

CREATING CLARITY: ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE MBTI® ASSESSMENT

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As you use the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® (MBTI®) assessment in your work, you'll undoubtedly encounter participants who have "read an article online" that criticizes the MBTI assessment, and who will then question the assessment and its utility. The purpose of this paper is to help you answer those questions by addressing some of the most common criticisms and misconceptions about the MBTI assessment.

A LOOK BACK

In order to address the criticisms and misconceptions of the MBTI assessment, it's helpful to understand the development of the assessment over time.

The MBTI assessment has a history spanning more than 75 years, and for more than 40 years has been available for use and application by organizations, educational institutions, government agencies, MBTI practitioners, and individuals in order to understand and make constructive use of personality type differences. Today, the MBTI assessment is used in 115 countries, is available in 29 languages, has been used by 88 of the Fortune 100 within the past five years, and is taken by millions of people worldwide.

The creation of today's MBTI assessment is a complex and thorough endeavor: carefully developing items, gathering representative samples on which to test those items, analyzing items to ensure that they work for diverse samples of people, testing data for statistical integrity, and more. But the origin of the MBTI assessment stems from the work of Katharine Briggs (1875–1968), a lifelong writer and student of character analysis. Largely from reading biographies and studying the personalities of their subjects, Briggs created a framework for understanding personality type and developed her own system of typology around the time of World War I.¹

In 1923, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung published his seminal work on personality types, *Psychological Types*, in English.² Jung, long considered one of the founders of modern-day psychology, proposed a theory of personality types derived from his observations and research. After reading and studying Jung's work, Briggs realized that it closely resembled her own framework but was much more developed. Briggs subsequently abandoned her framework and focused more fully on Jung's theory of psychological types.

During World War II, Briggs's daughter Isabel Myers (1897–1980), long an admirer of her mother's work, became interested in finding a way of making practical use of personality differences and thus began her quest to create a personality indicator. In 1943, the first version of the MBTI assessment was developed.³ Over the next decade, Myers continued to test forms of the assessment on over 5,000 medical students and 10,000 nurses.⁴ In 1957, Myers reached an agreement with Educational Testing Services (ETS) to publish the MBTI assessment for research purposes. In 1962, ETS published an updated form of the MBTI assessment and accompanying manual, again, primarily for research purposes.⁵

In 1975, Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. (now CPP, Inc.), began publishing the MBTI assessment for practical use and application. Below is a timeline of the forms of the MBTI assessment published by CPP, Inc.

1977: CPP releases the original commercial version of the MBTI assessment, Form G.

1998: CPP releases the current version of the MBTI assessment, Form M. Form M was created using item response theory to test and score items, and tested those items on a United States representative sample reflecting the most recent national US census relative to age, gender, and ethnicity.

2001: CPP releases the MBTI Step II™ assessment to provide additional information about 20 facets of personality.

2018: CPP releases an international revision of the MBTI assessment to replace Form M. The items on the international revision were selected and scored using latent class analysis, and were tested using an international sample, thus ensuring that items accurately assess personality type across different countries and cultures globally.

Any assessment, especially one with such a long history, breadth of use, and global popularity, is typically subject to criticism. The MBTI assessment is no exception. Many of its criticisms can be traced back to misunderstandings about the framework of the MBTI assessment, misconceptions about the actual instrument and its intended uses, or biases about personality assessments altogether.

COMMON CRITICISMS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

1 “Briggs and Myers weren't psychologists”

This is true; neither Briggs nor Myers was a psychologist. Katharine Briggs obtained a bachelor's degree with honors in agriculture from the Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University), and Isabel Myers achieved a bachelor's degree with honors in political science from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

While neither Briggs nor Myers were psychologists, the instrument they created does have psychology as its foundational element. The book *Psychological Types*, upon which the MBTI assessment is based, was the work of Carl Jung—Swiss psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and founder of analytical psychology. Both Briggs and Myers spent many years studying Jung's theory of psychological types in order to create the MBTI assessment.

