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Beyond ISTJ: a discourse-analytic study of the use of the Myers-Briggs type indicator as an organisational change device in an Australian industrial firm

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Beyond ISTJ: A Discourse-Analytic Study of the Use of the
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as an Organisational Change
Device in an Australian Industrial Firm

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Abstract

Although the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is widely deployed in work organisations, very little is known about how HR practitioners customise it for use, how employees react to being typed, and how (or if) they apply it in their daily work. This article reports the findings of a study that used interviews with HR practitioners and employees to investigate perceptions and uses of the MBTI in an Australian manufacturing site. A variety of interpretations and uses was found, illustrating that the effects of a device like the MBTI cannot simply be read off from the normative claims contained within it. Despite the variety of uses to which the tool was put, employees judged its effects to be moderately beneficial.

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Autobiographical note: Karin Garrety has a PhD in Science and Technology Studies from the University of New South Wales. She is a senior lecturer in the School of Management and Marketing at the University of Wollongong.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the most popular psychological instruments in the world. Each year, two to three million people fill in MBTI questionnaires (Gardner and Martinko 1996, Center for Applications of Psychological Type). Many of these do so in work organisations, as part of HR interventions that use the MBTI to enhance self-knowledge, interpersonal understanding and teamwork. Despite its widespread use, however, little is known about how HR practitioners customise and deploy the instrument as part of their professional toolkits, or how employees, once typed, use (or don't use) knowledge of type in their daily work. Although there is a large literature on the MBTI, much of it is prescriptive (for example, Jessup 2002), or focused on the tool's psychometric properties and ability to predict variables such as creativity and career choice (for example, Wang, Wu and Horng 1999).

Literature that is critical of the MBTI is also often directed at its psychometric properties (Gardner and Martinko 1996, Michael 2003). Here, writers caution against its use on the grounds that it relies on possibly inaccurate self-reports, that its dichotomous nature imposes a false polarity on differences that would be better conceptualised as a continuum, and that the reasoning behind it is based on 'the circular proposition that behaviour is caused by traits which are inferred by behaviour' (Spillane and Martin 2005, 254). There is also a stream of literature that bases its critique of the MBTI and similar devices on their putative 'power effects' (Foucault 1982). According to writers in this stream, personality-typing tools are not benign instruments for enhancing self-knowledge, but part of an armoury of devices that can be deployed for the purposes of social and organisational control (Holmer-Nadesan 1997, Rose 1996, Townley 1993). Reducing human differences into 'taxinomia' or classification schemes makes them visible and measurable, and therefore potentially controllable (Townley 1993). Individuals who are 'typed' are expected to practice 'technologies of the self'

(Foucault 1988). That is, they are supposed to use the knowledge that the MBTI provides to make themselves more socially amenable and economically productive. These critiques have been valuable for drawing attention to the disciplinary implications of personality typing, but again, detailed analyses of the degree to which (or even if) employees actually use the instruments to manage themselves in the corporate interest are generally lacking.

The relative lack of scholarly attention to how the MBTI is used and interpreted *in practice* is not surprising, given that employee reactions to HR activities in general have traditionally been under-researched (Guest 1999, Grant and Shields 2002). This article helps to address this imbalance through a case study analysis of how the MBTI was introduced, interpreted, and used in an Australian heavy manufacturing company that I will call Steelco. The article concentrates on two main aspects of MBTI use: - how the 'standard' MBTI was configured for Steelco by consultants and HR practitioners, and how it was variously adopted, transformed and sometimes subverted or neglected by the employees who were typed according to its conventions.

In carrying out this task, I treat the MBTI as a discursive device, that is, as a set of interrelated statements and practices that construct the 'reality' of a particular phenomenon of interest (Grant et al. 2004). In this case, the phenomenon is human nature, which the MBTI constructs as consisting of sixteen personality types with various preferences, habits, strengths and weaknesses. While positivist researchers would be interested in the degree to which the MBTI can accurately detect 'real' differences among people, researchers working from a discourse-analytic perspective would distance themselves from this issue. Instead, we are interested in how, through MBTI-related talk and action, organisational actors create the types as 'real', or at least real enough to legitimate certain knowledge claims and courses of action. Treating the MBTI as discourse allows an exploration of different interpretations

without legislating which are ‘correct’ and which are ‘distorted’. It allows us to trace what happens to a well-defined and formal set of normative statements and practices when it enters the complex milieu of an organisation undergoing change.

