Letting the Heart Sing / Bringing about Change:

Adaptors and Innovators in the Work of Michael Kirton

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Editor's Introduction

My friend, colleague and elder of British Humanistic Psychology, Denis Postle, has a habit of being ahead of the game. And so it was that, many years ago, he shared the work of industrial psychologist Michael Kirton in the Independent Practitioners Group (IPN) 'Leonard Piper' peer group of which, at the time, we were both members. I have often hauled out this model of 'adaptors and innovators' in many and diverse conversations since then – probably citing Kirton's work less than accurately from my memory of what Denis described all those years ago. With the current global Covid crisis, and people's revealing responses to it, I felt that once again, Kirton's model is of great relevance to understanding what is currently unfolding. So I asked Denis if we could re-publish his description of Kirton's pioneering insights in *Self & Society* – and with characteristic generosity, he agreed.

The following text is taken from Denis's interactive e-book *Letting the Heart Sing*. Here, just the raw text is reproduced; for access to a pdf of the full piece, with full accompanying illustrations from the original CD ROM, see http://www.mindgymnasium.com/ebooks/PDFs/BringAboutChange.pdf).
Denis also tells me that moves are afoot to post the whole of what is a unique CD-ROM Human Potential resource on to the internet.

Warmest of thanks go to Denis for allowing us to bring this important work to *Self & Society* and the Humanistic Psychology world. In the next edition of *Self & Society*, we hope to include a complementary retro-review of Kirton's 1994 book, *Adaptors and Innovators: Styles of Creativity and Problem Solving* (Routledge, London).

For the last several decades coping with, responding to, and bringing about change have been a defining characteristic of much personal and professional development. Where previously, driven by a belief in the merits of progress, it seemed that any change might count as beneficial, a new-paradigm view of change tends to look at it in terms of who might be harmed, what the unforeseen disadvantages are, who owns the benefits, and lastly, how it sits with a sustainable future.

Coping with the complexities of industrial, professional, personal and interpersonal change is likely to remain a feature of the landscape for the foreseeable future. Responding well to change is also a key element of species evolution and survival, both globally and locally.

But what counts as responding well? One person's change is often another person's nightmare. New-paradigm development seeks to value and honour difference and contradict monocultures of the mind, and yet this can be hard to put into practice. To appreciate and understand the range of difference in how people handle change, it helps to pay attention to the differences in creative style that are the subject of the following screens. [See the online pdf version – ed.]

Adaption/Innovation Theory

Michael Kirton's Adaption/Innovation Theory sheds light on creativity, change, and resistance to change. Over the last several years I've found it endlessly useful, and I hope you do too.

Introduction

What drives change? What holds it up? What is going on in us when we struggle either to survive change, or bring it about?

For anyone who wants to understand and facilitate change, Michael Kirton's Adaption/Innovation Theory (A/I Theory) is likely to be a useful source of nourishment. Kirton's research suggests that there are two very different approaches to, or styles of, bringing about change – Adapting or Innovating. Broadly, Adaptors prefer 'to make improvements in existing ways of doing things', while Innovators prefer 'to do things differently'.

According to A/I theory, the majority of us incline one way or the other, even small differences being noticeable; also, all of us have coping behaviour, an ability to reach into the style with which we are least comfortable. No value judgement is implied in A/I theory: 'style' refers only to a preference for a particular approach.

A/I theory and KAI, the inventory measure associated with it, are an outcome of occupational psychology research across more than 20 years. Perhaps because of this origin and its very scientific preoccupations with measurement and statistical validity, many people may have overlooked it. This is a pity,

because it appears to shed a lot of light on the 'how and why' of change.

The intention of this presentation is to make A/I Theory more broadly accessible, so that it can be tried out in, for example, the experiential-learning tradition.

