, Campbell and Herskovits

From both general and social perspectives, changes in attitude or approach can be presumed even when that hasn’t happened at all—or, at least, large numbers of people remain unaffected. Things can be accepted without being appreciated.

People can hold opposed or contradictory views of the society they’re in, while still identifying with it. Some of what goes on mightn’t make sense or have much utility, but in the end it’s what is *done*, how people *act* in a particular culture.

Similarly, with ideas about ‘evolutionary fitness’, it’s a mistake to think that everything relating to a species’ genetic makeup is to do with enhancing fitness or survival. An attribute may be an accident, just something that has been done.

What Australians really think would be informative, but perhaps frightening in some respects. The proposition that Australians are a tolerant people, for instance, is testable in many ways. Fifty years ago, John Douglas Pringle, a Scot who was twice

editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, wrote of the ‘strong ... character of Australians’:

Rough rather than tough, kindly but not tolerant, a generous sardonic, sceptical but surprisingly gullible character, quick to take offence and by no means unwilling to give it. Always ready for a fight, but just as ready to help ...

... its worst faults are aggressiveness, which leads easily to violence in word and deed, and a dreadful complacency; its greatest virtues courage and a certain downright honesty, which at least says what it thinks. (Strong 2009)

How much of that seems relevant today?

Cynthia Banham summarises a recent poll conducted by the Australian Red Cross:

Australians are cynical about the effectiveness of the laws of war, and large numbers of them think it is acceptable—and legal—to torture captured enemy soldiers in certain situations. (2009)

Being *tolerant* is presumably a statement about warmth and inclusiveness, notwithstanding that a reasonable dictionary or history book would suggest something a little more rubbery and contradictory. You can be tolerated but essentially disliked, or patronised.

Quite clearly, a number of Australians today are not all that tolerant. In some ways this is what you’d expect with a pluralist society, but it also applies to a homogeneous one, in which the people essentially share a similar cultural background and experience. At an extreme, others can be perceived as not fully human, for reasons such as ‘civility, refinement, rationality and language’ (Costigan 2009).

Sometimes parts of other countries are considered to be Australian, part of the Australian *mythos*, or something many Australians feel that they have a say in—for example, Gallipoli, the Western Front of the Great War, the Kokoda Trail/Track, and, latterly, Bali. An unconscious behaviour in many ways, as seen in attempts to circumvent local laws, or planning, or other decisions.



Gallipoli: part of the Australian *mythos*

It doesn't seem to bode well for tolerating or appreciating other cultures on *their* terms. Denis Altman sees this played out in more formal aspects of Australia's dealing with the outer world in the 'failure to accept that not everyone will accept the dominant Western understandings [presumed universal] values' (2009).

This kind of perspective isn't peculiar to Australia. In the USA, for instance, a recent book plausibly identifies the period of Richard Nixon's involvement in politics (1940s–1970s) as a time of virtual civil war, with much violence around issues such as race, behaviour, and appearance, with a number of different definitions of what it meant to be 'American'.

This included a disdain by the majority for 'intellectuals' and 'experts' telling them to behave differently from what they were accustomed to, and approval of acts of violence against demonstrators and dissidents. On the other hand, and somewhat naively, these experts possessed a view of the populace as giving rational consideration to everything, and that politics was something of which they had knowledge (Perlstein 2008).

Current events in the United States regarding Barack Obama's presidency seem to reflect similar issues (Davies 2009; Herbert 2009). Free speech, a notional good, can encourage actions and opinions that are not inclusive or well thought out.

Sharing expectations

People can have shared experiences, but the sharing may be in the event, rather than in the experience, which is always subjective, unless there's an element of the unconscious. A presumption about people having shared experiences is that this is crucial to the social bond.

It also includes the idea that if I'm doing something, or if I remember something important from the past, then others will do so too, such as an enjoyment of Abba songs, or The Beatles. It won't do to prefer Weather Report, say, or Blue Oyster Cult.

This perspective has been labelled 'phenomenal absolutism'. Socially, it refers to

an 'observer's assumption that all other observers perceive the situation as he does, and that if they respond differently it is because of some perverse wilfulness rather than because they act on different perceptual content' (Segall, Campbell & Herskovits 1966, p 5). This seems to be compatible with the Jungian notion being unconscious in some way.

The actress Helen Dallimore has reported that the book that changed her life is the Bible: not for the usual reasons, but because she 'had to come to terms with the fact that normal people believe some really weird things' (2009).

Recently, the television show *Master Chef* has apparently entranced all Australians, who also remember with affection *Skippy*, a show that's been around for more than 40 years and would probably be labelled 'iconic'. If, as in my case, you have no experience of either show, that may be problematic, and others may not 'get it', i.e. be able to accept that someone else's interest and experience are different.