When examining the use of the MBTI in organisations, however, we are not dealing with one neat, unified discourse. Instead, we have a situation where a formal and officially sanctioned body of knowledge – the MBTI as it is promoted and circulated by organisations such as CCP Inc and the Associations for Psychological Type – is adapted for use in a local setting. Just as new equipment often requires tinkering before it can be used (Fleck 1999), so too do tools such as the MBTI. In adapting it for local use, consultants and HR practitioners may highlight some aspects and downplay others according to circumstances and preference. The targets of MBTI use, that is, the employees who are typed, also tinker with it, using it in a variety of ways that may or may not be aligned with the prescriptions outlined in the formal literature.

To make the journey easier to follow, and to facilitate analysis, I employ a discourse-analytic framework developed by Grant and Shields (2002). In an article calling for greater attention to employee reactions to HR practices, Grant and Shields distinguished between discursive concepts, objects and subjects. The *discursive concepts* of HR are the formal, abstracted, normative and idealised bodies of knowledge on which the discipline is based. The MBTI as it is presented in canonical texts such as *Gifts Differing* (Myers 1980), and in the literature and training programs produced and administered by organisations such as CCP Inc. is a discursive concept. The conceptual frameworks of HR, however, are permeated with statements and assumptions about employees which influence how the profession is *practiced*. From the perspective of HR texts, employees are the *discursive objects* about which, and towards which, knowledge and actions are directed (Grant and Shields 2002: 315).

In adapting the MBTI for use in organisations, HR practitioners objectify employees as manifestations of the sixteen available personality types. These *discursive objects* are, moreover, assumed to be capable of, and even eager for, self-knowledge and improved understanding of others. Focussing on discursive concepts and objects only gives a partial view, however. To gain a more fully rounded picture, we also need to consider employees as subjects of their own discourse, that is, as *discursive subjects* (Grant and Shields 2002: 316). We need to take them seriously as thinking, feeling, self-creating people who may, or may not, take on the roles ascribed to them by HR professionals. This is the aspect of HR that has traditionally been under-researched.

The tendency to ignore the subjectivity of employees has had consequences for how HR practice is conceptualised. Academic writing on HR tends to fall either within a managerialist stream that assumes that it promotes well-being and productivity, or a critical stream that sees it as an insidious form of control (Guest 1999, Grant and Shields 2002, Maravelias 2003). This dichotomy is reflected in the contrast between literature that advocates the MBTI as valuable to organisations and individuals (e.g. Jessup 2002) and more critical responses, often inspired by the work of Foucault, that view personality testing as ‘a technique for engineering the workplace and for disciplining unruly employees’ (Holmer-Nadesan 1997, 189). Only by examining employees as discursive subjects can we ascertain which, if either, of these perspectives paints a more believable picture, or whether there is a more plausible account that lies between the two extremes.

The article begins with a brief outline of the MBTI as a discursive concept. I then describe the research site, data sources and method of analysis. Findings are then presented in accordance with the framework outlined above. The article concludes with some observations about the

use of the MBTI in Steelco, and the advantages of conceptually separating, and then searching for connections among, discursive concepts, objects and subjects.

The MBTI as a discursive concept

The MBTI is a conceptual device that sorts people into one of sixteen personality types. It is based on C. G. Jung's work *Psychological Types* (1921/1971) which argued that variations in behaviour can be explained by innate differences in the ways people prefer to take in information, make decisions and generally deal with the world. Between the 1940s and 1970s, Jung's ideas were operationalised by Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers into a questionnaire that locates respondents along the following four dichotomies (Myers, 1980: 2-9):

1. Extraversion (E) versus Introversion (I), or 'relative interest in ... outer and inner worlds';
2. Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N) - whether people perceive through their senses or through 'indirect perception by way of the unconscious';
3. Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F) - whether people make decisions using logic or subjective values; and
4. Judging (J) versus Perceiving (P). This refers to a general 'method of dealing with the world'. Judging people like to order their lives, while perceiving people embrace ambiguity.

