Personality Types or Personality Traits: What Difference Does It Make?
by Naomi L. Quenk

I asked Naomi Quenk to write this article for the Bulletin because I believe understanding the difference between a trait view of personality and a type view of personality is crucial to our ethical and wise use of psychological type. Psychology in the United States is dominated by trait approaches, and they are so much a part of our picture of how human beings function that we use the assumptions and explanations of trait theory without thinking about them. They frequently creep into how we think and talk about type, distorting the meaning of type preferences and what we can attribute to psychological type preferences. My hope is that all of us who use psychological type will study this issue and use the understanding to evaluate the way we present and use type. — Linda Kirby

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to effective applications of type theory and the MBTI is that the majority of type practitioners are largely unaware of the critical differences between typological and trait psychology approaches to personality. This article explains the important differences in these two ways of understanding personality, and illustrates the negative effects of confusing them in applying Jung’s theory and the MBTI.

Trait psychology and type psychology embody two very different approaches to personality. Both are reasonable explanatory systems, and whether one is “better” than the other is irrelevant to this discussion. What is relevant, however, are the detrimental consequences of confusing one with the other, in treating a type theory as though it were a trait theory or a trait theory as though it were a type theory. My focus here is on the former error, since much of the misunderstanding and consequent misuse of type theory and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is directly related to this misinterpretation.

Predominance of trait approaches
Personality theorists, particularly in the United States, favor trait approaches for at least two reasons. First, they often associate type theories with attempts to explain personality by body-type (Kretschmer, 1961; Sheldon, 1942), and then reject type as a static system that does not reflect the richness and diversity of human personality.

They also prefer trait approaches because traits can be studied with a wide range of statistical techniques — all those methods based on the assumption of a normal distribution and continuous scores (means, standard deviations, etc.). Many fewer methods are appropriate for doing statistical research with type categories and they often require much larger numbers of subjects than do trait studies. This means that type research is more time consuming and more difficult.

Trait-based theories and instruments
Human characteristics like height, weight, age, and intelligence (IQ) are traits. Everyone has a height, weighs a certain amount, is a particular age, obtains a particular score on an IQ test. We merely differ in how much of a trait each of us has of these traits, with a relatively small number reporting a great deal of Optimism, Dominance, Rigidity, and Anxiety, or very little of these qualities. Thus personality traits, like other trait measures, tend to be normally distributed in the population. Statistical research on normal distributions indicates that about 68% of the people tested score in the middle range, with a decreasing percent scoring by the extremes.

Inferences promoted by trait approaches
We tend to notice people who are extreme on something, whereas

If we measured height, weight, age, and IQ for a large number of people, we would find that few people are very tall or very short, very heavy or very light, very old or very young, very intelligent or very dull; most people would be average on these traits, obtaining some “middle” score on what is being measured.

We can also describe peoples’ personalities in terms of traits. We may say, “She is a very optimistic person,” or “He is quite domineering,” or “Most of the time he is rigid and anxious.” If we wanted to measure such traits objectively, we might devise a set of questions that would reflect the traits of Optimism, Dominance, Rigidity, and Anxiety.

If we created these trait scales and administered them to large numbers of people, we would find that most people have pretty moderate amounts...
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"average" people are unlikely to attract our attention. The extreme person is different and therefore "outside of the norm," not "normal"; so it is easy to make a value judgment about people who are not average on a trait. They may be seen as abnormal, and their abnormality may be either positive or negative. There are advantages or disadvantages to being very tall or very short, very fat or very thin, older or younger. When it comes to IQ, however, one extreme may be very much preferred. It is clearly better to be more rather than less intelligent!

Similar qualitative comments may be made for personality traits. We can see something wrong with being very optimistic (perhaps the person is not accepting reality) or with having too little optimism and therefore being pessimistic and depressed. We may want to avoid very domineering people who are overbearing and intrusive, as well as people with minimal dominance.

qualities as creativity, leadership ability, and insightfulness, may be among these. So we see that implicit in a trait approach are 1) universality of the attribute with everyone having at least some of it, and 2) often an explicit or implicit value attached to differing amounts of the trait.

Another important feature of trait approaches lies in the view that traits cause behavior. We act in certain ways because we have some underlying trait that activates a particular response or level of response. This is similar to Freud's causal approach where symptoms are caused by an early event resulting in a character trait (e.g., "anal retentiveness") that in turn causes a behavior such as compulsiveness.

Type theory and the MBTI
Type theories characterize people according to certain qualitatively distinctive categories. In common language, we may describe someone as an intellectual type or a cooperative type. Where a polar opposite category exists, we don't expect a person to be appropriately described by both of the two opposite poles. Thus a cooperative type would not likely also be called an antagonistic type.