For me, A/I Theory and the KAI have provided both an illuminating (and disturbing) re-orientation of my attitude towards my own and other people's creativity, while at the same time supporting my intuition about how organisations and individuals can tap deeper into their creative potential. As the possibility increases of being engulfed by some of the changes humankind has already set in train, understanding how and why we bring about or resist change becomes more and more urgent. A/I theory appears to account for at least some of the underlying patterns of change-related behaviour.

These screens [see the pdf – ed.] are ideally used alongside the basic tool of A/I Theory, the KAI inventory, a well-validated and widely used way of assessing 'the cognitive style you prefer to use when bringing about change'. However, if you don't have access to the KAI questionnaire, or presently only wish to have a taste of what A/I Theory offers, these screens should provide an initial introduction.

Adaptors and Innovators

1. A spectrum of creative styles

Research by Professor Michael Kirton suggests that there is a spectrum of creative style – the way that you prefer to approach bringing about change, or solving problems. At one end of the spectrum are Adaptors, who prefer 'to make improvements in existing ways of doing things', while at the other are Innovators, who prefer 'to do things differently'.

Most of us are not at the extremes, although small differences can be quite noticeable. It is important to appreciate that no style is regarded as better than another: each has benefits and drawbacks, depending on the circumstances. If you know yourself quite well, it's likely that you

will be able to make a guess at your own preferred style. Below are some of the characteristics of Adaptors and Innovators. Read through them and check out which of them represents your preferred creative style – are you inclined to be an adaptor or an innovator?

Do remember that while you may be able to guess accurately what your style is, getting an accurate score on the KAI Inventory is essential for serious practical applications of A/I Theory, for example in team-building or conflict resolution.

If your approach to bringing about change is ADAPTIVE, you will be more likely than Innovators:

- to prefer improvement of existing structures over mould-breaking change
- to start work only on projects or schemes that you can complete
- to calculate decisions finely, taking care about the consequences of your choices
- to accept change in so far as it improves or strengthens the status quo
- to be methodical and prudent
- to ensure widespread support for proposed changes before offering them
- to put a high value on being efficient within a system
- to resist 'sticking your neck out' against prevailing opinion
- to reject, or be very sceptical of, changes that challenge the cohesion of the group
- to be interested in solving problems rather than looking for them
- to appear tolerant of boredom
- to respond to criticism from close colleagues with greater conformity
- to see innovative ideas for change as threatening or unsafe

Adaptive ideas are more likely to be accepted and to pay off immediately. If your approach to bringing about change is INNOVATIVE, you will be more likely than Adaptors:

- to prefer mould-breaking change over improvement of existing structures

- to be reckless or neglectful of the consequences of your actions
- to see the 'status quo' as needing complete transformation
- to be seen as undisciplined and reckless
- to assume that ideas for radical change are self-evidently valuable
- to put greater value on thinking up new schemes than on implementing them
- to question basic assumptions about any problem that is being worked on
- to feel free to criticise proposals for change from any source without regard for the subsequent cohesion of the group
- to enjoy seeking out problems
- to become bored with routine
- to prefer to delegate routine tasks
- to live with rejection and hostility
- to see criticism from close colleagues as a challenge
- to tend to see Adaptive ideas for change as no change at all

2. Insiders and outsiders

Your awareness of boundaries, rules, limits or territories, and how you handle them when there is a problem to solve, is one of the clearest indicators of creative style. Families, schools, companies, clubs and human groupings come to have a core consensus as to what the purposes, intentions and norms of the group are. This consensus is often fluid, with constant variations of what's in or out.

Adaptors prefer to act within the confines of rules and regulations, and be respectful of custom and practice. They look to precedents for making changes, and they are likely to be at home with, and enjoy, agreed procedures.

Adaptors and Innovators tend to have very different attitudes to the consensus. Adaptors approach problem-solving from inside, and Innovators from outside, the consensus viewpoint. Innovators have less respect for the boundaries of what is acceptable. They are likely to feel that rules are there to be broken. They tend to see virtues in bringing in information and ideas from outside the consensus.