Depending on their responses to questionnaire items, individuals are identified as extraverted or introverted, sensing or intuitive, and so on. They are given a 4-letter designation (e.g. ESTJ) that indicates their preferences, and therefore their personality type.

From its small beginnings in the 1940s, the MBTI has developed into a well known and widely used concept. The questionnaires and associated manuals that form the core of the concept have been translated into more than 30 languages. Organisations such as the US based Center for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT) and national Associations for Psychological Type promote MBTI use in workplaces, educational institutions and counselling. These organisations also control training and certification. By simultaneously spreading the device and restricting access to those who are qualified to use it, these organisations work to keep the concept consistent and intact.

Case Study, Data Sources and Methodology

This investigation of MBTI use was conducted in Steelco, a heavy manufacturing company with its headquarters in Australia. The company was established early in the twentieth century, and for many decades was managed along strict hierarchical lines. Managers and shop floor workers were, and still are, predominantly male, with strong union membership among the latter. Under these influences, the company developed a ‘masculinist’ culture, characterised by poor communication, displays of aggression, and a ‘them’ and ‘us’ division between management and workers. Despite these characteristics, the company enjoyed good profits for many years. However, by the 1980s, reduced government protection and increasing international competition joined industrial strife and macho-style management as problems that plagued the company. Some influential people within the organisation began to argue that if the company was to survive, the culture, and the managers who produced and maintained it, would have to change. Senior executives began employing consultants specialising in culture change, who introduced them to a range of self-development techniques, such as neurolinguistic programming and the MBTI. According to our informants, a few of the senior

managers experienced powerful personal transformations as a result, and began championing the widespread use of these and similar techniques within the company. A particularly important enrollee in this process was a ‘hyper-rationalist’ engineer who reportedly experienced a ‘religious conversion’ at a leadership training course. He went on to become the head of the company’s organisational development unit, which spearheaded the use of various psychologically-based tools throughout the 1990s, as part of a concerted attempt to improve the self-knowledge and interpersonal skills of employees.

The data that I draw on in this article are derived from a series of research projects carried out with colleagues in Steelco between 1997 and 2003. All the projects involved aspects of organisational change (references to the work of the author and colleagues). This paper is based primarily on two sets of semi-structured interviews. The first, a group of 16 conducted in 1999 and 2000, were with middle and senior managers (a mixture of people working in finance, safety and operations) who had attended a leadership training program that made extensive use of the MBTI. All 45 attendees within one section of the plant were invited to participate and just over one third volunteered. Because interviewees consisted of volunteers, no conclusions can be drawn as to their representativeness. The aim of this project was not to gain a representative overview of impacts, but to record volunteers’ recollections of the program, and its effects on their understandings of themselves and their place in the organisation.

The second series of interviews is a set of 14 conducted in 2002 and 2003. The purpose of this series was to focus more specifically on uses and interpretations of the MBTI among different subsets of employees. Possible candidates were identified using existing social networks and invited to participate. The subjects included three HR practitioners, four superintendents, two supervisors, four shop-floor operators and a safety officer. Again, the

degree to which these subjects are representative of employee populations as a whole is not known. All interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo software, which enables researchers to systematically identify and explore, compare and link themes within qualitative data. Although all the quotations used below come from these two series of interviews, the account as a whole is informed by knowledge gained about the company during our involvement with it.

Concepts and objects: Customising the MBTI

In the literature and manuals produced and circulated by organisations such as CCP Inc. and CAPT, the MBTI is a discursive concept that exists purely in the realm of ideas. As it is applied to specific individuals and situations, however, it creates discursive objects in the form of particular types of employees. A significant step in this process in Steelco occurred in 1994, when an external consultant used the MBTI to produce a cultural profile of the organisation (Bridges, 1992). In his report, he identified Steelco as an ISTJ company. In doing so, he took a discursive concept and projected it onto an entire organisation – a remarkable act of reductionism (Spillane and Martin 2005, 252). The MBTI taxinomia allowed him to objectify Steelco’s employees as manifestations of a particular personality type - loyal, rational and technically skilled, but also conservative, risk-averse and lacking in ‘people skills’.

