

Psychological Types and Traits: Some Fundamentals

by *Peter Geyer*

Twenty years ago, I embarked on a sometimes wild journey of teaching various kinds of people about the MBTI® instrument, so they could be qualified to purchase and use it – what’s now called *Certification*.

In doing so, I had to find an effective way of explaining the distinctions between types and traits to people who, like me, did not come to type from a measurement perspective and so were essentially oblivious to both the terminology and the historical debate. Indeed, unless they had a background in psychology, it was something they had never thought about.

In the USA, around that time, the type-trait issue was sufficiently important for it to be addressed at type conferences (e.g. Rytting et al 1993), the *Journal of Psychological Type* (Ware et al 1994) and in a seminal article by Naomi Quenk in the *Bulletin of Psychological Type* (1993). These became my basic sources of explanation, added to as time went on.

These days, a glance at online discussions among MBTI® professionals show this hasn’t gone away. As Naomi Quenk said long ago, all too many type users are clearly unaware of the importance of distinguishing between type and trait personality approaches.

What can be said today? Here are elements of the past, for the present and future.

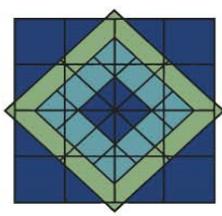
MBTI® instrument results are often interpreted as traits, rather than types i.e descriptions of behaviors rather than content-free mental processes. However differences between type and trait measurement approaches to personality are quite significant.

The conventional trait view presumes a structure of continuous scales and scores that imply amounts, with a normal distribution of these amounts. This differs from the MBTI® instrument’s dichotomous scales, scores that sort, not quantify, and bi-modal distribution of the scores, according to Isabel Briggs Myers’ interpretation of Jung’s theory of psychological types.

Roger Pearman and John Fleenor, men knowledgeable about measurement, write that “the artificially generated continuous scores on the MBTI® instrument are by-products of comparing the votes an individual gives on MBTI® instrument were not intended, developed, nor studied to show that a higher or lower preference score indicates a difference in behaviour” (1997).

The purpose of trait-based instruments is different from that of the MBTI® instrument, even though traits are used to describe type. Indeed, a description of type behavior is a trait description of an outcome of the interaction of type preferences. Types and traits are also fundamentally different views of what personality is – different kinds of people compared to individual differences amongst people.

A trait theory of personality implies a *tabula rasa* or blank slate for the mind, upon which experience in the world makes its mark, in contrast to both type theory and long-standing (e.g. Freeman 1999; Horgan 1999) scientific



research. Type is a systems theory, presuming individual purpose, or intentionality, and a dynamical approach to personality, as opposed to the static view often implied by traits, focusing on behavior in action.

In saying that, it's important to note that the MBTI® instrument doesn't contain type dynamics, but *infers* to it via the type code e.g ENFP as extraverted intuition with introverted feeling.

Pearman and Fleenor comment that "much issue has been made of the lack of common ground with traditional psychological research assumptions about personality, and those of type. Type has been identified with a sorter while... traits have been measured in degrees. But often forgotten in the debate is that type does not propose to explain the cause of behavior and seeks only to suggest that various expressions of behavior result from utilization of various patterns of mental processes.

Trait models presume to explain the root contributory causes of behavior. Type simply assumes that we can sort the expressions of individuals while they manage their world from their "automatic pilot" of perceiving and deciding. As the environmental demands in any given instant change, so might the utilization of different mental functions as defined by type.

Trait models indicate a more fixed notion of behavior and of the capabilities of individuals to adapt to their environment. Type may give information about patterns, responses and expressions, while traits may give us information on the typical sources of behavior.

Unlike trait models, however, type assumes change and adaptation. If one is measured for "dominance" on a trait scheme, it is presumed that your "amount" of this quality remains constant, with slight behavioral changes as learning occurs. Type, on the other hand,

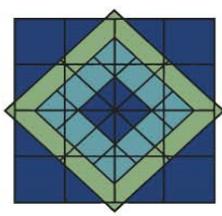
presumes that a preference for extraverted thinking does not preclude expressing extraverted feeling or extraverted intuitive behaviors as is needed to adapt to certain situational demands. In this sense, the virtue of adaptation, change and adjustment suggested by type is a more flexible and developmentally oriented model than trait systems of behavior" (1997 p188)

So, we use traits in describing type, but we must not confuse them with type preferences themselves, nor the view of personality that psychological type proposes.