For Adaptors, this problem may seem already half-solved because it is familiar territory. Adaptors are likely to take the lead in successfully searching for a solution based on improvement and evolution which is likely to be realistic and viable.

For innovators, this problem is likely to seem structural – i.e. due to the way the whole place has been organised. Innovators may well set about changing the structure as part of the problem itself. Innovators will be more open than Adaptors to seeing this type of problem for what it is. Their approach to finding a solution is likely to be based on the assumption that the present approach to it is inadequate, putting forward novel but not always reliable solutions.

Adaptors will tend to find it difficult to grasp this type of problem. In so far as they are aware of it, they are likely to perceive it as a threat to established values. The solutions they come up with are likely to be defensive, punitive or restrictive.

Organisational Climate

The Innovation/Adaption balance
Three hypothetical organisations illustrate how the distribution of Adaptors and Innovators contributes to the climate for change.

Configuration I:
In the first organisational configuration [see online pdf – ed.] there are enough adaptive people to keep it running well from day to day. There are enough Innovators to ensure that when there is controversy over aims and policy, their voices are heard. So long as it doesn't have to find a long run of original solutions to unprecedented problems, or a long run of intensive exploitation of a single system, the organisation is likely to be able to embody both stability and reliability, and responsiveness to changing circumstances. This is typical of a well-run organisation which values the strength that comes from diversity of styles, and that has taken action to ensure that people responsible for hiring policy do not unawarely sieve out high Innovators. This pattern is typical of large

groups which contain many sub-groups across the spectrum of styles.

Configuration II:
In this organisation, Adaptors dominate the climate for problem solving. This is an organisation which is likely to be very good at maintaining precise, reliable and prudent operations. As long as the structures they devise, or maintain, are viable and not under threat from rapidly changing external forces, the organisation is likely to be very efficient and provide a stable working environment.

However, if circumstances change to its disadvantage, it is likely to be slow to heed voices putting forward a radical programme of renewal. The small number of high Innovators best suited to support this are likely to be right outside the core power establishment in marginal, barely tolerated niche roles. Examples of this kind of organisation can be found among publishers who need to be very adaptive to produce and sell books successfully but who depend for innovation on freelance authors.

Configuration III:
This is an organisation with a high proportion of Innovators. They are likely to be a group of highly autonomous individuals who have come together for some short-term event or purpose such as a conference, think-tank, performance, theatrical, musical or training event. In doing this they are likely to be dependent on the support of a few, much more adaptive people who handle the practical issues of food, lodging, travel, money and scheduling.

If they are wise, organisers of collections of such high Innovators are likely to provide for a wide variety of different activities that these highly innovative people can join and leave at their own discretion. Sustaining such an organisation for long periods is difficult because with so many high Innovators, coping behaviour tends to be forgotten or switched off, and sooner or later the lack of attention given to group cohesion will lead to splitting, either into interest groups, or opposing factions.

Square Pegs and Round Holes

A/I Theory sheds new light on conflict in relationships, the family and at work

Why is it that in some places and with some people, we immediately feel at ease and can become quickly effective, while elsewhere, we can't get comfortable and everything seems a struggle? Why also do we take to some people and relate easily and well to them, and yet find others disagreeable, or out of reach?

To the many ingredients of social interaction that have been identified by psychologists, artists and writers, A/I Theory adds another, creative style. People with widely differing creative styles are very likely to disagree about how to make changes in their personal or working lives. Not only that, but groups of either preference are likely to try, either intentionally or unwittingly, to marginalise or exclude people who don't share their preference. This is true even between people who are of the same style but are far apart in the degree to which they are of that style.

So how is it that there is ever any agreement about change? First, because the majority of us are in the middle of the range of styles and secondly because of what Kirton calls 'coping behaviour'.

Coping

A/I Theory claims that our preferred style is very stable and is laid down early in life. Common sense tells us that when we regard it as essential, we are able to adopt behaviour that is out of our preferred style, as when managing foreign money whilst on holiday. This coping has a cost in energy, discomfort and relative ineffectiveness, that feeds an increasing desire to return to what is most comfortable and sustainable.