The identification of Steelco as ISTJ set the stage for much of the work that was done there with the MBTI over the next decade. The organisation’s problems were often conceived in terms of excessive ‘ISTJ-ness’, and the solutions in terms of greater diversity in type. As one of the senior managers recalled,

[The CEO] didn't want us to be an ISTJ organisation. Presumably that wasn't the terminology he had when he sort of figured it out. But he wanted us to be a much more dynamic organisation so that we could actually cope with the changes and be much faster at responding as the technology moves ahead (superintendent).

The designation of the company as ISTJ provided a terminology that was used in leadership training:

[The facilitators] talked about how [Steelco] was very much an ISTJ organisation and hinted that being different was good as well. And that we shouldn't push everyone into this ISTJ box. A bit of diversity is good (superintendent).

The designers of the cultural change programs at Steelco thus created an image of a company populated by people who were being constrained by the traditional hierarchical ISTJ management style. Nonetheless, HR practitioners spoke about how they presented the MBTI in ways that would make sense to an ISTJ audience:

It's logical. It's rational. You can put overheads up, so it's not seen as too touchy-feely. It's seen as something that makes sense.

Another HR practitioner said:

I use it as a means of conversation almost to objectify what's happened, so it's not so much of an emotional thing. It isn't objective, but they can believe, and it helps them to get away from the emotional side of it and start looking at the dynamics of the relationship and where the risks are.

The MBTI was described by one HR practitioner as a 'platform for self-awareness'. In this man's view, self-awareness was 'the first step for organisational change'. There was a somewhat hopeful assumption, only partially fulfilled (see below) that improved knowledge of self and others would reduce conflict and improve communication and productivity:

You'd just get a group of either supervisors or supervisors and their team together, and you'd use it as a way of... well, I guess, it started to be used in terms of conflict resolution. Like, 'I can now understand the people I'm working with better'. So, it was used as a bit of a short-cut, a short circuit there to conflict, actual or potential conflict (HR practitioner).

HR practitioners work at the interface between discursive concepts and objects. They are also discursive subjects themselves, and I include some of their personal reactions to the MBTI below. As we see above, discursive concepts and objects interpenetrate, as HR practitioners work to make abstract systems of knowledge meaningful through practical activity involving real people. In this endeavour, pragmatism can be more important than scientific 'correctness'. As one of the practitioners noted:

Whether it's scientifically valid, I can't say. I use it more as a means of conversation and getting people to think differently than as a scientific instrument. I might sound terrible in saying that, but it's true.

Given this perspective, attempts by academics to discourage MBTI use because of mixed evidence regarding its validity and reliability (for example, Michael 2003) may be missing the point. HR practitioners, at least in this sample, do not use the MBTI because of its

scientific validity. Rather, it provides a useful resource through which they, as discursive subjects, can construct themselves as competent practitioners in their field. Moreover, as Weick (1995, 60-61) pointed out, plausibility and coherence are more important than accuracy in making sense of organisational phenomena.

Discursive subjects: The employees' perspective

Exploring a discursive concept and its construction of, and application to, employees as discursive objects as I have done above involves adopting a top-down approach, in which we view an intervention from the perspective of HR practitioners. To complete the picture, as Grant and Shields advised, we also need to include the views of the employees themselves. In Steelco, there were many different reactions to the MBTI and employees used it in a variety of ways.

Being typed

For some employees, being typed was a straightforward experience: 'I just sat back and thought, well, yeah, that's me. It wasn't any big shock to me' (an operator). A second operator had a similar response: 'I, sort of, thought, yeah, that's me. There were no surprises. I mean, if you've filled it out honestly there shouldn't be any surprises'. Others felt their type was variable or not so clear-cut: 'I'm reasonably sure that I could easily be an ENTP. I could easily be any of the E's – the bottom ones – actually, if I really wanted to' (a superintendent). Another superintendent, who initially identified as ISTJ recounted 'I've had an interesting journey through four of the 16 boxes'.

