

# Consciousness and its role in understanding and interpreting MBTI results\*

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*She is susceptible; he is impossible...*

*He has his contradicting views; she has her cyclothymic moods*

*They make a study in despair*

*Three of a perfect pair*

Adrian Belew 1984

*The Functions are often taken as characterological figures rather than as functions of consciousness, for these are more or less identical with characterological factors.*

*If you are a Thinking type, everything that is decent in you is linked up with that in your Thinking you are a decent fellow.*

*In your Feeling you show another character.* C. G. Jung 1929

What is it to be conscious, or unconscious for that matter?

From a strictly behavioural point of view, this might seem simple enough for research purposes, at least, requiring observation and measurement, setting of appropriate tasks and so on. Experimental psychology and psychological instruments or tests of various kinds are examples of this atheoretical approach, which has its basis in a strict application of the "scientific method," as defined, which implies sticking to observable facts.

A consequence of this approach is the denial of the necessity of a construct of the unconscious in either treating or understanding people and their behaviours (e.g. Miles 1966; Rachlin 1994). This view has been extremely influential, if not the prevailing perspective in the social sciences over the last century, albeit punctuated by occasional outbursts of outright opposition such as Rychlak (1997).

This view might usefully be interpreted as an urge to be "scientific" according to a narrow definition and so excluding important, scientific data. The palaeoarchaeologist Steven Mithen, in criticising this approach, has named it the "Social Sciences view of Personality," preferring what he calls an Evolutionary Psychology perspective in explaining the development of the human mind over millennia (1996).

More pertinently, Jerome Kagan, the respected researcher into early childhood development, has pointed out the fallacy of presuming that a behaviour is displayed (even in rats) for one reason only. Attention is also drawn to the equally false presumption that a term used in one field (e.g. *fear*) means the same thing when used in another (2002; 2004).

Terms associated with C.G. Jung's typology and the MBTI (e.g. Thinking; Feeling) make ready examples, and while there are regular complaints about the different meanings associated with type constructs, the act of defining your terms is a normal part of scholarship. Too many new words or terms in any case are not necessarily an aid to learning or understanding, although they might be useful for marketing a new "tool," for instance.

What might or might not be scientific with regard to human psychology seems also to be confused, generally. A perceived lack of scientific rigour in certain psychological investigations, including the use of the MBTI, has been identified and criticised most recently and quite publicly by Paul (2004), notwithstanding her critique being remiss on several fronts, including basic research methods (Geyer 2005).

What of consciousness, then? Like emotion it has a few quite different meanings (Geyer 2001), although it might not be as unruly a

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category (Elster 1999). From a social perspective, consciousness as a religious, or spiritual, view has a long history in American culture (e.g. Curti 1980; Hoopes 1989; Taylor 1999). It strongly informs contemporary Jungian and other ideas in that country, less so in others, to the extent that consciousness in type terms is often incorrectly limited to just this perspective.

This particular view seems to be related to the idea of a transcendent or higher plane of being, not necessarily associated with a deity, but sometimes with animist tendencies, in the way consciousness is ascribed to non-humans.

In scientific investigations, understanding human consciousness is focused on mind and brain, sometimes interchangeably. This ranges from researching cognitive or emotional aspects of human beings (usually seen as opposites), including measuring and localising such events in regions of the brain, to the development of consciousness itself.

The latter is usually represented as being a distinction between humans and non-humans, insofar as being able to demonstrate a knowledge of self. There are boundary issues here with some primates and dolphins for instance, even birds like crows, and it seems that part of the issue here relates to older religious discussions on whether animals have souls, however defined.

In philosophy, discussions on consciousness circulate around the mind-body problem, or Cartesian dualism. Descartes' idea appears to be religiously based in some way; it does have similarities with the view expressed above, at any rate. The development of consciousness is generally called "the hard problem" in both this field and neuroscience, as it's not known how the biological entity called the brain creates the behaviours and experiences humans manifest that can be associated with consciousness, and other states.

The rise of machine or computer metaphors, even that of Swiss Army knives, as ways of understanding the brain hasn't helped matters, as these have turned out to be too limiting and reductionist (Uttal 2001). The same can be said for left-brain-right brain analogies, popular in adult learning and areas of psychology, but not with neuroscientists (e.g. Springer & Deutsch 1997).

However, the development and use of drug therapies depends on a chemical/mechanical view of the brain that presupposes that personality, if it exists, is similar enough for generalisations about treatment to be effective overall. This is notwithstanding scientific evidence to the contrary regarding individual

differences in brains and so on and the variety of human experience.