Coping can become chronic through being in place so much of the time that it conceals the underlying preference, especially if it means a marked departure from your basic style over a long period.

Given a pointer to your stable A/I style, and an understanding of how 'coping' can enable you to behave 'out of character', you may see that for much of the time you may try to present yourself as other than your deep preference. If, as a strong Innovator, you are surrounded by people who put a high value on adaptivity, you may recognise that your survival has been due to highly effective, but very stressful, coping. Similarly, as a strong Adaptor, you may have struggled to be effective in a conventionally 'creative' career, such as advertising, where novelty and originality are often the criteria for success. To meet these expectations, you may have had to shed a more 'traditional', adaptive approach, which for you would have been less stressful and more efficient.

If you identify your A/I style as moderately innovative and adaptive, you are likely to have had less need for strenuous coping, because your style will often match that of the group. From this it can be seen that it is more likely that people at both extremes may have developed better coping behaviour, to display, or match, the creative styles of the majority of those around them, so as to be acceptable to the majority. It seems likely that some people will learn to move across a wide range of preferences; but since all coping behaviour has a considerable cost in stress, what is more generally likely to happen is that a limited amount of coping is applied when we can't avoid it, and at other times we revert to what is most comfortable for us.

This said, the experience of Adaptors and Innovators is likely to be quite different. A strong adaptor may rely very much on the security that protection from open-ended challenge may give. They may well yearn secretly for the apparently more interesting life of those who are more highly innovative, with their greater degree of freedom of thought and action, but as a way of life it will also seem too risky and inefficient. When asked to list the disadvantages of their preference, groups of high Adaptors commonly can't think of any, whereas a similar group of Innovators will quickly compile a long catalogue of rejections, humiliation, marginalisation and lack of appreciation.

High Innovators who rely on a high degree of autonomy in what they do for feeling comfortable with themselves may occasionally envy the more settled and secure life of the Adaptor, but would be very unlikely to be capable of sustaining it if it was on offer. The human phenomenon of types of people failing to connect with each other, like ships passing in the night, has already attracted a number of explanations. A/I Theory can usefully be added to the list of other typologies such as extroversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, feeling/thinking etc. which begin to account for both the richness and diversity of human perceptions.

Self-esteem

There is a good chance that any of us who find ourselves choosing, or being required, to bring about change may find ourselves doing this while surrounded by people with a creative style very different from our own. As we've seen, we cope, but at a cost – and part of the cost may be in some injury to, or distortion of, our self-esteem. Innovators surrounded by Adaptors, or vice versa, may come to think that there is something wrong with them.

Alongside comprehensive self-acceptance and feeling good about ourselves, self-esteem depends to a high degree on knowing accurately what belongs to me and what belongs to the situation I am in, so that I can balance my own perceptions and feelings with what other people say about me. For this reason, an accurate assessment of individual A/I style, coupled with greater awareness of the need for care and support when you lean into the out-of-reach style, can support and strengthen self-esteem.

A level playing-field?

While A/I Theory insists that nowhere on the spectrum of styles is better than anywhere else, it does seem to me that the playing-field may not be level. Due to the huge industrial, business and administrative needs for continuity, precision and regularity, a highly Adaptive style is often favoured or demanded. For an Adaptor, 'success' tends to mean ensuring that the current system is actively responding to perceived need,

improving its performance, and extending its scope with the least disruption – but for Innovators, 'success' is likely to mean being able to put forward new ideas that open up new horizons.

From this it's easy to see that in the long run, the probability of 'success' in organisations, particularly large ones, is strongly weighted in favour of Adaptors, and that many Innovators learn to live with rejection – or as Michael Kirton puts it, 'to take a lot of punishment'. Not surprisingly, this imbalance in favour of the greater general acceptability of an Adaptive style may leave Innovators feeling that there is something fundamentally wrong with them. The recurring lack of acceptability of their offerings is absorbed into low or unsteady self-esteem, when actually there may be a stylistic difference of which they are unaware.