Employees in managerial roles tended to adopt more complex positions vis-à-vis their type identification than the operators, reflecting the fact that their roles often require them to present themselves in ways that are at odds with what they believe their ‘real’ selves to be:

I suppose they asked you lots of questions, and I suppose there’s a temptation to answer with the sort of response that you think the company would want you to be like rather than what you’re actually like. So I found it a little bit difficult to actually know what’s me, what’s my work person like versus what’s my home person like and do I really want people to know my secrets?
(a superintendent)

This superintendent also initially identified himself as ISTJ, noting that ‘much of it is trained into you from being in the company from the time you’re fairly young’. Like the man quoted above, he has also moved away from that designation. These two responses are in line with the intentions of those who introduced the MBTI as a means of encouraging those who were not ‘really’ ISTJ to move away from the confines imposed on them by the dominant ISTJ mind-set.

Self-knowledge, self-management and self-presentation

The ex-ISTJ superintendent who ‘had an interesting journey through four of the 16 boxes’ recounted:

When I came here, it was difficult for me, because a lot of the decisions that I made seemed to be at odds with what the other guys decided. I’d make a decision based on internal values, while they were making decisions on the rules. I know rules are important, but you have to say, ‘No, no, no. The circumstances are this...’ and the response would be, ‘No, we can’t do that. These are the guidelines.’ [...]. So, I did

the [leadership training] in Melbourne and thought ‘Oh, shit- that’s why that was the way it was like for years on no. 3 Battery. . [...] And I was relieved. [...] It was a bit of an eye-opener actually.

In this account, we can see how the MBTI can be used to reconfigure a person’s understanding of himself or herself in relation to others. Reconfigurations which turn bewilderment and feelings of not fitting into self-affirmation have positive effects. A similar response can be found in these words from a young manager:

Before I went on the course, I used to think ‘What’s wrong with me?’, but now you can read about it every day. I can read about my type every day and it's normal. So I know why I think like I do and why I behave like I do. It's good.

Proponents of the MBTI claim that knowledge of type can be used to manage stress (Quenk 2000). Several of our interview subjects reported using it in this way:

I’ve used it on a couple of occasions when I’ve really been struggling at work and I find myself doing crazy things. I’ve pulled the book out to try and get a bit of awareness about what I’m doing and how I can correct that. One example would be – if I start to get highly stressed, what I need to do is take some time out for myself (a safety officer).

When an ENFP is under stress.... For example, we’re not naturally inclined towards detail. Under stress, what we’re likely to do is grab a detail and because we don’t know what to do with it, it becomes the centre of our

universe and we focus on that. Look, that's just so bloody true! (HR practitioner).

Another use of the MBTI that emerged in the interviews was the use of knowledge of other people's types to tailor self-presentations and interpersonal interactions. A superintendent said:

Occasionally, if I'm going to make a presentation, and I'm giving it to [X], how many graphs am I going to put in it? And if I'm giving it to [Y], how many idealistic statements am I going to make?

In a similar vein, a senior supervisor 'confessed' that he used it to get subordinates to follow directions:

I've used it possibly as a bit of a sin, but which I think most people in this area have and that is you use it in order to get what you want done by people who you've previously had trouble getting to do things. So, 'you are an ISTJ, so I'll give you a detailed chart of what to do because I know you like to follow that'.

Interpersonal relationships and teamwork

The widespread use of the MBTI as a tool for enhancing teamwork is based on the assumption that an appreciation of type will improve communication and interpersonal skills. Some people in Steelco had high hopes for the MBTI:

When I first came across it I thought that this was the missing piece of the jigsaw, this is what we needed. If we all understand this, then everything will be all right (supervisor).

Interview subjects indicated, however, that knowledge of the MBTI had mixed effects on teamwork. One operator said:

In the short term, it was great. You could see the changes, you could see that people were There was a bit of consideration for others and a bit more understanding. So, yeah, in the short term, it definitely had an impact as far as your relationships go, but in the long term Now, I suppose half the guys probably wouldn't know what Myers-Briggs was if you asked them. But definitely in the short term it was good.