Implicit in the criticism of Briggs' and Myers' lack of formal education in psychology is the notion that valid and useful ideas and outcomes can result only from people who possess formal academic education in their field of study. Yet there are plenty of examples where this has not been the case, and individuals went on to make lasting contributions to the world. One of the earliest examples is Thomas Edison, who invented the light bulb, the motion picture camera, and the phonograph; who has more than one thousand patents in his name; and who was expelled from school at a young age and taught at home. Jane Goodall, known for her study of chimpanzees, made one of the most

groundbreaking discoveries in the anthropology community before ever attending college, using a nontraditional approach that was initially questioned by the scientific community. And Apple cofounder Steve Jobs wasn't a programmer or computer engineer; in fact, he didn't finish college. Yet there is no questioning the impact of the work of Edison, Goodall, and Jobs. And much like the work of Edison, Goodall, Jobs, and countless others who possessed vision and passion but no formal training, the work of Briggs and Myers has endured.

2 “Most traits are on a spectrum; the MBTI assessment uses artificial binaries”

The first part of this statement is true; most human traits are measured along a spectrum. It's why people often say things like, “I work with someone who's off-the-chart empathetic” or, “That person pays zero attention to detail.” There's a low and a high end to the trait spectrum, and having “too much” or “too little” of a trait can often be viewed as being problematic or negative.

The mistake, however, of using a trait-based approach as a critique of the MBTI assessment is that the MBTI assessment isn't designed to *measure traits*. Instead, the MBTI assessment is designed to *identify personality preferences*. Jung's theory of psychological types proposes that people have a preference for using their mind in certain ways. He introduced the preference pairs Extraversion–Introversion, Sensation (now called Sensing)–Intuition, and Thinking–Feeling, with each person having a preference for one way of operating in each pair. Myers and Briggs later added the fourth preference pair, Judging–Perceiving.

What's *not* true is that the binaries, or preference pairs, of the MBTI assessment are artificial. Research has shown that there are correlations consistent with the preference pairs on a variety of different tests and assessments. Among these are studies showing correlations between the MBTI preference pairs and the *Adjective Check List*, the Big Five Factors, the NEO-PI® assessment, and the *Birkman Method*® assessment.⁶

Confusing a trait-based, measuring approach to personality with the MBTI assessment's preference-based, sorting approach to personality isn't entirely surprising. Psychology has long had a focus on diagnosing psychological disorders using measurement—for example, identifying normal/abnormal behaviors. Jung's dichotomous approach ran, and continues to run, counter to the measuring model of psychology. In addition, most people have experienced a variety of tests over their lifetime that use a measuring approach: school tests, physical fitness tests, college entrance tests, aptitude tests, and intelligence tests, to name just a few. But most people have had exposure to far fewer tests that use a binary sorting approach like that of the MBTI assessment. A pregnancy test is one of the most common—someone is either pregnant or not. So the inclination to view a personality assessment as a measuring tool is understandable—but not accurate in the case of the MBTI assessment.

3 “Jung even said, ‘There is no such thing as a pure extravert or a pure introvert. Such a man would be in the lunatic asylum.’”

Jung did indeed make this statement while being interviewed in 1957.⁷ Those who criticize the MBTI assessment often cite this quote as proof that the notion of people having a preference toward Extraversion or Introversion is a false one. A further understanding of Jung's theory, however, can easily explain this misunderstanding.

The central focus of Jung's theory of psychological types was on the mental processes of perception and judgment. These mental processes are also referred to as “functions,” as Jung viewed them as the two primary functions that people are engaged in when they're awake. People are either taking in information through their perception function of Sensing or Intuition, or making decisions through their judgment function of Thinking or Feeling. Jung also proposed that every person has a preference for either Extraversion or Introversion as their preferred orientation of energy.

Jung's theory was also clear about two central mechanisms inherent in people's personalities. One of those is the need for individuals to engage both their perception and judgment functions. By engaging both functions, each person has ways of taking in information and making decisions. Without engaging both, people might take in information through perception but not decide on that information using judgment. Conversely, people might make decisions using judgment but not fully inform those decisions using perception.

The other central mechanism in Jung's theory is that one of the two functions will be extraverted (that is, used primarily in the outer world) and the other function will be introverted (that is, used primarily in the inner world). So, regardless of whether a person has a preference toward Extraversion or Introversion, people of each personality type will have ways of dealing with both their outer and inner worlds. And Jung believed that living in both of those worlds is essential. If people were to use Extraverted at the exclusion of Introversion, they would lose the value that comes from the inner world. If they were to use Introversion at the exclusion of Extraversion, they would lose the value that comes from the outer world. This interaction between Extraversion and Introversion in every personality type was actually a cornerstone of Jung's theory of psychological types.

