

Undercurrents

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On difference: models, lives, and human beings

The world of life can be studied from two points of view – that of its unity and that of its diversity

Theodore Dobzhansky

Talking about human beings – who or what they are, or can be; their limits, foibles, gifts and so on requires a mixture of particular and general.

What we know about ourselves and others is predicated, not only on our own experiences, but also whether we consider others as similar or different to us and how positive either of those perspectives might be.

If you see people as different, for instance, it can mean that everyone is the same except you, which leads to dilemmas of various kinds.

Perceiving others as different, including you, can lead to a variety of pleasurable experiences, or perhaps confusion.

If you think everyone's the same, it can simply mean saying we're all human beings, a fairly broad and benign statement that can open out to appreciating human difference, or block the possibility of a deeper understanding of others.

On the other hand, it might also mean presuming that everyone in the world will think the same way, given the opportunity. Notions of freedom, democracy and calls to national values come to mind here, as well as defining appropriate behaviour.

Attracta Lagan, for instance, asserts that because "the people" demand it, ethical behaviour by corporations and businesses will follow, as though ethics is a switch you just turn on and that its relevance and application are universally agreed (2006).

This sort of view can lead to presumptions that students benefit equally from a structured way of organising, or that that kind of ability defines responsibility, or adult behaviour and that punishment is beneficial.

Alternatively, there's the view that people can find their own way without guidelines and that criticism or judgement of any kind should be avoided in order not to damage the individual concerned.

On a more benign level, there are the marketing campaigns presuming that everyone is of the same opinion, and have similar interests.

Some might assert that nothing meaningful can be generalised about human beings other than unhelpful, negative stereotypes; others may develop categories through which to understand more about others, for a variety of reasons.

What's done with either can range from rigid controlling and labelling to the broadest relativism.

*Unless we can calculate the effects of our actions,
which includes the way others respond to them,
we will be incapable of realising our projects effectively*

Terry Eagleton

The philosopher Terry Eagleton attests that stereotypes are not necessarily negative, but often informative and useful: "corporation executives tend not to be Dadaists", for instance (2006).

Liberal-minded people might eschew labelling, but may also state everyone is "special", which is fairly unhelpful, to say the least.

Individual differences are problematic then, particularly if they are presented as presuming nature as an influence, rather than just nurture,

A sociologist might talk about gender differences from a social and cultural perspective, but not give consideration to psychological orientation, or other aspects of personality, particularly those which might not be easily read from general observable behaviour. A similar approach is taken by many psychologists.

Ullica Segerstrale (2001), in describing the sociobiology debate, identifies a post-World War II taboo on asserting biological reasons for behaviour and a focus instead on cultural considerations.

This was a response to racially-oriented eugenics practices, notably in Nazi Germany, but also in the United States and similar countries, including Australia.

A rather polarised debate still continues, with difference easily converted into something pejorative.

C.G.Jung's theory of psychological types presents a model and method for understanding natural differences, with its own language.

According to Jung, individual psychological orientation can be described as an interactive typology of opposites.

This arises from an interaction between nature and nurture, or a person's predisposition and their response to life experience.

The current understanding and use of this typology is also caught up in the language and methods of measurement and instrumentation, with its own issues and controversies.

The relevance of this typology is not that it's Jung's, or that Isabel Briggs Myers constructed an instrument to assist people in their access to his model, but that it seems to work well.

This is particularly so once movement is made past generalisations to basic principles, wherein the reason for a behaviour is sought, more than just the behaviour on its own.

People with the same type preferences or code – arrived at through instrumentation such as the MBTI, or through reading and discussion – may be on different sides of an argument.

The basic principles they use may be the same, but different values are attached to the data or the discussion.

This also depends on the experience of life and also what appeals to the person; sometimes, what is at stake.

In Australia, for instance, ISTJs appear to feature strongly on both sides of politics.

*If there is a thing called "psychology", it is about ordinary life.
It's about how we all live as ourselves.*

Adam Phillips

Jung's model stands on its own, but it doesn't follow it can't be compared with other ideas, or that it excludes them.

The efficacy of a model in many respects has to do with how it works in real life, which isn't necessarily found in a training room, an economics debate, or a sample of undergraduate students.

Ideally, a model that works will also have a better explanation of particular events and activities than other models.

In circumstances where only one model is applied, a better explanation can't be arrived at, because alternatives can't be tested. This is a current dilemma in economics, education, or industrial relations as well as other places.

And different language can be used to describe the same thing. David Quammen (2006) illustrates this well in his review of two recent editions of Charles Darwin's works, each introduced by a well-known scientist, each providing a different language and context, but similar conclusions.

Psychological type means interpretation, not literal attachment to specific things: INTPs and computers, for instance, or whether Intuitives should read more than Sensing types.

An attachment to the past, through experience, is quite different to an understanding and appreciation of history, and historical data.

By and large then, it's a lot easier to think we're roughly all the same and ascribe difference to outsiders, if you want to go that far: outsider labels include left, right, elites, aspirationalists, baby boomers and so on.

These labels are usually expressed simply – just a label; underpinning content of any depth might make things more complex, too complex for comfort, because a proper discussion might ensue.

One of the reasons why people need models and are sold them is that they provide a particular way of thinking.

Using a model can save you a lot of effort, or it can open doors a little wider.

For many, a recommended model is a substitute for thinking for themselves, for taking account, or no account, of data. Disagreeable information or facts can easily be discounted in this way, being outside the framework.

Standing in or for a model may mean you stand for nothing at all, particularly if there are incongruities to address.

Free-market capitalism is regularly touted as essential for democracy, for instance, notwithstanding it being a most undemocratic model, whatever its benefits and advantages.

It's also not clear that people in decision-making positions are actually capable of making consistently astute decisions particularly outside a particular field.

Saying something can't be afforded, sometimes off the cuff, can simply be saying "no", not investigating broader ramifications, or even the issue itself.

Some might claim that there's no time to do that, which is curious, given the importance of many such decisions.

This approach could be due to lack of education, knowledge, insight or ability, however described. And type is only a part of that

And you can believe your own model, or parrot its words without consideration. An organisation's press release might make all sorts of claims as to the benefits of a recent decision, but none of them have to be true, or even verifiable.

Early last year, a supermarket representative explained the New Year appearance of hot-cross buns on its shelves as providing "choice" to its customers, notwithstanding the utility and meaning of the product was related to Easter, quite some months away.

One wonders whether this person actually thought about what she said. She may have genuinely imagined that customers would actually be pleased to be given an opportunity to exercise their choice in that particular way.

"Choice" seems to have something to do with "freedom" these days, or at least "giving people what they want", even if they haven't asked for it.

Doing so can often be followed by bewilderment or consternation when a "customer" states the offered choice wasn't what was wanted at all.

It's not clear that competition in provision of public utilities is of benefit to anyone, other than marketers, for instance. The same people seem to be employed, anyway.

Standing for nothing, being unaware of what you've stated, is mostly an unconscious act, although clearly there are exceptions.

And people with different type preferences notice different things, which is a bit of a complication if you're wedded to a rigid notion of sameness.

As psychological type preferences develop through use and understanding, they become more conscious, we can be more aware of what we've said or done, in time at any rate done.

But this doesn't necessarily happen.

We can know our type and something about the way we use it, or have a life without that knowledge and still stand for nothing

Or for something.

Some References

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