Another operator gave a similar view:

Operator: I think they tried to get people to understand the people they work with, where they come from, their characteristics, how they behave, why they behave the way they behave, and then hopefully get people to try and put aside their differences or whatever in knowing what that person's like so they can work together effectively ...

Q. Do you think that's happened, or ...?

Operator: Yes and no. There are instances where it does, and instances where it doesn't.

Q. What would some of those be ... the ones where it does and the ones where it doesn't? What would be the differences between them?

Operator: It just depends on the circumstances. I can't think right now, but there are times when you work together really well. It just depends on the situation. ... you have good days and bad days, I suppose.

A supervisor who was an enthusiastic adopter of the MBTI recounted the difficulties he had in attempting to use it to manage interpersonal relationships:

I find it hard to actually use. I can use it. I can sit back and reflect after a discussion with someone saying, 'Oh yeah, that must have been because of this', but at the time I find it very difficult to say, 'Oh yes, well obviously I need to adopt this approach because this isn't working and because of your MBTI, it's that.' I don't know. I don't have that knowledge. And I suspect that you need to use it a lot for a long period of time to get that knowledge.

To sum up the findings so far: Employees in Steelco reacted differently to being typed. Supervisors and superintendents tended to have more complex reactions than operators, perhaps reflecting the fact that managerial roles often require the presentation of diverse personae to different audiences. Many respondents found the MBTI useful for enhancing self-knowledge, and there were some accounts of managers using the MBTI to validate a move away from the ISTJ stereotype. When it came to teamwork and interpersonal relationships, however, results were mixed.

The device seemed to be easier to use for self-understanding than for in-situ analysis of interpersonal dynamics.

Pigeon-holing and ‘bludging off the preferences’

There were two aspects of the MBTI which frequently emerged as being problematic in the interviews. One was a perception that the MBTI ‘pigeon-holed’ people, or put them into boxes. The other was that employees could use the MBTI to justify ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour.

Interview subjects often used the ‘box’ metaphor in relation to the MBTI: ‘I had it done to me too. Yes, I know which box I’m in’ (HR practitioner). Boxing people in was seen by some as a constraint:

I think people have to understand that it’s just a point in time and that it doesn’t mean that you are that person in that box all the time. I don’t always think that’s explained or understood very well by people or by teams (safety officer).

Curiously perhaps, it was HR practitioners who seemed to be most concerned about the pigeonholing issue as they reflected on their own practice:

You often get corridor conversation where people will, you know, box you in. And I’m not saying that critically. I mean, often it helps people to actually discuss who they are, what they are, and to give a bit of themselves. A bit of self-exposure as to the way that they are and the way they behave in the

manner that they do. Something to keep away from is just using it as a tool to label people. Having said that in my conversation, I've been labelling people all the way through.

Another dysfunctional use of the MBTI was characterised by one of the HR practitioners as 'bludging off the preferences', that is, using type as an excuse for one's 'bad' behaviour. Our interview subjects mostly reported others (not themselves) engaging in this activity:

The other thing I don't like is people will also use it as an excuse. For example, 'Oh, I'm an introvert so I don't have to speak in front of groups. It makes me uncomfortable' or 'I don't have to respond if I don't want to because it's okay for me to just think what I'm thinking'. And that really annoys me, because I think it's a really bad excuse for not contributing (safety officer).

One supervisor, however, admitted that he had used the MBTI to justify his actions, and that he used the device to ease his frustrations about other people's behaviour:

Human nature being what it is, we tend to use it to justify our actions rather than to change our actions. I find myself doing it. If I behave in a certain way, 'Well then that's my MBTI, I can't change what I am.' [...]. It's become largely used as part of the blame toolkit. 'If only we didn't have so many E's around here, us I's would be able to tell them what was wrong'. That sort of stuff. Some of it helps me to overcome some of my frustrations around here,

particularly when we're in a group and we've got a fairly large number of Es and getting a word in edgeways is quite difficult.