Type dimensions such as those on the MBTI are not assumed to characterize all people with individuals differing merely in the amount of "type" they possess. Each dimension has two opposite poles — a person characterized by one pole is qualitatively different from a person characterized by the opposite pole. An apple and an orange are qualitatively different fruit. They do not merely differ along some dimension of "fruitiness." Similarly, you are either an Extravert or an Introvert, a Sensing type or an Intuitive type.

Unlike the fruit analogy, however, type theory allows for the use of a less preferred pole by the person preferring its opposite. For unlike the static, relatively immutable character of the "fruit typology," psychological typology is a dynamic system embodying complex movement and interaction among elements. An apple cannot suspend its "appleness" in order to temporarily taste like a peach! But a person who prefers Thinking can suspend it and make a Feeling decision. This feature of typology is in accord with the notion of qualitative differences among types that are by nature complex and dynamic wholes.

How types are qualitatively different
In what sense, then, are type preferences "qualitatively different categories"? First, they are polar opposite mental activities, which means that we cannot do one at the same time that we do the other. We cannot focus on the outer environment and our inner reflections, or attend to concrete reality and future possibilities, simultaneously. But we can do these opposites consecutively, usually our preferred one first and the less preferred second.

Over and beyond this technical definition of polar opposites is the issue of how these qualitatively different categories emerge and develop within us. For we do not need to discriminate between simple categories like apples versus...
...personality traits will naturally form as the result of the habitual exercise of particular type preferences and/or one's whole type.

peaches, but rather explain some kind of consistency and predictability that result in highly complex and distinct human beings.

Perhaps a conception of the human psyche that views typology as a template upon and within which other relevant factors interact can be applied here. Thus, innate type as a dynamic whole and the individual preferences themselves may serve as a central core or organizing principle for significant life experience.

Within such a structure, personality traits will naturally form as the result of the habitual exercise of particular type preferences and/or one's whole type. The traits involved are likely to be more or less related to each other since the underlying preference or interaction of preferences will serve as the "glue" that makes them cohere.

It is commonplace to identify type differences by describing consistent sets of traits associated with them. We do this in our everyday observations of type and in the multitude of research studies available. Often, however, research examines one type dimension at a time rather than exploring the character of whole types. This is partially because of the difficulties mentioned above in doing statistical research with type. In order to do research using standard trait-based statistical methods, researchers suspend the basic premise of independent type categories and convert MBTI data into continuous scores. Those who are aware of the basic assumptions of type theory are cautious in interpreting the results of this kind of research and take care to interpret within the context of type theory. Those who fail to recognize the theoretical context of type theory interpret their research results in trait terms and thereby come to erroneous conclusions.

But even research performed in accord with type theory largely ignores the dynamic character of typology in both the design of studies and testing and interpretation of results. The consequence is a failure to make the most of the explanatory ability of the theory. A notable exception to this is the recent research compendium by Thorne and Gough (1991), which looked at personality descriptors for whole four-letter types. (See my review of their book in this Bulletin issue.)

The normal distribution and norms do not apply
The important point to make here is that, unlike traits (including those associated with type preferences), type dimensions are not normally distributed in the population. For example, when preference scores (or corresponding continuous scores) on the Extraversion-Introversion dimension are arrayed, they approximate a bimodal distribution. This allows interpretation of two distinctly different kinds of people characterized by each pole of a dimension. We assume that most people will score at or near either pole (end) of the distribution, not that the majority will score in the mid-range of low Preference Scores.

Another important distinction is that type is not normative: there is no "normal" or "best" score to obtain or type to be. Of traits) is an expression of type. In contrast to the Freudian reductive/causal approach, it is consistent with Jung's prospective, purposive approach. The purpose or goal of typological expression relates to our instinctual push toward completion, which is the final stage of the Individuation process. Although trait approaches are not necessarily inconsistent with a prospective, purposive approach to personality, they are not commonly viewed from that perspective but rather within a causal framework.

Type dimensions such as Extraversion, however, are often treated as traits within a trait theory. In fact, every major personality instrument in use includes a measure of extraversion/introversion. It is typically treated as a trait. One
In a type approach, behavior is not seen as caused by one’s type. Rather, behavior (often through the vehicle of traits) is an expression of type.

example of such a trait-based instrument is the Cattell 16-PF (1970). In trait approaches, a continuum is assumed such that, for example, a person with a low score would be seen as “less extraverted” than a person with a higher score. In such a system, we might explain someone’s behavior as a function of their degree of Extraversion. We might say, “You like having many people around you because you are high on the trait of Extraversion.”

In type theory, a statement ascribing cause would not be appropriate. The correct statement would be, “Your enjoyment in having many people around you is an expression of your preference for Extraversion; it is one way in which you demonstrate your Extraverted attitude.” Or perhaps more theoretically, “your life experience has been filtered through an Extraverted template that has encouraged development of many traits associated with Extraversion, your enjoyment of many people being one of them.”

