

## Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations



*The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing*, By Merve Emre (2018)  
New York, Doubleday: Penguin Random House, 336 pages. ISBN: 978-0-385-54190-9

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to think and implement the right talent infrastructure to turn an aging workforce into a competitive advantage. They must be aware that employees are part of their talent value even after leaving the organization.

- Frontline managers have the right place to identify hidden needs and provide education to all employees of all ages. Doing this, they will be able to address workforce issues with “creativity and grace”.

Authors conclude on the future of work where talent revolution should ignite new and different conversations for individuals who are navigating work, life and their own career potential. This is why we need to challenge deeply ingrained myths and to prepare for meaningful career development. In this context, leaders, if they want to profit from the untapped source of wealth in their teams, have to see longevity as their “single greatest competitive opportunity”.

The argument in favour of mature people in working environment is really well done and makes sense in our western countries totally immersed in the myth of eternal youth, a myth that is almost becoming a tyranny. The authors analysing modernity also criticize this way of thinking. Bauman (2007) portrayed our western life as a “consuming life” in which individuals are apprehended in a “best before date” perspective. Nevertheless, the book misses other societies such as those of Asia or Africa in which culture is very different and where older people are highly valued and respected. To rediscover the value of factors like wisdom, experience and taking time (for reflection, for sharing and cooperation), in our western countries—mainly focused on “speed” and “competition”—is healthy. It can help us to think about inclusive organizations, inclusive societies, able to face the terrible human challenges (global warming, massive immigrations, poverty and exclu-

sion...) with a different point of view where the dignity of each person, as part of the humankind, is preserved and protected.

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### **The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing**

By Merve Emre (2018) New York, Doubleday: Penguin Random House, 336 pages.  
ISBN: 978-0-385-54190-9.

When Francis Galton posited individual differences existed based on genetics, he turned the world on its head. Philosophers could no longer claim people were blank slates. Rather, they had ingrained traits that were difficult, and even impossible, to change an insight that troubled society for over 130 years. Psychologists were eager to jump on this new idea, proposing various tests and methods to measure these traits. These assessment techniques became the basis for the emergence of the modern world and were quickly adapted by various modern organizations: the military, government agencies, corporations, educational systems, and medical organizations. It is like the world has become one big test. Testing made the world fairer, but at the cost of losing the uniqueness of the individual or the belief that mind, character, and personality were not fixed by nature, but adaptable.

With this in mind, Merve Emre, an Oxford University professor, has written an interesting and thought provoking book about one of those tests, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a well-known model of assessing one's type or personality. More than two million people take the MBTI in a year. Mostly, Emre has written the story of the two women attached to that model, Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers. Although both were

educated, neither woman had training in psychology or psychometrics. What they had was a strong will, entrepreneurial spirit, and an obsessive, indeed maybe even a religious, zeal. It was a story that could only occur in America.

The strengths of the book are as follows. Firstly, as befitting an English professor, the book is well written and tells a crackling good tale about Briggs and Briggs Myers. Secondly, she has a remarkable ability to create empathy for Briggs and Briggs Myers. For example, Briggs's concern with type largely came from her difficulty in reconciling her religious belief with scientific evidence. In addition, her retelling of the complex relationship between Briggs and Briggs Myers was fraught with confusion and hostility. Likewise, the intersection between various members of psychology, such as Henry Murray, Edward Northup Hay, Donald MacKinnon, Henry Chauncey and MBTI is fascinating and well done.

Mostly, Emre's observation that the great insight of Briggs and Briggs Myers was not in psychology, but peddling a tool so that people could find insight and understanding of themselves, even in the face of a lack of scientific validity of the tool. Her descriptions and observations over how people treat MBTI as a religion rather than a psychological tool is funny, if not for the stakes being so high. The chants of "type does not change" sounds more like a religious prayer than a statement that would come from a trained psychologist.

Emre's has another apt observation; MBTI become a tool that people can use to understand themselves and their place in the world. Although people learn they are similar to others, for certain personality types, it could be liberating. Take Briggs's early life, introverted, highly intelligent, and non-athletic, she was probably separate from most of her classmates and presumably had a difficult time finding friends. But when, through a test, she discovered that

there are others out there like her, it could be comforting. As much as people claim they want individuality, they also want social acceptance from their peers. In fact, believing oneself to be radically different from others is usually a sign of a dangerous narcissist.