Non-use, disinterest, and the 'management conspiracy'

Some of our interview subjects reported that they, and the people around them, did not take much notice of the MBTI. When asked 'Have you thought about or used the MBTI since you first encountered it?' one of the operators replied:

No, not really. People mention what they are, or what they've heard of it.

You don't really relate back to it, sort of thing. You just get on with doing your stuff, so ... Personally, I haven't.

Q. Have you seen other people at work use it, and if so how?

Operator: No, not really.

A safety officer reported:

I found the Myers-Briggs useful but to me it was something that just didn't register much. A lot of people came back from the course, and there's a lot of terminology flying around. People try to group people - like 'you're an INTJ or you're this or you're that'. It's just something that didn't really catch my attention

For some people, disinterest seemed to be linked to a dislike of being pigeon-holed.

A superintendent reported

One colleague's MBTI was IROG. His name was Roger [Laughs]. In other words he was having nothing to do with being classified into a box, as he saw it.

Two operators reported that some of their workmates rejected the MBTI because it emanated from management:

There were probably a couple of guys that just disregarded it totally because it may have been seen as a management ploy or brainwashing or whatever you'd care to call it.

If your boss hands you something You know, a lot of people think, 'bullshit, what's he trying to pull this time?'

These quotations indicate that, despite efforts to extinguish it, the old 'them' versus 'us' divide had not disappeared.

Evaluating 'success': Aligning concepts, objects and subjects

Discursive concepts are normative. In their emphasis on prescriptions and ideals, the discursive concepts of HR encapsulate the hopes and intentions of its theorists and practitioners. Within these encapsulations, employees are constructed as particular types of objects. In the case of the MBTI, employees are constructed as capable of self-knowledge,

interpersonal understanding and change. For HR practitioners, 'success' occurs when employees adopt and enact the object positions created for them by the normative discourse. As the evidence presented above shows, sometimes this happens, and sometimes it does not. In this section, I draw together extracts from the interviews that facilitate an overview of the effects of MBTI use in Steelco, from the viewpoints of employees and HR practitioners. I do so in relation to two interconnected issues that the discursive concept of the MBTI was introduced to address - the perceived dominance of ISTJs, and the perceived need to improve communication and relationship skills.

When proponents of the MBTI identified Steelco as ISTJ, and emphasised the desirability of a greater diversity of types, they were attempting to re-engineer patterns of conformity and deviance within the organisation (reference to work of author and colleagues). Interview subjects confirmed that many people did indeed identify themselves as ISTJ at that time. A superintendent who attended one of the early leadership courses recollected 'They said "go", and we got up and initialled the box, and at that course, two-thirds of the people were ISTJ'. He himself was 'in the opposite box' . Later in the interview, he said,

My suspicion was that half the guys that put their names down as ISTJs really weren't. .. They just wanted to be like the others... The first time they did it, they scored themselves ISTJ, but they've since figured out they're not ISTJ.

Until the early 1990s, ISTJ-type behaviour was considered desirable. It was 'the model for people who moved up through the organisation' (HR practitioner). With the new emphasis on diversity, previously desirable behaviour became suspect, and:

People would wish they weren't ISTJ's. It was almost like a label and they didn't like to think that they were introverted and used all their data, and they didn't really have a hell of a lot of feeling for other people, were very logical and very structured and so on. A lot of the time they found that hard to come to terms with (HR practitioner).

In our interviews, we did not encounter any ISTJs who expressed difficulties with being identified as such. However, we did interview a few managers who had initially identified themselves as ISTJ and had since altered their perceptions of themselves. 'I wouldn't see myself as an ISTJ any more. There's other bits in there that are sort of the "real me", if you like' (superintendent).

A HR practitioner who was involved in delivering the leadership courses confirmed that the distribution of type had changed over time:

When we first started to do the MBTI and the Leadership Program, there was a very solid split with most of the people in the STJ category – very few NFs, very few SFs. By the end of the time, we were seeing quite a bias towards NFs. And there were a couple of reasons for that. The mix of people probably changed, so we might have been getting more of the HR people, some of the younger people, towards the end of the exercise... The other one might have been that there was actually more willingness to be honest about preferences.

