

Typecasting

Look Behind the Name

Stuart Atkins, Ph.D.

Originally published as Chapter 5 of The Name of Your Game

The trouble with typologies or classification systems is that the labels wind up making people feel boxed in, typecast, judged. Please don't put a label on yourself. While there are hard and fixed labels, there are few hard and fixed people.

We are not the same all the time. That's why I included the "ing" suffix in the names of the four orientations to life: Supporting Giving, Controlling Taking, Conserving Holding and Adapting Dealing. The "ing" suffix indicates an action or process. I do not want to classify people; I want to classify their values, goals, strengths, priorities, and preferences to act one way or another under varying circumstances.

The semanticists tell us that the words are not hard or soft. Words are words—neutral. Our meanings make them hard or soft. However, people today think in hard terms, because marketing and advertising have contributed to our product-orientation. We want our products labeled clearly for instant recognition and evaluation.

The easiest course seems to be communication through labeling. It's easier to label a package or a person and believe the label tells us everything we need to know. We seldom read the leaflet inside the package where the more difficult to assimilate information resides.

It's easy to say that a person is an alcoholic, bed wetter, loudmouth, martyr, loser, and prima donna. Conveniently, we get a picture. The trouble is that it is a freeze-frame and we forget to turn the camera back on. The label evokes permanent images.

The "is" is the villain. "Is" connotes an equal sign. For example, we might say that a person is a loudmouth. Person = loudmouth. More completely, we could say that this person is a person who experiences anxiety in a variety of situations and may dominate the conversation in varying degrees. They do this in order to make sure their ideas and desires are heard. They may talk so long and so loud that they alienate us. Our resentment rides out on the vehicle of the convenient label "loudmouth," because it feels so good to call names! But we could also say that if the person received assurance from us that we would hear their ideas and desires, meet their needs, then they might talk less and listen more. If we label them as a loudmouth, it stops us from thinking, and we will overlook alternatives or actions that could be helpful to reduce their tension.

It requires much more effort to look beyond the label, to experience the person as a dynamic process, to look at the fine print on the box and carefully study



Dr. Stuart Atkins is the principal author of the Life Orientations[®] Survey, originator of LIFO[®] Training and author of The Name of Your Game and Life in the Stress Lane. He has taught at UCLA, USC, Caltech, AMA, and the NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science.

continued

Typecasting

the information inside the package. We have been conditioned to trust the label and look no further.

Labels are not only a shortcut, but they can be loaded as ammunition for resentment or distancing, for keeping us away from those strange creatures with the strange names, those inferior products.

But the possibility of judgment is everywhere, in all combinations of words. So I say, let people have their negative reactions to the labels. We can use those reactions as learning opportunities. Let them explore their negative reactions and arrive at a deeper understanding of the person behind the label. Then they will more completely perceive others as they are, and remove the danger of substituting labels for a real encounter and a more complete experience.

We are what we think. I am suggesting that we think of people's complexity in a simple way. Think in terms of more or less, of sometimes this, other times that, of most preferred to least preferred. Thinking quantitatively like this is important as an antidote to the qualitative thinking of good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak.

In thinking quantitatively about ourselves and others, we know that we can get into difficulty if we do "too little" or "too much." What is needed is "just enough."

To visualize this, we can look at the symbol of infinity. Not only does this symbolize, for me, the quantitative flow of our strengths and actions, but it symbolizes the infinite possibilities for managing ourselves and others.