What happens when people treat type dimensions as traits?
The misuse of typology and the MBTI follow from the differences outlined above.

Effects of assuming a normal distribution
When we assume that type dimensions are normally distributed, we can readily infer that there is a normal or “good” score to obtain. We thus give meaning to the numerical scores whose primary purpose is to sort people into equally desirable categories. Errorneously assuming a normal distribution also encourages us to speak of “amounts” of a type dimension rather than qualitatively different type preferences. Here is an example to illustrate the effects of this kind of error.

If an Extraversion-Introversion dimension is treated as a trait, people merely differ in how much extraversion (or introversion, depending on how the scale is constructed) they demonstrate. Introversion could then be defined as a diminished amount or an absence of Extraversion (or vice versa). However, if Extraversion and Introversion are qualitatively different modes of being, we cannot define one as merely less or the absence of the other. Rather, we are dealing with a coherent set of qualities that define Extraversion, and a different set of qualities that define Introversion. Our descriptors will likely be mental and behavioral traits that result from habitually having one’s energy flow outward (Extraversion) or inward (Introversion). But we will not speak of a “degree” of outward and inward flow or a degree of Extraversion or Introversion.

Inferences about skills and pathologies
If I am “more Intuitive” than you, are my intuitions better than yours? Could you do something to raise your Intuition to the level of mine? If you get a higher preference score for Intuition the next time you take the Indicator, does that mean you

The following summarizes the essential differences between trait and type theories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRAIT THEORIES</th>
<th>TYPE THEORIES</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universals differing only in amount possessed.</td>
<td>Qualitatively distinct inborn preferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves measuring amounts.</td>
<td>Involves sorting into categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normally distributed.</td>
<td>Bimodal/skewed distributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme scores important for discrimination.</td>
<td>Midpoint separating categories important for discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scores show amount of trait possessed.</td>
<td>Scores show confidence in the sorting procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior is caused by traits; a reductive approach.</td>
<td>Behavior is an expression of type; a purposive approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much or too little is often negative or diagnostic.</td>
<td>“Too much” or “too little” is irrelevant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is typical or "normal" for one type may be quite out of character for another.

are more intuitive than you were before? Would an employer who runs an intuitive company be better off hiring me than you because I am "more intuitive" than you?

When we speak of "amounts" in relation to type dimensions, we readily fall into erroneous interpretations of differential skill levels and other "surplus meanings." If you are "very introverted," you probably lack social skills, dislike people, and are inhibited, as compared to someone who is only slightly introverted and probably has fewer deficiencies in these areas. Is someone with a very clear Preference for Judging over Perceiving "very judgmental" and should I rather favor the person with a clear score on Perception because she must be "very perceptive"? Should I be wary of people with low preference scores because they may lack self-awareness or confidence in themselves? Or should I rather regard them highly as "flexible and able to go both ways"?

As you can see, treating type dimensions and scores on the Indicator as traits leads us to incorrect attributions of skill and permits us to pathologize or overvalue one or the other extreme score or the middle score, depending on what other erroneous notions we hold about type theory and the MBTI. We may think it is best to be in the middle if we are looking for the "normality" associated with trait measures; or we may opt for one of the extremes if we assume more of less of some type dimension is better than "average." Sixteen "norms" versus one norm. Perhaps the most negative effect of interpreting type from a trait perspective is the lost opportunity to describe, appreciate, and assess individuals from the perspective of their own character structure; for attitudes, motives, and behaviors are seen in entirely different ways within the context of one type as compared to another. What is typical or "normal" for one type may be quite out of character for another.

It is type-consonant for an Introverted child to spend much of his recess alone reading a book; when an Extraverted child spends much of his free school time that way, one might be wise to pay special attention to his state of mind. But from a single-norm perspective, both children might be seen as shy, unsociable, and maladjusted. Similarly, taking control and organizing people is expected as an expression of type for Extraverted Thinkers, regardless of gender. But in our normative culture, women who demonstrate such behavior may be viewed as inappropriately aggressive and over-controlling.

Myriad examples of the effects of a single-norm approach on different types can be cited. Some clues to the negative consequences from this normative approach are shown in some of the correlational data reported in the MBTI Manual (1985), such as the consistent association between Introversion and various measures of neuroticism and maladaptation. A more recent report is available in the Thorne and Gough book previously cited. In that research, MBTI types were described by themselves as well as observers using assessment instruments based on the single-norm approach. It was inevitable, therefore, that some types were described rather negatively overall, while others were portrayed as well-adjusted and psychologically healthy.

Many people who use the Type Indicator are aware that it differs markedly from other personality approaches — but most practitioners are not clear about the profound and critical nature of those differences. The goal of the foregoing discussion was to provide a useful explanation of type theory's essential characteristics and thereby encourage accurate understanding and more effective applications.

References