Marvin Rytting and Roger Ware have commented that the Five Factor Model trait perspective is biased towards E,N,F, and J behaviors, an implication of a perceived ideal perspective for a well-adjusted person. (Note: In this case the preferences are taken separately, not as a part of the whole type, which is systemic.)

The Five Factor Model (FFM) perspective differs from Jung's in several ways. Most notably it depends on measurement that also presumes a regular distribution of behaviors so that certain of these become, by definition, clearly pathological. Correlations are considered high between the NEO-PI (an FFM instrument) and the MBTI® instrument, but the words describing FFM dimensions are quite different in tone and intent. Ray Moody, reporting on type and mental disorders provided brief comparative descriptions of Five-Factor Model dimensions, presented below in chart form (2006).

Pearman and Fleenor note that trait and type measurement perspectives "are very different in their aims in understanding behavior and rather than find them unreconcilable, both have a valuable contribution to make in exploring human behavior" (1997 p188).



Five Factor Model Dimensions – Brief Descriptions	
Emotional Stability	Neuroticism
relaxed; peaceful; objective; calm; unemotional; even-tempered; secure; patient; uninhibited	fearful; apprehensive; bitter; angry; pessimistic; despondent; timid; reckless; fragile; helpless; unable to resist temptations
Extraversion (or Surgency)	Its Opposite
sociable; talkative; active; bold; person-oriented fun-loving; spontaneous; adventurous; assertive; enthusiastic	cold; aloof; indifferent; withdrawn; isolated; quiet; passive; lethargic; cautious; dull; anhedonic
Openness (or Culture, Intellect)	Its Opposite
original; imaginative; creative; perceptive; artistic; sophisticated; knowledgeable; cultured; curious; analytical; liberal	practical; concrete; unaesthetic; unresponsive; constricted
Agreeableness (or Friendliness)	Its Opposite
warm; generous; trustful; courteous; agreeable; cooperative; flexible; forgiving; cheerful; humble	skeptical; cynical; suspicious; paranoid; cunning; manipulative; deceptive; exploitative; combative; aggressive; confident; arrogant; callous; selfish; ruthless
Conscientiousness (or Dependability)	Its Opposite
conscientious; practical; cautious; serious; dutiful; reliable; organised; careful; dependable; ambitious; hardworking	lax; negligent; disorganized; sloppy; undependable; aimless; hedonistic; careless; hasty; impulsive

From Moody (2006). Original source D.R. Lynam (2005) *Psychopathy from the perspective of the Five-Factor Model of personality* in P.T. Costa and T.A. Widiger (eds.) *Personality Disorders and the Five-Factor Model of Personality* (2nd. ed.) pp325-348). APA

So it's not a question of saying one view is good and the other bad, they are simply not the same. Taking type and trait measurement results that use the same terms at face value, for instance, misses this important point. Extraversion and introversion mean different things and have different implications.

Similarly, a strong correlation between the trait constructs Openness, Agreeableness or Conscientiousness and the type constructs Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling and Judging-Perceiving respectively requires looking past the numbers to the qualitatively different meaning and intent inherent in all those labels.

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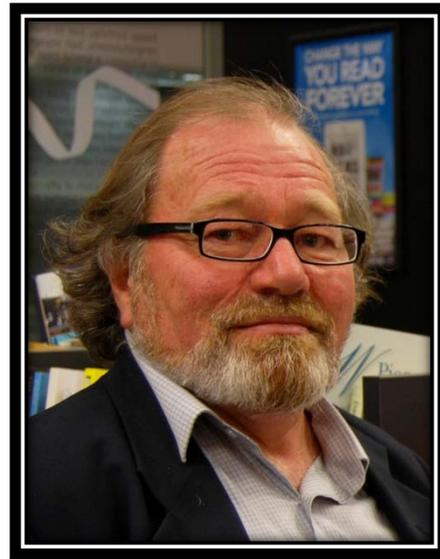
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Peter Geyer is a thinker, writer and researcher who has studied psychological type and similar ideas for 25 years. He facilitates groups on type themes and provides individual in-depth type interpretation and webinar presentations. His writing has appeared in the *Bulletin of Psychological Type*, *Australian Psychological Type Review*, *Type Face* and the *Journal of Psychological Type*. He taught MBTI® Qualifying Workshops for 13 years, also Step II and other advanced workshops, developing his own interpretive techniques. Peter is a life member of AusAPT, was an editor of the *Australian Journal of Psychological Type*, and a founder of the Psychological Type Research Unit at Deakin University.