In this way, by treating generalised symptoms for bipolar disorder for instance, the person under treatment may be at risk in other ways (Bentall 2004; Valenstein 1998). Recently, two mental health specialists in the USA have been reported by the magazine *New Scientist* as recommending "adverts that claim depression is caused by a chemical imbalance, and that antidepressants correct it, are false, and should be banned (Walker, 2005)."

In the cognitive field, such approaches have given rise to Rational Choice Theory, which underpins contemporary economics, or choice theory in general, influential in areas including coaching. Both these seem extraverterted judging methods. In the first instance, there's a presumption that human consciousness involves objective logic of a particular kind, accessible to all. For coaching and other applications, choice can involve the bringing to consciousness of a positive opportunity or alternative. Sometimes the notion is presented that there are always choices, a proposition that may be in the mind of the suggester, but not a viable reality in the life of the person to whom the choice is suggested, and so accordingly not a choice.

It's important to note here in passing that Jung's psychological types do not comprise a theory of cognition as defined in that field, notwithstanding its core processes of perception and judgement.

The moral philosopher Mary Midgley has critiqued the description of consciousness as a "hard problem," suggesting that the wrong definitions are used and wrong places are searched (2002, 2004a; 2004b). In particular, she points out that the (incorrect) notion of the brain as simply inert matter in the physics sense leads to incredulity that consciousness can rise out of it. She argues for a biological approach that is more likely to see consciousness as a natural part of complex organisms operating in their environment.

This view of consciousness, with its lack of metaphysics, is actually more or less compatible with Jung's view on the historical development of consciousness over time, and his understanding of "primitive" cultures in this regard. However, it's important to recognise that Jung is also talking about psychological consciousness, rather than the broader definitions of consciousness investigated by scientists and philosophers.

Jung's view of consciousness is more of an individual process: "*the function of activity which maintains the relation of psychic contents to the ego*" (1970). Samuels, Shorter and Plaut explain that:

*“Attainment of consciousness would appear to be the result of recognition, reflection upon and retention of psychic experience, enabling the individual to combine it with what he (sic) has learned, to feel its relevance emotionally and to sense its meaning for his (sic) life.*

*In contrast, unconscious contents are undifferentiated and there is no clarification about what belongs or does not belong to one’s own person”* (1986)

Accordingly, a human being may be conscious according to science, but not according to Jung, a similar idea to his view of personality as a vocation, or calling (1977). So a person may be engaged in society in a conventional way, but not be conscious *per se*.

This view of conscious/unconscious has significance for Jung’s psychological types, and the MBTI. In theory, type preferences are a bridge between the psychological conscious and unconscious. Development of preferences implies that they become more conscious, and so therefore under more control in that the person concerned can impose their will on the construct and it will work more or less in their interest. This is an abstract from reality, of course, no-one spends their time saying to themselves “I’m going to use x or y function” day in, day out, although some people seem to have made deliberate attempts to do so.

John Beebe and John Giannini have sought to relate type functions and archetypes, Beebe through identifying specific archetypes with the 8 functions and their attitudes, and Giannini through claiming the types as archetypes in themselves. To my mind, Beebe’s view seems the more plausible, notwithstanding a tendency for some users to want to quantify with specific behaviours what is at its core a therapeutic model where the reason for the behaviour is more important than what the behaviour actually is.

The MBTI was never intended to be a measure of consciousness, simply a sort for preference. Barbuto’s curious suggestion (1997) that this is, or should be, the case is yet another example of published MBTI articles being greatly unfamiliar with MBTI history and theory, for whatever reason, often combining this with a lack of understanding of the cognitive and intellectual boundaries surrounding psychometric measurement and its subjects.

There’s not much point critiquing an instrument or idea for not doing something it didn’t say it was doing anyway. Having said that, this activity occurs quite often.

The outsider Isabel Myers was never in doubt about the indicator she developed being

just that. It didn’t matter whether the person completing her Indicator had ever done the activity or task they were being asked to choose between.

She wrote in about 1950 (und.a) *“One thing nor required is for questions to be overtly descriptive of the testee’s behaviour. Nowhere do we assume that a given answer is objectively true of the person giving it”* because she understood, much like Kagan in recent times in another context, that preference or personality and behaviour were not necessarily the same. Instructions on older Forms of the MBTI offered the advice that: *“The questions are not important in themselves, but the answers point to certain likes and dislikes that are important”* (1977 Form F answer sheet).

One of the reasons Isabel Myers constructed an Indicator and not a measure claiming exactness, was because of her understanding of Jung’s typology as being more than about behaviours regarding questions. Hence, her innovative allowance of omissions, something sadly not taken up by other instrument developers who prefer to force respondents to answer often irrelevant questions. It’s also unfortunate that MBTI instructions regarding the meaning of the questions and the permissibility of omissions have become less clear, or even disappeared, over time.

