

Looking for Theory in an Imagined Community of Practice A Parsimonious Perspective

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We tend not to accept the possibility that something meaningful could actually be random Nicolas Bouleau

The mathematician Nicolas Bouleau thinks “the question of meaning is at the heart of scientific knowledge” (2011). Consequently, arriving at an interpretation, or “making meaning”, is irreversible. You can’t go back to what obtained beforehand, although making new meaning is a clear possibility. Obviously, this applies to self-knowledge, as well as knowledge about ideas, objects, events and practices. Bouleau also contends that if you think something can be objectively measured, then interpretation – looking for what something means – can be too easily discarded, notwithstanding its clear importance to understanding. Safety in numbers can be risky, cognitively or otherwise.

So, when a person encounters a new idea or method, it will invariably be seen in the context of their prior experience and knowledge: a specific “model” perhaps, or even sealed and unconsulted “Black Boxes” (Latour 1987). This is a general problem when reading books and articles of any kind, notably so when investigating the genesis and context of an idea like psychological type in which current knowledge and experience colour understanding and interpretation.

Otto Kroeger, reflecting on his present and past experience, once stated “we were all behaviourists in those days” i.e. prior to encountering the MBTI and psychological type. For those who come out of that perspective – whatever it might mean, given “behaviourism” is a contested construct, like everything else in psychology (see e.g. Berlyne 1975), that kind of approach can still remain in a new context. B.F. Skinner “argued there are no theoretical ideas in science” (Kukla 2001 p.8)

In another context, the world of history looks different to its practitioners than to outsiders who might refer to it in passing, to bolster an argument. Martin Seligman’s examples of positive societies that existed in the past suffer accordingly (see e.g. Greenberg 2010).

The world of types and individual differences looks different to those from a humanities background precluding the presumption or use of measurement, and something else for those from business orientations. The understood purpose and use of instruments and ideas about people in the corporate world differs from a psychological consultation in key ways, some less apparent than others, given behaviour and control themes in both. Application can also defeat purpose, in any setting. The philosophy behind psychological type can be at odds with how some use it as a tool.

Finally, *logical positivism*, of which behaviourist views and statistical measurement are a part, is not necessarily a schema under which ideas about a particular kind of consciousness might be effectively investigated, particularly where an observable behaviour may be a consequence of a different intent. This behaviourist presupposition in personality research leads to an important question: if it was possible to start again with type research in a greenfields kind of way, and with historical material available for examination, how would researchers go about it?

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was the outcome of almost two decades of examination of C.G. Jung’s theory of psychological types. Isabel Myers and Katharine Briggs looked at theory first, developed a mechanism or outcome according to their understanding of the theory. They chose measurement as their method and used it in the context of the theory; other measurement methods meant other things.

Types of Communities: 1. Imagined

The historians Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds describe Benedict Anderson's notion of *Imagined Communities* (1990) as being "composed of individuals who, though they might never meet face to face, came to identify with their compatriots and believed themselves to hold certain values, myths and outlooks in common" (2008). They use this singular idea in a transnational sense when investigating and describing the solidarity of White Men from settler communities like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (2008). Beliefs and practices that originated in or were associated with this imagined community (measurement, individual differences etc.) are core components of what might be called "the imagined community of personality type", notwithstanding that the beliefs behind those methods and practices are not held.

Like the transnational construct of the White Man, an imagined community of personality type has its origins and focus in a specific area, which is the methodologies and practices of one particular society, that of the USA, notwithstanding any aims and ideals held by any of its members.

Types of Communities: 2. Practice

Etienne Wenger promotes the idea of social learning systems, in which "competence is historically and socially defined (2000)" by what he calls *communities of practice*. These help you know how to be a doctor, for instance, a citizen, or a type practitioner for that matter. He says "They are born of learning, but they can also learn not to learn. They are the cradles of the human spirit, but they can also be its cages. After all, witch-hunts were also community practices. (p.230). Different modes of belonging interact in a dynamic way with community elements.

Community of practice members are bound together by "a collectively developed understanding of what the community is about and contribute in agreed norms, with shared language, tools, routines and the like, such as authorised certification standards, the type code and other related terms, and the structure of meetings and associations.

