

Research and Theory

“Type’s not everything”, but what is it?

Some boundaries of knowing (or wanting to know).

*I bet you sometimes wondered what was standing right behind you –
Keep looking over your shoulder to see if it’s there* Sonja Kristina

*True personality is always a vocation...an irrational factor that destines one to emancipate
themselves from the herd and its well-worn paths* C.G. Jung

Peter Geyer

Wherever you go with type, its theory stands behind you, as *eminence grise* or friendly ghost perhaps, depending on your level of familiarity with what it is, what it has to suggest, and how agreeable that might be to your being, or doing.

The breadth and depth to which psychological type and the MBTI (two different, but overlapping, things) can be explained successfully to anyone is constrained by what’s known about theory i.e. what this idea or model is about, as well as what’s learned from reflection, practice, and other ideas.

Paradoxically, you can know little or a lot about something and make the same claims.

Type preferences, as principles, are content-free and it seems that the unfolding of preferences, rather than an acceding to a general description or skill expectation, is most pertinent. It’s like getting back to basics, in a way.

Are all people preferring Feeling empathetic? Well, no. There are other considerations; Feeling is about judgement, after all. Jung stated and Jung has made Jung makes clear in his dream, it’s contingent for most and some don’t really get to it much at all. You can observe this at any type meeting, or anywhere, for that matter. That doesn’t stop it being an attribute of Feeling, but it’s unwise to presume the person in front of you who prefers it is going to empathise with you in a way you might expect, or have you included in their view of harmony. A person who prefers intuition isn’t necessarily driven to investigate theories or the big picture. It’s all about interest and focus.

Expecting objective logic from thinking types, or an interest in facts in general to those preferring sensing may actually lead to disappointment and disarray if the wrong topic or situation is present, or a person hasn’t developed those attributes sufficiently to have control over them. Skill is also a presumption I wouldn’t make; that’s something to be established.

Knowing where a boundary of a particular idea is, and why, is quite different to not wishing to venture beyond a particular point. Or turning in a particular direction because of other interests or beliefs, even business imperatives. People can stand in the same spot for different reasons.

Research and theory about anything is not “how to” but, rather, “what is it?” You need to have some knowledge or appreciation of other fields of enquiry and be able to see similarities and differences between these fields and type’s acreages.

This can present a dilemma for those primarily interested in helping people, or changing the world, rather than using their energies on uncovering facts about a theory that can help them more if such information is sought out.

Saying “type doesn’t mean everything” is a sensible caveat at one level, in that nothing really explains everything anyway, unless you take a particular religious point of view.

But it also begs the question as to why it has to be mentioned, given that any idea or presentation has a defining context.

It can be experienced as a throwaway line at the end of a presentation; a kind of a get-out clause which perhaps invites tolerance for having to take this sort of thing seriously, let alone know more than a little about it. Personality is fun, after all. But participants or audiences may wonder why they were there in the first place, if a suitable in depth explanation of the limits, either way, of a typology or instrumentation isn’t provided.

For instance, in a recent professional type presentation, I acknowledged type didn’t explain everything. This came as obvious relief to one of those present, a likeable ENFP I had taught, and knew reasonably well. Regrettably, she didn’t trouble to ask me what I thought type did, or didn’t explain. On the other hand, I didn’t offer an explication, partly because I didn’t think it’d be received well at a number of levels, one of which would have been that I think type explains quite a lot and more than she expected. It also included the issue of peer discussion, where we would have been in complete disagreement. A mutual interest in type doesn’t necessarily make for a discussion between peers, although that doesn’t mean you can’t learn something, because that can happen anywhere.

Saying “we’re all individuals” also puts people in the same spot. Denial of individual difference is a core issue for the postmodern world as Terry Eagleton observes (2004) and there seems to be some general wish that eventually we will all agree on the shape of things, becoming accordingly individually non-individual. In type this is like hoping that people will come to their senses and become NF, or NT, or really just like me. There’s a bit of that about, which seems to miss the point about difference. It is just that –different –whether psychological, cultural or anything else and the recognition of that and what to do with it is what’s most important. Avoiding it doesn’t help anybody at all.

An “individuals” statement can also mean “I don’t know how to adequately explain this idea,” notwithstanding the easy availability of material providing words or phrases (e.g. Page 1983) that identify some boundaries, usually directed at the MBTI and type descriptions.

So what **does** type explain and what should I know and be aware of?

Type *can't* explain everything, because if it did people would be automaton-like figures as presumed by behaviourist, and some management, views.

Perhaps it's also about people looking for a simple answer, or check-list against which to assess anybody. Type's not like that, although it may appear to be that way on the surface to some at least. You can find out a lot of things very quickly using type, and this can be deceptive.

Personality *per se* can also be a number of things. There are strong reasons for contending that describing Jung's typology as personality type is profoundly misleading, particularly as he identifies true personality as a *calling* (1971). We can have preferences, but not necessarily personality.

That doesn't mean that type isn't a core component of what personality might be. I would argue for a more central location for discussing personality if you use type with other models; all models are not equal in content and insight.

Except for aspects of associated instrumentation, you have to forget type as a tool if you're looking at its theory. You also have to access other information in order to arrive a good interpretation and explanation of type.

Examining biology, neurology, evolution, measurement might be a start, even critical theory.. Recent articles in the evolutionary study of how culture develops provide a congenial framework for the unfolding of type (Runciman 2001; Wheeler et al 2004). You have to get past labels, even those of Jung, to the principles behind them. The brain or body doesn't really have labels: we put them there. Various offerings of theory and interpretation can cloud the basics or core.

We can quote liberally from Jung, Isabel Myers and others, but we have to know something about why they're saying these things in order to interpret them. Both took an evolutionary perspective, for instance. That doesn't mean you can't use their ideas if that's not your perspective, because many do, but it's useful to know where the ideas are coming from, and why.

I recently encountered someone who was enamoured, as was Jung, of the *Tao te ching*, liberally quoting a litany of lines. However, *Yin* and *Yang*, a core of Taoist philosophy, key for Jung, and relevant to an appreciation of his typology, was closed to her, which regrettably wasn't of concern, even though she counted herself as a student of his work.

In typology this is about notions of the unconscious and archetypal considerations, as well as the topics of recent and valuable articles by Roger Pearman and Gordon Lawrence (2007), which focus more on the MBTI than my purpose here.

In closing, I'd also like to welcome the *Journal of Psychological Type* back to APTi. It's a compulsory read for me since and it's a key way of learning what's inside and outside type.

Some References

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