

Looking for Personality

perception, translation, meaning

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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 1972

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 those words 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 of what I taught: 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 had 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, which may, of course, have been incorrect, but I'm trying to learn more about when to open my mouth and when to be 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", or 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 mislead or clarify in their own way. Some definitions are or can be more useful than others, of course, and some presumptions may be wrong, or off-beam in some way.

Looking for definitions and meaning seems a rare activity these days. At school, this sort of thing was identified as "critical thinking", part of English studies, actually, and it disappeared from the curriculum shortly after I completed school. I don't know whether it's come back, or ever left in other places, but I found it really valuable. It's probably introverted thinking in type terms, which may account for my enthusiasm, but it's essential for the understanding of type constructs and the comparison with other psychological, sociological or popular ideas.

This is because, when it all comes down to it, psychological instruments are translation devices. We ask someone a leading question, or series of them, and speculate/define the responses. Hopefully this is done in a non-coercive atmosphere, some of which can be deceptively benign, like 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. As Umberto Eco points out, however, 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 he provides some entertaining and appalling examples of where translation has gone awry (2004).

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

Even amongst the various Englishes, this is an issue. British and American humour is well-known to be different. In management and organisations literature, the emphasis seems more on American approaches than British, notwithstanding an Australian cultural affinity with the latter rather than the former.

Within Australia, many variants of standard terms exist, and it's interesting how many people presume their words are the only ones. When I went with my family to Williamstown Beach in Melbourne in the 1950s and later, we all wore our "togs". Later on, for reasons that were unclear to me, it became "bathers" ; 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 we should look past specific behaviour or attributes if we really want to find out about people.

Socio-economic frameworks focusing on description come to mind, particularly the Generations (Baby boomers; X; Y etc.), which has been a recent theme of discussion in various issues of the Melbourne "Age", culminating in a recent editorial which questioned the usefulness of such generalised terms. This is progress of a sort from my point of view, partly because the Generations doesn't stand up well under critical scrutiny, but also because of the broad range of people that publicly expressed unease, of which I was a part.

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 at the moment than was the case when I was growing up.

It's not that there were fewer extraverts, simply that there weren't places in the public eye where there could be the acceptable expression of extraversion. Here, social etiquette comes into play. A simple example of this is the side of the path or street you walk on.

Historically it's been the custom to walk on the left in Australia and so people acted accordingly, without thinking about it. In the United States and Europe, for instance, people walk on the right, and this method seems to be the one currently 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. In language terms, "bathroom" now describes a toilet, particularly amongst women it seems, even when there's no bath to be seen.

Mobile phones have their own etiquette, for want of a better term. It seems any place will do. Last week, 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 of whatever sort anywhere they choose. I haven't 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. Now it isn't: it's become general behaviour. Not using one might not be introversion either, it might be social circumstances, money, and so on.

So we have to take these considerations into account when trying to see type in others, when data can be a moveable feast. And it also depends on what someone says or writes: you need cues to see where the information is leading you.

Recently, Ricky Ponting, the captain of the Australian Cricket team published an article in which he compared two leg-spinners in his team in Shane Warne and Stuart MacGill.

Here's an excerpt:

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

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 and says 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 here regarding 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

"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 Geraldine Doogue, the ABC presenter, part of a 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 been the presenter of the "religious" program *Compass*, which is more about belief and values rather 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, and 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 much rather watch Kerry O'Brien grapple with Richard Armitage. So I don't test out the program 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 would have seen her as ENFJ: confident, forthright people oriented, bright, intelligent in the NF way.

So what evidence does she present for that?

Well, extraversion is easy. She says that

"Sitting around waiting is wasted time"

"I probably find it easier to talk than write"

She likes about herself 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 she talks about her struggle in this way.

"I like ideas, I like discussing ideas and concepts very entertaining, but at time 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 Is are likely to avoid that sort of word.

The rest of the brief article has Doogue talk about physical issues, success for women, Australians' preference for moderates rather than extremists and a 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 here, or elsewhere

Something that intrigued me, though, were comments made on males being needy, including:

"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."

Having read that, I'm certainly having second thoughts about being in Doogue's company with the potential label "pathetic" (an offensive label to me), although I expect that the words come out blunter than intended (which may mean something).

But there seem 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 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.

But as to type: I suspect ENFP, but I wouldn't be sure about that and I'd need to know a little, or even 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 and was suggested to me by Danbelle Poirier.

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To be published in the *Australian Psychological Type Review* Vol 6 No 2, 2004.