Theory and Practice

In the imagined community of practice of personality type, theory takes a back seat to practice, notwithstanding that its practice is the outcome of a theory. Theoretical arguments tend to be model driven and presented in experiential mode. This is no accident. CAPT, the body founded by Isabel Myers and Mary McCaulley and the vehicle for the establishment of APTi, has as its motto *The Constructive Use of Differences*, its processes guiding the community along instrumental lines for a kind of theory that arose without such a base.

Social presumptions regarding the background to the psychological enterprise played its natural part, with an emphasis on measurement, testing and a particular empirical method. *Empiricism* itself is an uncontested word in type research and associated personality work to American pioneers of this kind of research it had a different meaning to how it was considered by C.G.Jung, and remains problematic.

Measurement and theory have also been perceived to be the same thing. Some years ago, *The Type Reporter* periodical ran an informative series of issues entitled "The MBTI and Other Personality Theories." Those selected for comparison were the Enneagram, the "Big 5" and the NEO-PI instrument, Carol Pearson's approach to Jungian archetypes, and the FIRO-B; what might be called a narrow field (Scanlan 1999). Curiously, all these perspectives now have questionnaires associated with them.

Outside the boundaries of type, one can read something like *The Five-Factor Model-Theoretical Perspectives* and struggle to find anything theoretical in it at all (Wiggins 1996).

Sometimes a questionnaire itself is equated with a theory, notwithstanding clear evidence to the contrary. Jung's typology was not arrived at by measurement and measurement methods used to make it more popular like the MBTI identified themselves as Indicators, implying inference, not literality. Controversy can be created by confusing an instrument for the idea as well as not examining presuppositions of a measurement strategy that have been challenged for quite a while. The lexical hypothesis, one of the foundations of trait personality measurement, is a relevant case in point. Challenges to this idea don't undermine its usefulness, rather providing a more realistic boundary to that utility.

Differences in Individual Differences

The Association for Psychological Type, International (APTi) began out of responses to the work of Isabel Myers and Katharine Briggs. It has its origins firmly based in the MBTI and their approach to Jung's typology. The emphasis was on measurement, in part the defence of a non-trait methodology in a world of trait perspectives e.g. the proposition that the MBTI is flawed because it doesn't provide a scale for neuroticism. The uses of the MBTI and its associated theory, with type distributions and the like were the norm. Published arguments appeared to be more about measurement, than the theory and the theory defended or attacked by a measurement perspective. Previous studies colour the approach taken to type instruments, for instance, including questions such as the legitimacy of construction.

The current APTi logo features 3 superimposed grids representing 3 essentialist typological perspectives on individual human difference with disparate origins but an asserted behavioural overlap. This overlap, strong in many areas, hides various presumptive incompatibilities which range from origin and purpose and associations with measurement, to what is made of consciousness, or an unconscious. The glue in this arrangement may be the notions of self-help that have arisen out of American culture and spread elsewhere (Taylor 1999).

The implied unity of these overlapping ideas of "Type" is deceptive, particularly if the commonalities are expressed in behaviours. By looking at behaviour, or outcomes, there can be a tendency to discount or not examine closely the reasons for the behaviour or outcomes. The psychological orientation of a person might not match the behaviour or expected behaviour for a number of reasons.

Science and Method

A particular definition of "science" can preclude certain kinds of activities or investigations and direct others, for instance examinations of behaviour. Wanting to apply the methods of physical science to the human sciences constrains the available ways in which human beings might be effectively investigated, defined and understood. That's not good or bad; rather an "is" : something that happens.

As mentioned earlier, an important question is whether a science, or an attempt at science grounded in logical positivism adequately examine a theory with different presumptions like personality typologies?

This is particularly relevant for interpretative methods. Investigating extraversion–introversion as bundles of traits, rather than the idea of direction of energy asserted by Jung is quite a different enterprise, as might be looking for *Intuiting* rather than *Intuition*.

Herbert Simon dislikes the idea that you can test out an idea without investigating its provenance or what it means (1968); Mary Harrington observes that researchers in neuroscience aren't all that good at constructing models of personality, which one might think is crucial to their enterprise.