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Pulling Together

Does your organisation's A/I balance match its goals?

A key to the effectiveness of organisations, large and small, is how good a match there is between the organisation's goals and aims, and its staff's abilities and skills. At one level, this means building teams that are effective in handling their tasks. On the broader scale, it means constantly monitoring the match between the shifting composition of the staff and the goals, as they too change.

Another way of looking at this issue is to consider the climate for change in your organisation – how well does it deal with the change required of it? – is open to change? – obsessed with change? – or obstinately resistant? Of course much of the time, contingencies rule, but if your organisation's survival is in question, checking out its creative climate and whether its

A/I balance matches its goals could be vital. Of course, the view on 'match' may itself be influenced by Adaption–Innovation orientation.

Wherever you are on the A/I scale, it means that a large number of other people in your organisation are likely to have an approach to bringing about change which is either quite similar, if you are among the majority in the middle, or if you are among the third of the population who are at, or towards, the extremes of the two styles, very different to yours. However, as we've seen, any advantage or disadvantage due to our preferred A/I style is situational. If the general need in an organisation is for adaptive styles of problem-solving, as in parts of large bureaucratic organisations with large teams and a lot of structure, then high adaptors will fit in better and like the work, and a shortage of them is likely to prove problematic. But in any group, a marked lack of adaptors is likely to be threatening to its continuity.

In parts of the same organisation, innovators are likely to feel unappreciated and, unless they find a niche in which their higher innovation is required, are unlikely to be happy. Nevertheless, if due to a tendency to hire innovators rarely and to lose them quickly if they are hired, the same organisation becomes unresponsive to outside influences, then in a crisis, the previously neglected innovators will become essential as a source of the mould-breaking ideas required for further development, or even survival.

To summarise, then, high Adaptors will be likely to be at home in organisations in which continuity, regularity and procedural precision is demanded and where change happens within the structure. High Innovators will tend to shun such organisations unless they can find a corner where their talents are relevant and appreciated – which they do surprisingly often. High Innovators are also likely to have a preference for self-employment, or at least to seek to have a wide range of tasks and freedom of action in their work. However, two-thirds of the population are neither high Innovators nor high Adaptors. The advantage of more moderate styles is that they are more capable of reaching out, without being committed, towards either extreme, or bridging

between the two extremes. Nevertheless, they have the disadvantage of lacking the ease of reaching the depth of function that high Adaptors or high Innovators have in their preferred approach to change.

Leadership for Change

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that change is innovation-led, change agents can be either Adaptors or Innovators. What does A/I theory have to offer someone who is preoccupied with facilitating (or resisting) change? A/I Theory suggests that, contrary to the conventional wisdom that effective change agents are people with lots of ideas and drive, anyone can effectively promote change if they are the right person at the right time. Here again, this is because the functional effect of the A/I styles is situational.

Bridging

Michael Kirton's research suggests that a difference in creative style 10 points apart on a 100-point scale is recognisable, 20 points apart and people have to take care when communicating, 40 or more points apart means they are likely to misunderstand each other fairly completely, and more than that apart are likely to feel that the other person is an alien! For this reason, facilitating communication between people with significantly different styles is of great importance. This bridging role means mediating between people more adaptive and more innovative than yourself, wherever you are on the spectrum of A/I styles.

For example, an effective champion of a new approach to, say, quality control, is likely to be engaged in bridging between a work-force of operators – who put a high value on custom and practice – and a management which sees a move towards zero-defect production as essential to company survival.

Even though such an agent will be likely to be an Adaptor, he or she is also likely to be seen as innovative by some people and adaptive by others. Similarly, a group of highly innovative managers whose task includes devising new products or presentations is likely

to benefit from someone who bridges between their group and the demands of production departments.