Modern technology can also get in the way, as Catherine Deveny found. Her children looked up *Skippy* on the internet and found a satire, not the actual show. Naturally, they had to be informed about the difference, as their experience indicated that they had successfully located what they were seeking (2009).

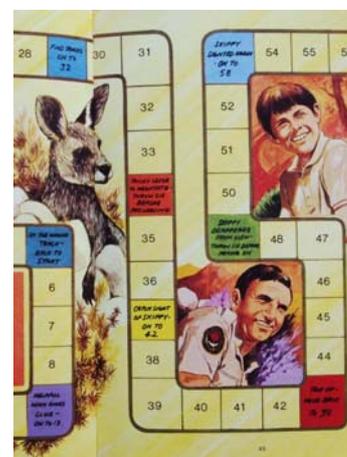
Being appropriate

There is a deep contradiction between the demands 'be yourself' and 'change and adapt all the time'.

Svend Brinkmann

Reading the play about what's appropriate to say and do can be a minefield if you think everyone *is* like you, or *would be* like you if they could, or *should be*, anyway. The current media jargon term for this appears to be 'narcissistic personality disorder', life being 'all about me'.

Kyle Sandilands—possibly a household name, although I've never attempted to view or listen to his work—has been in



Skippy: probably labelled 'iconic'

trouble for broadcasting inappropriate material. Paradoxically, being inappropriate seems to be what he's paid for, so it isn't surprising that *he* doesn't seem to 'get it' either—nor, for that matter, do the people in authority surrounding him.

Helen Razer, by no means a fan, cautions against limiting perception of Sandilands' misdemeanours to being all about him. This means thinking the problem is resolved by punishment, rather than being symptomatic of a general malaise (2009). Mia Freedman alludes to this in a different style in writing about celebrities who don't really know where the boundaries of being appropriate are (2009).

Tim Holding, the Victorian cabinet minister, provoked a number of reactions on being lost and found in the cold, snowy mountains in the state's north-east. Apparently a reserved and quiet man, his lack of an expected emotional expression on meeting loved ones was criticised by many, as though the appropriate thing for anyone in his circumstances was to freely and loosely express themselves in public and *to* the public, much as many citizens do these days with photographs and 'beautiful' memories.

A long-time friend of my age considered Holding not emotional enough, and reckless into the bargain.

A woman in her late 20s, similar to me typologically, glanced at the book by Greg Huszczo (a personal friend), *Making A Difference By Being Yourself*, and laughed out loud at the idea that this might be a possibility for her at work—perhaps anywhere, actually.

Your context might not be that of others and it may not be generational.

Appropriateness can also be associated with money and possessions, such as a \$1000 pram, which one might think is a functional purchase. But apparently anything costing less is embarrassing and a statement of your worth as a mother, taste, style and social status (Kasey Edwards 2009).

Money is sometimes taken up with worth, even moral worth. You have to spend the appropriate amount. Utility and outcome aren't really examined.

These events demonstrate a broader expression of emotion and opinion that appears to swing between 'leave me alone and let me live my life the way I want' and 'people should all do X'—sometimes uttered by the same person on the same subject at the same point in time.

We may criticise people for their eating or shopping, or lack of political engagement or interest in the arts or education, but perhaps that's their approach to life and should be understood as that.

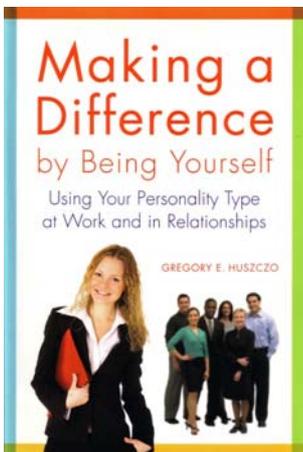
Food writ large

Telling people what to do and when and how to do is a flawed, but consistently applied, method. The carrot seems more effective than the stick (Campbell 2009). However, the search for one solution to fit everyone continues: for example, in what everyone is supposed to eat, or not eat—including *how* to eat.

This is confusing to me, given that generalising about bodies, like psyches, is hardly productive or helpful. Nutrition advice is detailed and prescriptive, something Michael Pollan criticises for its concentration on the chemical components of a food or manufactured equivalents, rather than the food itself (2008). The combinations of the nutrients in the whole seems greater than the sum of the parts.

Helen Elliott, probably not a fan of *Master Chef*, thinks that food has become a kind of porn, something salacious and out of control, a public discussion rather than private and practical, and in a Freudian way, this obsession leads to obesity, to say nothing of the dumbing down of society in the discussion of and absorption of recipes and the like. So if people, particularly children, were told that this view wasn't true or good for them, then that would be that, they'd just do it (2009).

