

Theory in Practice: some present(ing) experiences

Recently, I presented at a university post-graduate research forum a brief fact-based paper on type and other distributions (gender, age etc) from a sample of MBTI Qualifying workshop participants, with some interpretation in mind on how best to teach the topic (e.g. small discussion groups).

The allocated 20 minutes didn't go as intended for a number of reasons, one of which was that the small group attending didn't really know anything much about type, but were curious, although not all that much about the data I was presenting as it wasn't a group oriented to figures of any sort. So I found myself explaining the MBTI and type rather than an aspect of its application.

One person commented that a colleague had recently said to her that the MBTI was "unscientific". She acknowledged that she didn't know what that specifically meant. I couldn't ascertain how or why this comment was made to her: it could have been from a recent special edition of *Scientific American*, or another source entirely, academic or otherwise.

In my experience, MBTI critiques on scientific grounds (where one is explained, at any rate) usually have to do with it not using continuous scores, as though that's the only method available and appropriate for measurement, rather than using whatever statistical method is appropriate for the purpose required.

Notwithstanding their utility, continuous scores presume *tabula rasa* ñ the notion proposed by the philosopher, John Locke, that when born, an infant's mind is a blank slate upon which is written what that person experiences: nurture, rather than nature, if you like.

This view has been known to be scientifically false for a few decades. The interaction of nature and nurture is the current scientific position and is compatible with both Isabel Myers and C.G.Jung. Myers spoke of going against the grain as a way of explaining her view that type was innate in some way, whilst Jung thought, that people were born with a predisposition to type; quite a subtle phrase, when you come to think of it.

Sometimes the use or even naming of statistics or statistical methods can be seductive to the musings and considerations of any human being, irrespective of type. It's quite amazing to me, for instance, how many people have presumed that because Form M is comprised of questions whose answers all have equal value (1 point), that the gender difference in preferring Thinking and Feeling Isabel Myers discovered 60 years ago is now extinguished. Everything is back to 50-50, which is admirably

symmetrical.

This view ascribes a remarkable power to a pencil and paper test: that of changing the world, rather than reporting on it. Presenting T-F questions that have been found to be answered equally by males and females, says nothing about whether males will answer T and females will answer F. It also leaves aside research elsewhere on gender difference that has no interest in the MBTI, or Jung's claims.

Another part of the scientific jigsaw regarding the MBTI has to do with the prediction of behaviour. Taken literally, this implies behaviourism, a still-popular perspective, partly I think because it's uncomplicated: behaviours are easily identified. The origins of psychological instruments are here, involving a particular version of the scientific method. Extraverted thinking approaches like rational-choice and economic theories, and some therapeutic methods leave little space for individual difference.

If you take 'prediction' in its literal form as above, then the MBTI can't do that by definition, because it's not approaching personality or, more correctly, psychological orientation, in a behaviourist way, or a behavioural way, as one might interpret Keirseyan Temperament. The MBTI is about explaining behaviour and its possible utility is in being able to do that in the broadest possible way, and hopefully better than other frameworks and models

This can be seen in Isabel Myers' MBTI Forms, where she writes "the questions are not important in themselves" and elsewhere that it didn't matter whether a person had ever done what a question was inquiring about. In that respect, the MBTI reports on what you prefer, which is not necessarily what you do as a matter of course. Step II feedback is often instructive here, where a client can prefer one facet of a preference, but enjoy using the opposite, and with some facility, notwithstanding it not being shown in the printed results.

For me, the preferences are better thought of as content free as a basic principle, so that you get the idea of their orientation and keep that in mind. Type descriptions can often get in the way if you take them literally, or presume that a person's preferences mean they're actually good at what they prefer. INTPs that don't read, for instance, or dislike computers; or SFJs who don't go for the neat and tidy, but still exemplify the positive aspects of their preferences. There are many other examples.

The content of a person's preferences i.e. behaviours and the like, including cultural influences, will give you an idea as to how the person expresses their type, as well as other aspects of their orientation that aren't visible. Behaviours can be an indicator of what a person prefers to do, but it's not necessarily directly related to a specific type preference. In the same way, a learning doesn't have to be expressed in the outer

world by a behaviour, or be labelled a skill. What matters here is that a person expresses their type in a way congruent with their situation and experience. Sometimes this involves understanding the basic principles and just something of what comes after.

Some References:

Tim Rogers *The Psychological Testing Enterprise* (Brooks/Cole 1994)

David Deutsch: *The Fabric of Reality* (Penguin 1998)

Isabel Briggs Myers; Private collection

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Æ Form F Answer Sheet (CPP 1976)