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Translation

One of the things that effective change agents must be able to do is to translate, in the sense of translating adaptive ideas for innovative ears, and vice versa. If their coping skills are well-enough developed to ensure that they are heard by both sides, they will be able to extend their organisation's range of ideas – given that in addition to good coping skills, and irrespective of their own creative style, they are competent, respected and willing.

'Outsiders' and 'misfits'

A second kind of agent for change is the organisational 'misfit'. When the partnership of highly innovative freelances is about to collapse because everybody is too busy being 'creative' to attend to business, their accountant, a high Adaptor, who had previously been a barely tolerated necessary evil, suddenly comes up with a fully worked-out contingency plan to save the enterprise. He, or she, takes the role of managing director. In the short term it works, but eventually the creative atmosphere of the partnership is so changed that many of the more innovative people quit.

In A/I terms, when the balance of power favouring high Innovators is on the point of collapse, a high Adaptor from outside the consensus will often come up with a viable survival plan. However, the price of survival may be a change of organisational 'style' or 'climate' so decisively in favour of adaptivity as to propel Innovators through the door.

Highly adaptive organisations may successfully 'contain' Innovators while utilising their proliferation of ideas, through keeping them at a safe distance in research parks, or as consultants or advisers. Independent consultants may be

essential where there is a desire to change organisations with a deeply entrenched structure of custom and practice. As outsiders (either innovative or adaptive), they may be able to effectively challenge the accepted assumptions in ways that will be inaccessible from within the organisation. It can't be said too strongly that for organisational well-being, each creative style needs the other.

Resistance to change

Alongside the new perspectives which A/I Theory reveals on bringing about change, it also makes it easier to see why change is so often resisted. Of course some of us, for reasons of distressed or distorted early learning, may in some situations and at some times be very stuck or rigid; but A/I Theory suggests that opposition to change can usefully be reframed as 'opposition to the style of change' – it's my resistance to your change.

A/I Style and Creativity

The conventional pecking orders undermined

A/I Theory focuses on creative style, specifically excluding level, technique and process of creativity. Someone who is strongly innovative might be inactive in pursuit of his or her ideas, be unskilled, and know nothing about creative process; a strong Adaptor might be very active in pursuit of their ideas, be highly skilled and very adept at managing the creative process. Which of them is the more creative? – the second person? But suppose that he or she was an accountant? What then?

Because of the social status of innovation in the arts and science over the last century or so – e.g. Cezanne, Van Gogh, Einstein… – both Innovators and Adaptors have tended to see the adaptive approach to creativity as 'uncreative'. A/I Theory makes it possible to appreciate how this high social status of innovation has tended to push adaptive creativity into the shadows.

Broadening the base

I find A/I Theory pointing to a radical redistribution of creativity. Instead of it being

seen as narrowly concentrated in the 'arts', it can be looked on as a broad spectrum of intrinsically creative activities in which craft, design, manufacturing and 'the arts' all have a place. The theory insists that there are adaptive painters and innovative engineers and that aircraft designers and architects can be adaptive or innovative. Because adaptive creativity is likely to be necessarily the style at the heart of our main social institutions, law, government, transport, manufacturing, distribution etc., its lower status than the high-profile innovation of the 'arts' has been mutually impoverishing.

High Innovators are likely to resist this revaluation because of their tendency to look on adaptive creativity as the recycling of conformity, or a clinging to tradition. They also tend to undervalue the inner workings of adaptive creativity simply because it works within a system, or towards the technical improvement of products and processes leading to greater safety, convenience or comfort. And not least, because few high Innovators feel comfortable attempting novelty within the tighter system that adaptive creativity requires. Also, much innovative creativity seems to me to be reactive, an overloud banging on the adaptor's door to get them to open up to what's going on outside.

Similarly, high Adaptors are very unlikely to embrace innovative creativity because they will tend to see it, initially at least, as self-indulgent and a threat to their values or way of life. Due to Innovators' frequent contempt for the adaptive style, this is likely to be a realistic concern.