With this in mind, it can be seen that Jung's reference to a "pure extravert" is describing individuals who overengage Extraversion and exclude the introverted part of themselves, and a "pure introvert" is describing individuals who overengage Introversion and exclude the extraverted part of themselves. Both conditions run counter to Jung's approach to personality. He was clear that while every person will have a preference toward Extraversion or Introversion, every person needs to both extravert and introvert. So in his statement, Jung isn't refuting his own theory of psychological types—rather he is supporting it.

4 "Jung also said, 'Every individual is an exception to the rule'"

Jung did make this statement in his book *Psychological Types*. The quote is also often used by those who critique the MBTI assessment as supposed proof that Jung's theory isn't valid. To make sense of this quote, however, it's useful to read it with its surrounding text in order to gain the full context of the statement. Here is the complete paragraph within which Jung's statement was made:

Although there are doubtless individuals whose type can be recognized at first glance, this is by no means always the case. As a rule, only careful observation and weighing of the evidence permits a sure classification. However simple and clear the fundamental principle of the two opposing attitudes may be, in actual reality they are complicated and hard to make out, because every individual is an exception to the rule. Hence one can never give a description of a type, no matter how complete, that would apply to more than one individual, despite the fact that in some ways it aptly characterizes thousands of others. Conformity is one side of a man, uniqueness is the other. Classification does not explain the human psyche. Nevertheless, an understanding of psychological types opens the way to a better understanding of human psychology in general.⁸

Jung's full statement advises several cautions in the use of personality type information: (1) avoid making quick assumptions about individuals' personality type; (2) recognize that people and how their personality shows up is complex; and (3) remember that no one personality type description can describe all aspects of a person's entire being or psyche. This notion is reflected in the statement, "An ENFP is like every other ENFP, like some other ENFPs, and like no other ENFP."⁹

So in his quote, Jung was likely not refuting his own theory of psychological types, his body of work on the topic, or his 600-plus-page book on the subject, but rather was trying to ensure their proper use. He was also likely acknowledging that any model or theory for describing or explaining human behavior, including his theory, will be imperfect in some way.

Jung compared his model of personality with points on a compass: “They are just as arbitrary and just as indispensable,” and added, “I would not for anything dispense with this compass on my psychological voyages of discovery.”¹⁰

5 “People are really ambiverts”

The concept of “ambiverts” was popularized by a 2013 research study using the Big Five personality measure to determine the personality type of the most productive salespeople.¹¹ The Big Five is a measure of five personality traits, one of which is extraversion, and this was the focus of the study. The research found that the highest-revenue-generating salespeople were not “highly extraverted” or “highly introverted” on the extraversion scale, but were those with scores at the midpoint of the scale—those who use both extraversion and introversion. The study called them “ambiverts.”

To understand the difference between the extraversion scale on the Big Five and the Extraversion–Introversion preference scale of the MBTI assessment, it’s important to remember that the two assessments, while both personality assessments and both correlated with one another,⁶ are also quite different and distinct. A fundamental difference between the two assessments is that the Big Five measures how much of a trait a person has, while the MBTI assessment assesses which preference a person has. In assessing extraversion, the Big Five measures how much extraversion a person has and uses, while the MBTI assessment indicates which preference between Extraversion and Introversion a person has.

The most relatable example to illustrate this difference is the concept of right- or left-handedness. Using this analogy, the Big Five framework would measure how much right-handedness and left-handedness a person demonstrates, with most people demonstrating both and hence falling in the middle. The MBTI framework, however, would assess which hand is a person’s preference, while acknowledging that most

people will make situational use of both hands to navigate through life.

Using the notion of ambiversion to discount the MBTI dichotomy of Extraversion–Introversion is akin to proposing that, because most people make situational use of both hands throughout their day, they are actually ambidextrous and that therefore left- or right-handedness isn’t real. Jung’s theory and the MBTI instrument propose that while it’s essential for every personality type to use both Extraversion and Introversion, each type has a preference for one or the other.

6 “Psychologists don’t even use the MBTI assessment”

In an effort to support this point, critics sometimes cite a 2012 article in *The Washington Post* in which Carl Thoreson, PhD, psychologist, Stanford emeritus, and former chairman of CPP, Inc., is quoted as saying he didn’t use the MBTI assessment in his research at Stanford because “it would be questioned by my academic colleagues.”¹² What was missing from the article, however, was the fact that the focus of Dr. Thoreson’s work at Stanford was on *altering type A behaviors to reduce heart attack mortality*.¹³ Since the MBTI assessment doesn’t measure type A personalities, it simply wasn’t an appropriate tool for the topic—so naturally, its use in his work would have been questioned had he used it. When an assessment isn’t used because it’s not the appropriate assessment for the intended purpose, that just means it’s not the right tool for the job—but that doesn’t invalidate the assessment.