From the interviews it appears, then, that one of the goals of the MBTI's proponents was fulfilled. Over time, there were fewer employees identifying themselves as ISTJ. However,

whether this redistribution of types translated into improved communication and productivity was another matter entirely.

Our second series of interviews (those that focussed primarily on the MBTI) included the following two questions: 'Why do you think management introduced the MBTI into the organisation?' and 'Did management get what they wanted out of it?' Most of the interview subjects agreed that management introduced the device in order to improve interpersonal relationships, and to enhance flexibility by moving away from the ISTJ stereotype. Regarding the degree of success, almost everyone agreed that there had been some progress. All, however, qualified their answers in some way.

The most pessimistic of our interview subjects, a supervisor, in answering the question 'Did management get what they wanted out of the MBTI?' replied 'My view would be, no'. He explained:

I think if they did, we wouldn't have the Requisite Organisation¹ or the other restructures....I don't think it's delivered the results that were expected.

He continued:

I'm not sure what results they expected it to deliver. I suspect that everything was still linked to the black and white balance sheet anyway. We can have a lot of intangible changes in relationships with people, but if it doesn't actually deliver to producing more product for less money then it's not handled as a success.

All the other interview subjects saw at least some benefit from the MBTI, and even the supervisor quoted above stated that relationships had become more 'consultative' in the area in which he worked. Statements of positive effects included:

I think we became better at managing people and if you look at safety statistics and behavioural issues in relation to others and if you look at our industrial disputation there's evidence there to suggest, yes, we improved the organisation, improved the way it worked (superintendent).

If you look at a lot of the leadership teams around the plant, they have a reasonable mix of different personality types within those groups. Prior to the MBTI being put in there, maybe they wouldn't have (HR practitioner)

I would like to think that they [management] intended for us to have a better working relationship with each other, and if that was their intention then, yeah, they had obvious success in the short term. But, geez, they screwed it up since then [laughter] (operator).

To a certain extent, I think it's worked. I don't know how you gauge these things, or how effective they wanted it to be, but I think it's had a slight effect at least, yeah (operator).

Answers to the these two questions tended to be roughly similar across different levels in the organisation. HR practitioners, operators, and senior and middle managers all saw some benefit from the MBTI – from slight to moderate – and mostly in terms of greater acceptance of diversity, and improved communications and relationships. However, the qualifications in their answers illustrate how difficult it is to measure the impact of a device like the MBTI. Its effects cannot be isolated from the many other factors that influence organisational behaviour and productivity.

Conclusion

This article is a contribution to a growing literature that examines employees' reactions to HR practices (Browning and Edgar 2004, Grant and Shields 2002). Employee-focussed literature provides a valuable alternative to existing managerialist and critical approaches, both of which tend to view employees as passive instruments of managerial control. In terms of the discursive framework employed above, the managerialist and critical approaches both concentrate on the normative claims and prescriptions contained in the discursive concepts of HR and assume that employees adopt the object positions that these concepts create (e.g. Townley 1993). However, as we saw above, employees produce a range of reactions. Some, such as the Steelco employees who used the MBTI to legitimate their deviations from the ISTJ stereotype, used the tool in ways that the HR practitioners intended. Others ignored it, or used it in ways not sanctioned by its proponents. Sometimes, even when they supported the concept, they found it difficult to put into practice.

Separating a HR intervention into its discursive concepts, objects and subjects allows us to uncover and probe these different possibilities. In the words to Grant and Shields (2002, 313), 'a meaningful evaluation of the discursive concept of HRM only becomes possible by analysing the primary discursive object of HRM (the employee) as a discursive subject'. Employee reactions are complex, and cannot simply read off from the claims made in the normative literature.

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¹ The 'Requisite Organisation' was a change initiative that was introduced in 2002. Following Jaques (1989), it was a top-down restructure of the organization, based on a precise delineation of roles and responsibilities. As such, it was quite different in nature to the values-based culture change programs which featured the MBTI.