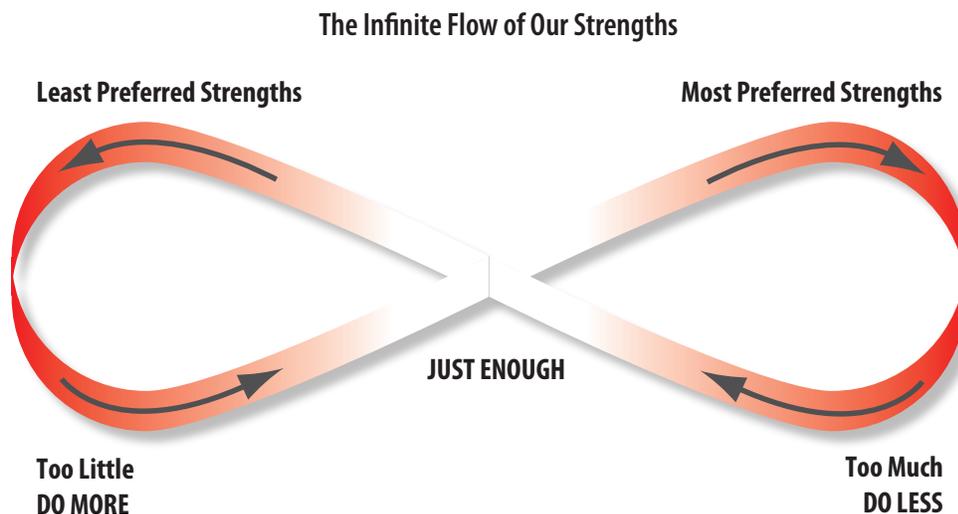
Think in terms of "How Much." How much is enough? How much *more* can we use our *least* preferred styles and strengths to add to our total power and perspective? How much less can we use our *most* preferred styles and strengths to prevent self-defeating and alienating excessive action?

If we think "how much," improvement is possible without changing ourselves, without trying to be someone other people want us to be. We need only to control the *amount* of our strengths. A little more of this, a little less of that, until we get closer to the "just enough" position.

Thinking quantitatively can keep us reacting more positively to the ever-moving, ever-changing possibilities of people. Seeing the flow of our styles and strengths on the horizontal figure-eight can help counteract the judgment of fixed labels that oversimplify and deny the whole person.

Gardner Murphy, the psychologist, in a book called *Outgrowing Self-Deception* says, "Labeling and oversimplification is an escape from the reality of our inadequacies."

Clearly, he says, if we didn't simplify by selecting what we see, we would be overwhelmed by all that is going on in our world and inside the world of other people. The effort it would take to deal with what is really there would be enormous. People



continued

Typecasting

therefore seek out the simple because it is more manageable.

Murphy concludes, "Soon the simple becomes boring and there's the excitement and exhilaration of *progressive mastery* of the complex. But people have to be led from the simple to the complex."

Though starting with simple labels, I have progressed to a more complex understanding of ourselves and our exchanges with people. Life Orientations theory has simple guidelines for understanding and improving complex human problems.

People are like a kaleidoscope, with twirling and twisting patterns, shapes and colors. Stop the kaleidoscope and you see one pattern. Turn it and there's a different one. The kaleidoscope contains the same pieces and colors and shapes, but with a quarter turn to the right or to the left, they reform into new patterns. Though people are in flux, their actions do have organization and patterning.

In some typologies people are put into hard and fixed categories-introverted or extroverted, dominant or submissive, subjective or objective. The basic position in Life Orientations Theory is that we can be *all* these things— a mix. Using a Life Orientations Survey, we clearly see the unique patterning of preferences.

Most of us have more than one preferred orientation, or more than one set of strengths. In two nationwide samples of over 3,000 men and women in various vocations and professions, only nine percent have one main choice. With five percent, all four orientations are used uniformly. Fifteen percent have three orientations that are about equal in preference, while the fourth one is preferred much less. Fifty-five percent have two orientations that guide their lives. Finally, sixteen percent of the people we analyzed had a strong preference for one orientation, with two others equally strong as a backup.

