

# The Enneagram & Prototype Theory

by Susan Rhodes, February 2007

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*“There is increasing evidence that what defines a category is not some bundle of observable features, but some hidden essence (or a hidden property) or an appropriate mental structure.”<sup>1</sup>*

How do we determine our enneagram type? Why is it easier for some people than others? These two questions have been knocking around since people started using the enneagram to better understand themselves.

*Enneagram Monthly* editor Jack Labanauskas recently raised the question again. Like many people, Jack did not find it easy to determine his enneagram type. If the enneagram is based on a real construct, and if the enneagram is universally applicable, why do some people find it harder to determine their type than others?

In this short article, I’ll try to offer one possible answer to that question. It’s not the only possible answer, but it’s an intriguing one.

The answer is based on prototype theory. Prototype theory was developed by cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch in the 1970s as a way of explaining how people categorize information. Rosch was especially interested in what she called natural categories—categories that occur in nature or that are a familiar part of our daily life. Natural categories include things like types of plants, animals, cars, foods, toys, and colors.

According to Rosch, all members of a natural category are not created equal in the perceptual sense. Some are seen as more central or typical than others. For example, in the case of the category “Birds,” which is a better example of a bird, a robin or a penguin? The vast majority of people say “robin” (unless they’re trying to be funny or provocative!) If you ask them why they said “robin,” they can give you lots of reasons why—that a robin flies, eats worms, constructs ordinary-looking nests, lives in trees, etc. Penguins do none of these things (plus, most of us don’t see them around much). As a result, robins seem “birdier” than penguins or ostriches.



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Robins are an example of a prototype—that is, a member of a category that is central or definitive. Prototypes provide the standard or exemplar by which other category members are measured. Other examples of prototypes include “table” for the category “Furniture” or “oak” for the category “Tree.” Less prototypical category members (for example, “tomato” for the category “Fruit”) are assigned category membership either with greater hesitation or with qualifications.

We can apply Rosch’s insights about prototypes to the enneagram. If enneagram types are really universal, then one each is a natural category. So we have nine natural categories, each of which reflects a unique core motivation. For each core motivation, it’s possible to generate a list of attributes and behaviors that are typically associated with that motivation. Everybody who studies the enneagram soon becomes familiar with the most well-known attributes and behaviors associated with each type. While authors may argue about the “fringe” attributes, they mostly agree with one another when it comes to behaviors that are most prototypical. We also know that none of these typical attributes actually define the type—each one reflects but one of its many possible facets.

However, the way that we typically identify our own type is not by looking directly at our core motivation (which would be difficult), but at our attributes and behaviors. We compare these with those listed for each type. If we find a really good match, we believe we’ve found our type. (I’m oversimplifying here a little, because sometimes it takes a while to really pin the type down, but this is the basic process that I see people use.)

Now we know that some people find this much easier than others. They read the enneagram descriptions once and immediately identify themselves as a particular type. This was my experience. I read Suzanne Zuercher’s book on Thomas Merton (a Four), and realized that I must be the same enneagram type. There were just too many uncanny similarities (many of which, unfortunately, made me more than a little uncomfortable).

I initially thought that everybody had the same experience. Later, I realized this wasn’t so. I met a lot of people who had trouble recognizing their type, even after lots of reading and workshops. They just couldn’t match their experience of themselves with the enneagram descriptions they read. Others had no trouble making an initial decision about their type, but later changed their mind, even after years of living at the “wrong” point.

One possible explanation for a person’s inability to pin down their type is that the enneagram is not a universal system (that is applies to some people but not to everyone). Another is that some people have more insight (or fewer defense mechanisms) than others. But a third—and more intriguing—possibility is that some people of a given type exhibit behavior that’s very typical (even stereotypical) while others do not. The core motivation is identical, but in the latter case, it’s reflected in behaviors that are unusual, unexpected, or atypical. When this is the case, it can become tough to link behavior to motivation. If we combine this atypicality with other factors—e.g., other *interior* influences from wings, connecting points and subtypes or

from *exterior* influences from parents and culture—the picture can become pretty muddy. It's not that individuals who are atypical exemplars have less insight or can't be typed—it's just that the typing process needs to be adapted to take into account these atypicalities. Also, it's possible that while individuals who are atypical exemplars are subject to the identical motivational influences as more prototypical exemplars, the motivation may carry a lot more weight with the latter.

These are questions that have yet to be answered. It would be interesting, however, to talk with both individuals who have had difficulty typing themselves or who have “switched” types to find out whether some of their typing difficulties are because their core motivation is either expressed in unusual behavior or is hard to detect because it's not as strong an influence. Prototype theory offers an interesting jumping off point for further explorations.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> p 37, “Concepts and Object-Oriented Knowledge Representation,” MA thesis, Univ. of Helsinki, Dept. of Cognitive Science, Feb. 2002, Juha Petteri Pesonen (<http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/hum/psyko/pg/pesonen/concepts.pdf>)

#### REFERENCES

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Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prototype\\_Theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prototype_Theory)).