On a broader canvas, Katharine Murphy wonders why politicians like Anna Bligh and Julia Gillard are making TV appearances on, respectively, *Celebrity Master Chef* and *Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?* She sees this as 'displacement activity', i.e. 'shouldn't they be doing what we elected them for?' (2009).



She laughed at the idea that this might be a possibility

Unlike Elliott, Murphy doesn't want to be told what to do by what she labels 'the fat police', in part because

... it leads me to worry how long it will be before someone would be grateful if I would stop wearing glasses, so I don't impose costs on regulators who need to know I can see before giving me a driver's licence.

The joy of saving Tim Holding was tempered by suggestions that he be punished in some way for getting lost, including being charged for the cost of his rescue, which didn't seem particularly kindly or tolerant.

The issue of food and obesity is obviously complex and requires multiple activities. June Factor thinks it'd help in general if we let kids run around a bit in an unstructured way (2009). Others have pointed out that many people can't cook and/or aren't interested in doing so, no matter the number of shows on food they view—gardening and cooking shows as fantasy entertainment in a way.

Food also costs money, which, like social class, determines a lot about what people do, and eat.

Money and decisions

Our whole economy is based on aid to business.

Tim Costello

Doing something in government or business, or not doing it, also hinges on money. It's easier to distribute it if you think everybody's motives are the same, or if you decide they should be.

An example is the education policy focus on parents being interested in their children's education in the same ways and for the same reasons. In Victoria, large sums are being spent on television advertising extolling the virtues of state schools, notwithstanding continuous criticism of those who work there, and the cognitive dissonance that might be experienced by actually visiting a school and looking around.

Sometimes there's confusion between using money for useful purposes as a social

good and getting 'value for money for the taxpayer'. World Vision Australia is engaged in a project to help Indigenous people to buy houses at Mapoon in Queensland that appear to be government owned. The value or price for these homes appears to be related to return on investment, rather than to an opportunity to enable use of property for social advantage (Costello 2009). Presumably that doesn't get costed.

The utilisation of new technologies for innovation and tackling climate change might be curtailed by a requirement that they be cheaper than existing technology. One of the problems with a carbon trading scheme is that many do not wish to change their methods unless they get paid for what should be an astute business decision, i.e. to modernise.

The use of broadband is actively encouraged, but in outlying suburban areas like mine, the wires into dwellings and local exchanges make this impossible. These are financial decisions made by developers and other companies.

Some of this confusion in decision-making is to do with language. Don Watson points out the incomprehensible jargon of managers appearing at the Victorian Bushfires Commission, with a parallel inability to use plain language, use of which might help in telling people what's going on and what they can do (2009). But the language in question is many things, particularly one designed to avoid trouble, particularly regarding new ideas.

One of these people self-described as 'adding value'. I first heard this phrase from an intimidating senior manager many years ago. He was unimpressed when I replied I 'added value' simply by turning up to work. Although intelligent, he didn't really grasp possibilities and ideas all that well, mostly looking for power and control, and so, on reflection, I was a dangerous person to have around, as far as he was concerned.

With a similar level of respect, Michael Lallo has something to say about similar language in radio management (2009), essentially a variant of a technique associated with managerialism, the current and prevalent way of discussing anything in organisations—even, it seems, churches.



Julia Gillard: smarter than a fifth grader?

If you have to avoid mistakes, rather than innovate (Lindy Edwards 2009), it's easier to continue on with something that doesn't really work but has always been done that way. Bob Ellis wonders why we are surprised when we find people don't like us because we're bombing them (2009).

Doing something new will set you up for criticism, not least because of the idea of wanting to know the outcome before you start—a curious requirement for some engaged in the climate change debate, which seems to be conducted according to economic and financial criteria, as though those worlds are separate from both the social and natural worlds.

Variety and wisdom

Phillip Adams wonders where wisdom can be found, because we certainly seem to need to find some (2009). This doesn't mean consulting gurus for the right answers, engaging the machine that's Dr Phil or someone of his ilk (Neill 2009), or thinking that there should be a perfect world in which people will all be in agreement. There's no indication—to me, anyway—of that being a possibility; certainly, telling people what to do and how to act gets a very mixed response. Things could be better, but that's always the case, and things will always be bumbling along in some way.

Enlightenment might be its own reward, but it can also bring on a migraine. So why not welcome a little time out in the dark?

Jen Vuk

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I'd like to remember **Euan Comrie**, who died in the Kokoda plane crash. I met him at a type workshop, and he struck me as a gentle and kind man.



Things will always be bumbling along