continued

Typecasting

Life Orientations Survey Results

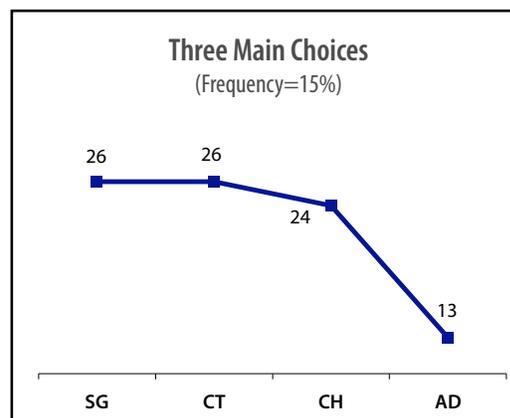
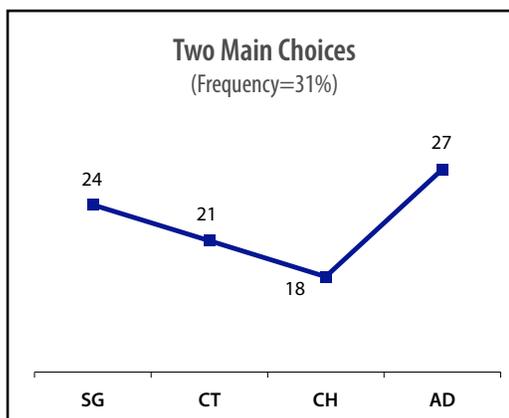
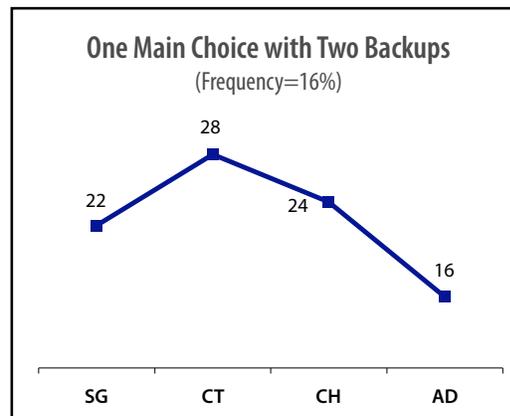
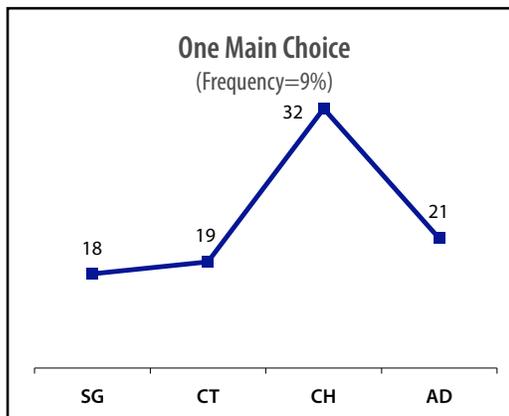
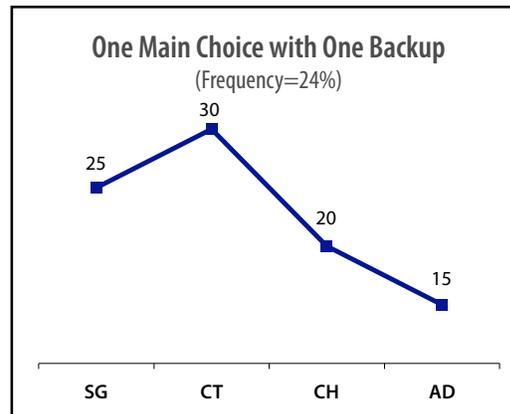
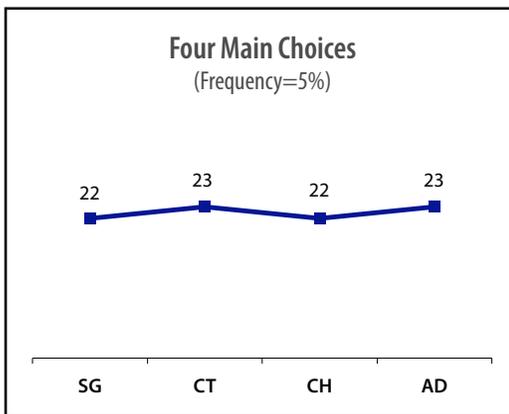
90 points are distributed over the four orientations