It does seem probable that adaptive creativity is less reactive than the opposite style. Because Adaptors are more likely to be inside organisations and hold the high ground, so to speak, they don't need to work so hard to persuade others of the value of their ideas. Also, their capacity to hold, restrain and repeat means that they welcome adaptive change. However, the idea that the priorities of high Innovators, e.g. mould-breaking novelty, is the way to assess creative value no longer seems to be tenable.

A/I Style Preference – Nature or Nurture?

Loyalty, reliability and predictability

Some researchers (e.g. van der Molen, 1989) have suggested that the A/I styles are genetically based. Michael Kirton himself doesn't actually claim that A/I style differences are innate, but his presentations do make reference to a 'gene package of recognition' and of 'humans as herd animals'. He seems to imply that A/I preferences are basically about how to recognise those other people who will be predictable and reliable, and with whom we will therefore be safe.

For herd animals, being able to recognise who is, and who is not, a member of the herd is an important survival consideration, and the story Kirton tells is of humankind herding together on the basis of mutual recognition, with 'difference' being regarded as a source of potential danger – 'if you are different from me, you are inferior' – 'if you don't want to be like me, you're hostile'. An interesting metaphor, but like many parallels between humans and animals, one to be treated with caution. Michael Kirton does, however, claim that A/I style preferences are settled very early, perhaps by the age of 6 or 7, and he has evidence (Kirton, 1989) to suggest they are quite stable over time in adults.

From my Humanistic Psychology perspective, this proposed stability, and the possibility that it has a hard-wired genetic basis, tend to sound like yet another aspect of the social construction of personality that has been questionably 'naturalised' into biology. However, I've found that the usefulness of A/I theory has outweighed my initial scepticism about its scientific, statistical, psychometric approach to human experience. I see A/I Theory as a valuable reminder for groups of people engaged in deep personal and professional development, of how structurally stable some underlying preferences may be. It's an indicator, if you like, both of the limits of personal change and also of the kinds of change we will be open to. For those of us who are involved in such work, the junction between genetic inheritance and nurturance is a constant concern, and A/I theory is also useful here in counterbalancing any tendency to rely too much

on nurturance as the shaper of patterns of behaviour, whether desirable or otherwise.

Following on from this, my own inquiries have initially used the KAI inventory as a way of looking at the relation between A/I balance and group dynamics in personal and professional development groups, and how, due to facilitator bias, or a too narrowly focused consensus style, some participants may have difficulty in getting their needs met.

A/I and history

It is interesting to speculate about whether the balance of adaptivity and innovation in the population has changed over the centuries. The ebb and flow of consolidation and renewal of nations, states and communities must always at some time have favoured innovation, but it's hard to escape the impression that it may have been a considerable liability in regard to personal survival to be a strong innovator in, say, mediaeval Europe. Equally it seems unlikely that there have been many previous eras in history when innovation was so welcome and so rewarded as it is today.

Using A/I Theory

Practical applications in personal and professional development, training and management

Some uses for A/I theory: Team-building – in organisations, help people check out their A/I style and use this information to try to match the composition of teams to their task.

A group of people charged with coming up with a constant stream of operational, marketing or presentational ideas will benefit from the presence of several high innovators. But if they try to shed or demote the Adaptors among them, beware – because without them, their coping behaviour is likely to be switched off, and splits, factions and a lack of timely action are probable.

A group of people charged with operating within a wide range of statutory regulations, maintaining consistency, responsiveness and impartiality, will benefit from the presence of a

high proportion of Adaptors. But if they unwisely shed or demote the more innovative among them, again beware, because without them their coping behaviour is also likely to be progressively switched off, and an excess of cohesion, bureaucratic zeal and stagnation is probable. When this happens, the solving of new problems will be approached as if they are old ones, the nature of which is already understood.

Use it to help you sort out miscommunication. People who, despite making an effort, have recurring misunderstandings may benefit from being counselled about their own and colleagues' A/I styles.