Emre points out the obvious problem with such an approach, that such tests can flatten human behavior into a "static predetermined set of traits" that are used by "powerful institutions" to support their own affairs. Basing this concept is her regarding of such organizational classics such as William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man*. However, Emre does not recognize that all groups impose conformity on its members. I wish that she had consulted newer literature on organizational behavior.

There are several problems in the book. The largest is that Emre does not have any training in psychology, meaning that she lacks the understanding of psychometrics. For example, she does not understand the difference between statistical significance and test/retest reliability. Nor really does she dive into the concept of validity in the book, which for a book on a psychological concept is a major miss. The fact that type does change, at least in measurement, means that the MBTI measures lack validity. Likewise, concepts, such as test theory, faking, relationship between personality, and intelligence, are not mentioned. The citations do not have many references to scholarly journals or addresses the larger historical atmosphere. Industrial and organizational psychologists were never fooled. In fact, psychologists and management scholars discounted the use of personality in the workplace up to the 1990s.

Little attention is given to other measures of personality that are used, such as the Big Five, which is valid and reliable. In fact, many of the problems that Emre points out about MBTI, such as dividing people into categories; lack of validity and reliability; have been corrected by the Big

Five model. Personality is not a dichotomy, although we often make it one to understand, but rather it is a continuum between various aspects. But there is little to no mention of the Big Five or any other recent model of personality. Basically, Emre is willing to discount all psychometrics based on the failings of MBTI, even though there are measures that are accurate, such as intelligence. She admits she does so because such measures support those in power and because there is racial/sexist bias with measures. Of course, personality is usually free from biases, unlike other measures such as intelligence.

Mostly, the book reads like a psychology book written by an English Professor; a stylish, well-written, and an engrossing story but one that lacks depth and nuance. It is a much better biography of Briggs and Briggs-Meyers than a history of the MBTI. The world can be divided between those who understand psychometrics and those who do not. Unfortunately, Emre falls in the latter category.

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**Maurice Blackburn: Champion of the People**

By David Day (2019) Melbourne: Scribe, 339 pages. ISBN: 978-1-92571-378-7.

The problem with undertaking a biography is knowing how to organize material. Should one pursue a chronological or thematic approach? What should be the balance between background/contextual material and more narrowly focused information on the subject of the biography? What should be the balance on information between the different orbits which our protagonist inhabited? These issues are relevant in examining David Day's biography of Maurice McCrae Blackburn (1880-1944), a lawyer, politician and early Australian advocate of what we would now

call liberal and human rights. Blackburn was involved in many of the major events that dominated Australian politics and industrial relations from prior to World War I to his death in 1944.

Blackburn is an early example of an educated person who represented and advocated on behalf of workers, the less fortunate and those subject to victimization by various arms of the state. He joined the Australian Labor Party and was elected to the Victorian Parliament in 1914. Blackburn was heavily involved in successfully opposing two referenda on introducing conscription by Prime Minister Billy Hughes during World War I, in 1916 and 1917. His stance on conscription cost him his seat in the 1917 election. In 1919, he opened a legal firm under his name. It still operates today, and it appears that this book, commissioned by the firm (p. 251), is designed to celebrate its centenary.

Blackburn was elected to the Victorian Parliament for a second time in 1925. He was too independent to be offered a ministerial position. He became Speaker of the Parliament in 1933, a position he held for a year before resigning and winning a seat in the Federal Parliament. He oscillated between representing Labour and being an independent member until he was defeated by an official Labour candidate in 1943. Twice he was expelled by the Labor Party during the charged times of the 1930s. The first was in 1935 because of his membership of the Movement against War and Fascism; the second in 1937 because of his membership of the Australia-Soviet Friendship League.

If we can put to one side Blackburn's family, his childhood, education and obtaining a law degree, there are four areas in which he is of importance to Australian history. They are his involvement with the Labor Party and election campaigns; his involvement and work as a parliamentarian—that has two elements; his Victorian and Federal periods of office—; the work