SG = Supporting Giving

CT = Controlling Taking

CH = Conserving Holding

AD = Adapting Dealing



continued

Typcasting

Time and time again, the results of the Life Orientations Survey have indicated that we are not just one thing or another. It is inaccurate to typecast. We are complex and dynamic. Yet, there must be a way to stop the kaleidoscope and look at our patterning, the unique mix of shapes, colors and forms that make up our lives. To make some sense out of ourselves and others, to simplify our complexity, we need a common language, a common frame of reference. We need to think about ourselves in a systematic and organized way.

Focusing on the four orientations to life accomplishes this need for simplicity and structure. The structure is limited to four orientations because it's more manageable. Practically, we can only handle a certain number of concepts at one time. If we created ten or twelve orientations, it would be so unmanageable that we would not be able to use the information and apply the ideas.

After looking at other classification systems, my conclusion about the orientations is that Supporting Giving, Controlling Taking, Conserving Holding and Adapting Dealing are such composite categories that each seems to be an umbrella big enough for large numbers of people to get under comfortably.

This is what psychologist George Kelly called the mini-max theory. Personal constructs to explain our actions should follow a rule: the minimum number of categories to cover the maximum number of events.

Some people ask, "Well, four orientations, isn't that oversimplifying life? We're more complex than that." My answer is, "Yes, we are complex, and so is Life Orientations theory. But it starts simply by identifying the name of our styles and strengths, and it progresses to provide structured guidelines for complex problems."

Even though there are only four categories, more complexity evolves because they can be arranged in a pattern, a mix, a first, second, third, and fourth choice. This happens when we survey people's orientations

to life. They are able to pattern their preferences for the four orientations under two sets of conditions; *favorable*— when things are going well, and *adverse*— when things are not going well. With four orientations under *two sets of conditions*, there is more complexity. But it is still manageable, because we are still talking about the same basic four.

When preferences are indicated on the LIFO survey, a point value results with each category ranging from 9 to 36. This leads to another level of complexity within the simplicity of the four. For you could have Controlling Taking as your most preferred choice, and that could be a point value of 34, and I could also have Controlling Taking as my most preferred way, but the point value could be 28. We could be different in the relative intensity of our preferences.

There is another way we could be different within our similarity. If we both have Controlling Taking as our main choice, you could have Supporting Giving as your second choice, and I could have Conserving Holding as my second choice. We could be different in second choices, but similar with our first.

Statistically, the possibilities for complexity astound me. For example, ranking our preferences for the four orientations under two conditions, favorable and adverse, results in a mix of eight categories. These eight can be likened to the eight notes on a musical scale. They can be arranged in many different patterns. As in music, they could result in a simple folk song or a complex symphony. It only takes eight notes. So it is with the survey results. While there are only eight categories to be ranked, the point value of each category can range from 9 to 36. This yields a possible 22,400 patterns! While we are all using the same eight "notes" to orchestrate our lives, the music that comes out is not the same, and the concert halls in which we play vary. How marvelous it is that we can be so similar and so different, so simple and so complex.

The meaning behind Life Orientations Theory is complex, but it suggests a simple, finite framework

continued

Typecasting

which helps us cope with the infinite. My goal is profound simplicity.

We simplify the complex by working only with four basic styles and strengths in favorable and adverse conditions, then focus in on our most preferred and our least preferred of these four styles and strengths. Yet, with only these two dimensions, most and least,

we can do a little more of our least and a little less of our most until we have just enough. This simple quantitative view tell us a great deal about how we can be more productive personally, how to help others be more productive, and how we can communicate together with greater love and effectiveness. 