The notion of consciousness in type theory makes the provision of adequate feedback on MBTI results more important than a protocol or professional advice. This is because it’s in this process that consciousness, this particular personal attribute, is more likely to appear. A person might say “is this me?” for instance, or be unaware of similarities and differences between their own personality and others. It’s not necessarily pathological, simply how people have lived.

There may have been no necessity to develop in type terms, for instance. It can also be a dangerous thing to engage in this kind of development; social costs may be too high, for instance.

Sometimes this relates to close scores, sometimes not.

A female Human Resources Manager in her late 20s reported as INFP with preference clarities of Very Clear, Slight, Slight and Moderate. She identified as INFP before the reported results were provided, and suggested that the Slight results related to her work requirements, something she found unpleasant, but could do. In discussions, and activities, she expressed the attitudes rather than any functions to any great extent.

A male consultant in his mid-40s reported as ENTP with preference clarities of Slight, Clear,

Moderate and Very Clear respectively, and readily identified as ENTP. In discussions and activities he spent little time in Thinking mode before readily returning to the possibilities of extraverted intuition

A female school teacher in her 50s reported as INFJ with preference clarities of Clear, Slight, Moderate and Moderate respectively, and was unsure of her whole type. Eventually she agreed that her preferences were ISFP, and that the reported preference of J related to her family and teaching responsibilities. In a far from unusual situation for many females I've observed, she remained closer to a stereotype in behaviour (in this case ISFJ) than her natural preferences.

Over the years of teaching MBTI, I've often encountered successful professionals (mostly females, although my clientele is biased that way) who would be classified as unconscious in Jung's terms. Mostly these are in the late 20s/early 30s, but sometimes older, in the early 50s, for example. MBTI results of mostly Slight preferences (I and 2 others) with a Clear or Very Clear preference for J can be a clue.

It seems some MBTI practitioners offer a retake of the MBTI to people who are unsure of their type preferences. For me, this is a futile activity that misunderstands the purpose and use of the MBTI. An in-depth feedback session, with reflection and follow-up is more relevant, but it must include an understanding of type dynamics and development and an ability to apply that knowledge to a stranger's life.

Comprehensive personal feedback is also particularly relevant for MBTI computer printout results, particularly Step II, because of the temptation to look at the expression of type as literal behaviour, not in terms of what people might express themselves. Group processes involving type may not provide sufficient insight for people to decide, whether or not there is interest in the idea itself.

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Sensing people are attracted to facts, for instance, but clearly not every fact and sometimes what might seem like relevant facts. In this case, the preference might not be consciously developed, or the fact might be associated with another preference for the person concerned. Gardening can be easily identified as a sensing pursuit, but can be loathed by people of that preference. Internet engagement might be dominant function for one type, and inferior function for someone of the same type, for instance: control or entrapment.

Type preference is also not skill; essentially the preferences are content free, and contingent on experience. Not only are there other psychological factors involved, but a person might want to express their preferred functions and development differently: environment, family, opportunity and so on are relevant here, as well as talent. Some people like to be handy around the home, but they may not be good at it.

I can also identify with a type, but still be unconscious of its meaning or relevance. This can happen anywhere, but MBTI Qualifying workshops are, paradoxically, a place where the meaning of type is lost on people, sometimes due to method or knowledge, other times due to the limited amount of consciousness involved. Paul's book can be profitably mined for such examples, in the MBTI sections, and elsewhere (2004).

So in looking at consciousness and how it might relate to psychological type, we're looking at observing and engaging with an individual approach to the world. The examples given above are intended to suggest that an understanding of consciousness is a crucial part of teaching and learning about type, notwithstanding that this approach may take us away from the generalised descriptions and to an understanding of how individuals conduct their lives, in the context of C. G. Jung's psychological types and the MBTI.

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## Appendix: C. G. Jung on Personality

- No-one develops their personality because someone told them it would be useful or advisable for them to do so...
- The development of personality...means fidelity to the laws of one's own being...
- Personality, as the complete realisation of our own being, is an unattainable ideal...
- To become a personality is not the absolute prerogative of a genius, for a person may be a genius without being a personality.
- True personality is always a **vocation**...an irrational factor that destines one to emancipate themselves from the herd and its well-worn paths
- Personality can never develop unless the individual chooses his/her own way, consciously and with moral deliberation.
- The developing personality obeys no caprice, no command, no insight, only brute necessity.
- The developing personality...needs the motivating force of inner or outer fatalities.
- Only the person who can consciously assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality.
- But if they succumb to it, they will be swept away by the blind flux of psychic events and destroyed.

Taken and adapted from C.G. Jung *The Development of Personality* (CW17) Princeton 1991: p. 172 para 291; p. 173 paras 293, 295; p. 174 para 296; p. 175 para 300; p. 179 para 307; p. 180 para 30