The position of theory in research needs to be addressed, particularly when addressing research on a theory.

A Theoretical Approach

Elizabeth Valentine, in her classic text *Conceptual Issues in Psychology* (1992) comments that:

“data are not theory-free and that all observation involves selection and interpretation. Facts do not speak for themselves. This is particularly true in psychology where much of the subject matter is not directly observable and involves a good deal of inference.” (p103)

She also makes distinctions between a *system*, a *theory* and a *model*:

A *system* is somewhat like a paradigm, a “general theory plus methodological recommendations” such as behaviourism. This seems to be a closed system

A *theory*, narrower than a system, is a set of propositions, sometimes provisional, abstract and distinct from the data that seeks to explain observations, underlying mechanisms or structures or inferred relationships and underlying mechanisms

A *model*, often conflated with a theory but is less data-sensitive. Models aim to be useful rather than true and are intended as aids rather than complete descriptions.

Although Jung’s typology has been referred to as a model, and his ideas as a whole a system for that matter, he denied the veracity of either label.

Andre Kukla defines a theoretical project as being one that does not require observation at any stage, contrasting it with empirical methods of experiment and observation (2001 p2). This doesn’t mean that a theorist never experiments or observes as a consequence to their theorising. Kukla considers, though, that a theoretical approach to psychology requires different methods than simply the empirical approach.

Toni Vogel Carey makes a parsimonious distinction between a *theoretical* and *empirical* perspective. *Theorists* look for simplicity, not on the surface, but *underlying* the phenomena, whereas *empiricism* is about the surface of things (2011). She also explains *parsimony* as “the number of phenomena for which a good theory accounts (more) and to the simplicity by which it explains them (less). She refers to Herbert Simon, who thinks we should seek “the law that is simplest in relation to the phenomena it explains, that is most parsimonious.” Mathematics is also not the key to parsimony, possibly because it’s very complicated (This last statement might require more definition and examination).

My method as a thinker and a researcher is that of a Theorist with a parsimonious bent. This doesn’t mean I’m not interested in facts, data, or an objective reality, quite the contrary. In this, I am in broad agreement with the philosopher John Searle (2004) who considers, amongst other things “the theories we develop are intelligible only in the context of mind-independent reality’ i.e. whether they fit with social and other facts (Smith 2003).

An application of this perspective to the field of personality types with their disparate perspectives, means identifying essential principles and placing other ideas in that context, either as explanatory material, reframed ideas or perhaps discarding them altogether. My assessment is that C.G.Jung’s theory of psychological orientation and psychological consciousness are the fundamental principles, the latter being a particular aspect of, but not the same as, the general idea of consciousness.

The broader type nomenclature e.g. preferences, functions and individuation follow from those principles as does observed behaviour and its interpretation. Developmental ideas may be more problematic, particularly ego-development models as they come from different theoretical perspectives and may not apply well to someone “becoming themselves” something which may be too flawed an outcome for some stage approaches.

Investigating consciousness is of course a metaphysical enterprise. The philosopher Rick Lewis points out that two of the most important metaphysical questions of today are what is consciousness and how does it arise in a physical universe (2011). Simon Blackburn writes:

“Metaphysicians may think of themselves as investigating the facts, or discovering the broad structures of reality. Or they may see the enterprise as more self-reflective, gaining an understanding of how we represent the facts to ourselves; how our “conceptual scheme” or perhaps any possible perceptual scheme, structures our own thought about reality.” (2003 p61)

This description appears similar to a Theorist perspective.

The question also arises of what kind of relevant existing data is appropriate e.g. how to include Keirseyan Temperament, a behaviourally similar construct which arises from separate theories of mood, physiological constitution and personality.

How to research psychological orientation may be problematic, but it should at least be kept in mind as a principle. Subsidiary questions are also important, including why this orientation seems more important to some than others, how schemes of development (however defined) arise from them and how that relates to what people do in life, particularly those who don't belong to a movement that engages in such practices or seek to consciously develop them. The paradox of completing a questionnaire and receiving a type code result and the fluidity of what personal consciousness suggests (Jung thought most people were psychologically unconscious – see Odajnyk 1976) for individuals in all human societies.

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