

12-3-2018

Psycho-Political Assessment and Making People: What Can We Know?

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2018) "Psycho-Political Assessment and Making People: What Can We Know?," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 7 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol18/iss7/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

Title: Psycho-Political Assessment and Making People: What Can We Know?

Author: Editor

The Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking has popularized the construct of making people, i.e., inventing types of people who haven't before existed (1). No, there's no Dr. Frankenstein-like laboratory or Chinese human genome editing or somehow assuming the role of a life-giving God. Instead, human characteristics—never-before perceived or perceived with different degrees of salience and quality—are pooled into an overarching category—a type. And people perceived as manifesting the characteristics—as a figure to the ground of whatever else they may manifest—have now been made as an example or exemplar of the type. Thus, these people—this type of person—have never previously existed in this way. These people and their type accrue currency via social usage much as through a Wittgensteinian language game (2). These people and their type become characters in our fantasies about people, in our daily interpersonal lives, of yet other peoples and types who populate our life world. People labelled as a type uses it as a guide for their own psychology—external behavior, moral and ethical calculus, self-identity. As if once being made, these people foster a thick description (3) within the type, incarnate and metaphysically. But then there's a psychological drift. People of a type fall into and wittingly develop characteristics not conceived or perceived as part of the original type. As it were, the type mutates. Experts and professional organizations that have sprung forth to explain and pontificate on the type now change their expectations—their descriptions and inferences—about the type. In turn, people labelled with the type change their expectations in an iterative, reciprocal interaction that spirals forth *ad infinitum* or eventually into a death spiral. At this latter event, that type of person is unmade, a victim of psychological historicism (4).

How might self-appointed and socially sanctioned experts on people—mental health professionals, poets, psychologists, clairvoyants, other delvers into the soul—manage Hacking's challenge of knowing made people, especially as all people are made? Three constructs come immediately to mind, two from literary criticism, one from scientific psychology.

The first literary construct is British poet John Keats's *negative capability* also exemplified by the couplet of the *chamber of maiden thought* and the *burden of mystery* "...capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...[towards] a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery...the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration..." (5). Negative capability also was employed by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion connoting an attitude of openness of mind "... the ability to tolerate the pain and confusion of not knowing, rather than imposing ready-made or omnipotent certainties upon an ambiguous situation or emotional challenge..." (6).

The second literary construct is American poet T.S. Eliot's *objective correlative* connoting "...expressing emotion by finding ...a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked..." (7). Although Eliot was focused on invoking emotion in an audience, the *objective correlative* can apply to knowing the made person by that person and others.

The scientific psychological term is *empathy*—it's two main definitions knowing what someone is feeling and feeling what that someone is feeling. Unfortunately, these definitions and associated psychological research do not definitively bear on knowing how to know. This seems to be the case even as there are efforts to develop and assess explicit metacognitive interventions during virtual human experiences to teach and develop empathetic communication skills *in medias res* (8).

Enmeshed in making made people, the experts must be at best agnostic as to whether they can know anything at all. How different is this than Wittgenstein's "...whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (9) ?

References: (1) Hacking, I. (August 17, 2006). Making up people. *London Review of Books*, 28(16), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n16/ian-hacking/making-up-people>. (2) Wittgenstein, L. (1973/1953). (Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe). *Philosophical Investigations*. Pearson. (3) Geertz, Clifford. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In (C. Geertz). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, (pp. 3-30). (4) Hoagwood, K. (1993). Poststructuralist historicism and the psychological construction of anxiety disorders. *Journal of Psychology*, 127(1),105-122. (5) Li, O. (2009). *Keats and Negative Capability*. Continuum International Publishing Group. (p. ix). Keats, J. (2008/1899). *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*. (Cambridge Edition). Read Country Book. (p. 277). (6) Meg Harris Williams, M. H. (2018/2010). *The Aesthetic Development*. Routledge. (pp. 25-52). Bion, W. R. (1970). *Attention and interpretation*. Tavistock Publications. (7) Eliot, T. S. (1921). Hamlet and his problems. <https://www.bartleby.com/200/sw9.html>. (8) Formosa, N. J.; Morrison, B. W.; Hill, G. ; & Stone, D. (March 2018). Testing the efficacy of a virtual reality-based simulation in enhancing users' knowledge, attitudes, and empathy relating to psychosis. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 70(1), 57-65. (9) Wittgenstein, L. (2010/1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. (Trans. C. K. Ogden). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf>.

Keywords: Assessment. Empathy. Epistemology. Hermeneutics. Negative Capability. Objective Correlative. Political. Profiling. Psychological.

Abstract/Description: This article describes foundational problems in even experts' knowing people from formal psychological assessment to musings on human nature.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

To comment on this article, please go online to
<https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol18/iss7/1>