Criticisms like this one are often rooted in a misunderstanding of the difference between the intents of clinical psychology tests and the MBTI assessment. Clinical psychology is largely focused on the diagnosis and treatment of psychopathology. Therefore, many of the tests used by clinical psychologists are diagnostic and are used to identify conditions such as depression, narcissism, or anxiety. In contrast, Jung’s theory of psychological types, upon which the MBTI assessment is based, is focused on identifying the non-psychopathology-based

differences that exist among people. As a result, the MBTI assessment is designed to be descriptive of the typical characteristics of people with different personality types, not to be diagnostic. Today thousands of psychologists use the MBTI assessment for appropriate nondiagnostic applications.

7 “The MBTI assessment just flatters you”

Criticisms like this one are again usually based on a misunderstanding of the intent of the MBTI assessment and confuse its intent with that of other instruments. As described earlier, the MBTI assessment is designed to identify a person’s personality preferences and to describe the typical behaviors associated with those preferences. Unlike diagnostic tests, the MBTI assessment isn’t designed to identify good/bad personalities or normal/abnormal personalities, or to make diagnoses about personality types. People often confuse the descriptive nature of the MBTI assessment with the diagnostic qualities of other psychological tests, and then mistakenly criticize the MBTI assessment for flattery because it doesn’t identify anything “wrong” or negative about a person.

However, the psychological type framework does recognize and emphasize that each personality type comes with its own inherent challenges as well as assets. As such, the descriptions of the personality types in many MBTI resources, including the *Introduction to Myers-Briggs Type®* booklet series and others, include not only descriptions of the typical behaviors and assets associated with a type but of the potential challenges and development areas as well. These challenges and development areas are in fact essential to what Jung called *individuation*, which is the “development of the individual personality”¹⁴ toward the goal of self-actualization.

8 “The MBTI assessment isn’t reliable”

Many articles that criticize the MBTI assessment quote the same reliability statistic: “Across a 5-week

retest period, 50% of participants received a different classification on one or more of the MBTI scales.” When this exact same statistic and exact same wording appears in multiple articles, it’s easy for people to view it as fact. But a closer investigation of the source of this statistic reveals its origin: an article published in 1993 in the *Journal of Career Planning & Placement*¹⁵ citing an even earlier study published in 1979.¹⁶

The year of the source test-retest reliability article, 1979, is significant. In 1979, the main version of the MBTI assessment in use was Form G, the original commercial version released in 1977. Form M, the current commercial version of the MBTI, was released in 1998 to replace the original Form G. Form M differed from Form G in several ways: Form M items were selected and scored using item response theory, an improved statistical technique compared to the selection and scoring mechanisms used in the original Form G; many outdated or less effective Form G items were not included in Form M, and other new and more effective items were added; and Form M items were tested on a national representative sample, something not available during the construction of Form G.

Which MBTI form was used in the 1979 research study isn’t clear, but it would have been Form G or possibly an older research version available at the time. So when articles written in the 2010s quote the 50% test-retest statistic from the 1993 *Journal* article, they’re not only citing old data from 1979 but also citing old data about a version of the MBTI assessment that is no longer in use and hasn’t been since 1998. To critique reliability data of an instrument, authors should be using data based on the current version of that instrument.

Form M research in the *MBTI® Manual* shows that over a 4-week retest period, 65% of respondents had all four preferences the same, and 93% had three or four the same.¹⁷ The *MBTI® Form M Manual Supplement* (2009) shows test-retest reliabilities up to four years ranging from .57 to .81 and one-month test-reliabilities of .94 to .97.¹⁸

9 “The MBTI assessment isn’t predictive”

Another common criticism of the MBTI instrument is that there’s no evidence to show a positive relation between MBTI types and success within an occupation. These articles often cite examples of organizations that have used type for hiring decisions, or stories of individuals who were encouraged to pursue a career based solely on their MBTI type, or worse yet, discouraged from pursuing a career based solely on their MBTI type.