Use it to help you judge the practical politics of a situation. If you are an Innovator, do you adequately check out how much support there is for your ideas before introducing them? If you are an Adaptor, do you avoid taking responsibility for breaking new ground but later criticise people who do, when their schemes get into difficulties?

Use it to help identify people who might have potential as change agents, people whose A/I style is different from the consensus but who have become accepted in it. (To be viable, a change agent must also be willing to take on the role, and it also helps if they have had training in the necessary skills.)

Use it to check out whether 'difficult' clients, or group members if you have them, might not have a very divergent creative style to your own, and so may be more helpfully seen as 'different' rather than a 'problem'.

Use it as a basis for developing a broader base of coping behaviour and learn how to sustain it for longer.

Use it to support strengths and minimise weaknesses. Michael Kirton points out that once we have a better idea of what our A/I style is, we have two choices: we can decide to move from strength and keep away from our weaknesses (or hire someone to handle them), or alternatively we can learn extended coping, how to reach out of our preferred style into the less easy one.

Use it to identify coping behaviour that is excessively stressful, and either improve the coping skills or find ways of delegating or changing those tasks or roles which persistently threaten to overwhelm our capacity to cope.

Afterword

My aim has been to make Michael Kirton's Adaption/Innovation Theory accessible, in the expectation that it will prove as useful to you as it has been to me. In the first instance it has led me to a satisfying understanding of how I came to fruitfully occupy some of the jobs and roles that have come my way, and why others didn't work out. Secondly, it has given strong support to my intuitions about the narrowness of an exclusively innovative definition of creativity. Alongside this it has also provided a strong reminder of how unavoidably personal our perceptions of the world are.

The way other people approach bringing about change is likely to be very different from our own, and so at first sight it may seem unattractive, or even alien and wrong. A/I Theory underlines how important it is to be actively open to this possibility.

For these if for no other reasons, I see A/I Theory as very relevant to any practitioner/client situation, e.g. counselling, medicine, law, social work, management, and especially education, where actions in favour of client change are intended to be based on a deep appreciation by the practitioner of the client's perceptual universe. Here as elsewhere, there is a danger of coming up with apparently nourishing proposals which do not match the client's creative style and so may be of little use to them.

To give a personal example, as a quite high Innovator, my presentation of A/I Theory here is likely to be biased towards innovation. In this document this has been handled through giving the text to high Adaptors for review, and detailed line-by-line consultation with Michael Kirton. If, despite this effort, significant bias remains, and adaptivity is undervalued here, it would be contrary to my intention, since what led me initially to A/I Theory was a desire to open up

and revalue what I now see to be adaptive creativity.

I have long been astonished by the daily tidal flow of millions of people coming into and out of cities like London each working day. In this case and elsewhere, the extraordinary collective social creativity involved tends to be taken for granted, except when it fails. As Michael Kirton puts it, 'think of the miracle happening hourly, of the 10,000 things that have to go right so that you catch a plane, it goes safely, contains what you need, arrives on time at the right destination with your baggage'. If once in one million passenger-hours something goes wrong, that's all we remember. Compare that with the Wright brothers machine: a great deal of creative adaptation as well as creative innovation was needed to take us from then to now.

If you are concerned in any way to awaken a lost or dormant creativity, whether your own or others around you, I believe that along with creative process, technique and application, A/I style could become a cornerstone of that development.

Note [from the 2010 edition]

Acknowledgements

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About the contributor

Denis Postle: Eight years of art school, concluded with the Royal College of Art. Twenty years of directing broadcast documentary films morphed into Humanistic Psychology, initially via co-counselling and co-operative enquiry, deeply influenced by Anne Dickson and John Heron, and later co-running four years of Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP) facilitator training at the University of Surrey. Resistance to the occlusion of this self-directed experiential learning tradition by professionalised therapy trainings led to co-founding of the Independent Practitioners Network. Latterly I became a European, with a home and a wife in Brussels, a practice settled as 'human condition work' and a return to media production.