And it’s absolutely true: the MBTI assessment isn’t designed to predict who will be most successful in certain occupations, and there’s no evidence to suggest that certain MBTI types are more successful in certain careers.

Again, the MBTI assessment is designed to be descriptive, not predictive. Unfortunately, however, the MBTI assessment, like many other assessments and psychological tests, can be misused. Organizations that use the MBTI assessment for hiring decisions are confusing preference with skill and are doing themselves a disservice in their hiring process by screening out potentially qualified applicants, not to mention running the potential risk of litigation. And when MBTI type alone is used to direct individuals into occupations or careers, it represents the same disservice. Career success is the result of a number of attributes, factors, and events, not of personality type alone. The Myers & Briggs Foundation is clear regarding the ethical use of the MBTI assessment:

It is unethical and in many cases illegal to require job applicants to take the Indicator if the results will be used to screen out applicants. The administrator should not counsel a person to, or away from, a particular career, personal relationship or activity based solely upon type information.¹⁹

What is true about type and occupations is that certain MBTI types are *attracted to* and *overrepresented* in certain occupations. In fact, examining this attraction and overrepresentation is one of the primary methods for validating the MBTI assessment. This validation evidence occurs when certain types are overrepresented in a particular career in ways that type theory would suggest—for example, an overrepresentation of ISTJs in accounting. The research of occupational attraction does indeed show that certain types are attracted to certain careers.²⁰ But when interpreting this kind of occupational data, two factors are important to remember. First, data showing attraction to an occupation should not be interpreted as being indicative of high performance in that occupation. Second, while the research shows that certain types are overrepresented in certain occupations, it also shows that all 16 types are represented in almost every occupation.

So while the MBTI assessment can unfortunately be misused to hire, to indicate career performance, to indicate relationship compatibility, or for other inappropriate purposes, that speaks to the misuse of the tool rather than to the validity or the efficacy of the tool itself.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Many of the criticisms and misconceptions about the MBTI assessment can be addressed by fully understanding the theory upon which it is based, by being familiar with the intended uses and ethical applications of the assessment, by examining the data and the sources of that data, and by being familiar with the current research on the assessment. When reading articles criticizing the MBTI assessment, or any assessment, be sure that you:

- ✓ **Identify the source data.**

If you're reading online articles, click on the links to words or phrases such as "a recent study" or "a recent article showed" to identify the source of the data. If you're reading a print article, review the References section to check on the source of the data. Be wary of citations that reference old articles with outdated data, or articles criticizing old versions of the MBTI assessment.

- ✓ **Verify that the articles are referencing the actual assessment.**

Some articles reference assessment items or terminology not even used on the MBTI assessment, but that are found on other non-MBTI assessments. Be wary of articles that criticize the MBTI assessment by referencing non-MBTI assessments.

- ✓ **Check that the article reflects an understanding of the basic underpinnings of the assessment.**

Some articles seek to invalidate the MBTI assessment by claiming that the concept of preferences limits people to their four letters and excludes them from using their opposites—which type theory doesn't actually propose. Other articles claim that since people use both sides of a preference pair, the idea of a preference isn't true—which again runs counter to the basic underpinnings of the MBTI assessment; having a preference doesn't prohibit individuals from using their opposite. Be wary of articles that don't reflect an understanding of the basics of the MBTI assessment or of the central principle of Jung's theory of type dynamics, which proposes that every person needs to use both the extraverted and introverted part of themselves.

- ✓ **Verify the article is referencing appropriate use of the assessment.**

When articles criticize the MBTI assessment because some people use it for hiring or for career placement, the articles should actually be criticizing the inappropriate and unethical use of the assessment, not the MBTI assessment itself. Articles that criticize the MBTI assessment for not identifying career performance, for example, demonstrate a lack of understanding of the appropriate and beneficial uses of the MBTI assessment. Be wary of articles that criticize the MBTI assessment because some people use it unethically, or articles that criticize the MBTI assessment for not doing things that it's not designed to do.

- ✓ **Be aware of the assessment biases within the article.**

Different authors have different assessment biases and will write articles to support their assessment of choice. Be wary of articles claiming that the MBTI assessment is widely used simply because its users have been brainwashed.

- ✓ **Be aware of your own assessment biases.**

Challenge your own biases by staying current on the research about the MBTI assessment and on your knowledge of the MBTI assessment as it continues to evolve. Be wary of articles presenting the MBTI assessment as the perfect tool for solving any work or personal relationship problem.

NOTES

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