

The edge of reality

Research offers a reality check on the refrain that psychologists view the MBTI with disdain



Philip L Kerr

It's often claimed that psychologists disdain the MBTI. What did a US poll of 85 experts find?

As an INTP, **Philip L Kerr** tempers a proclivity for pondering the world with a natural scepticism. His quest to understand life, the universe and everything led him to a first degree in science. His 32 year career in HR and business management has offered a wealth of opportunities to affirm the reality of Jung's 'typical differences' in individual personalities.

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I reject your reality and substitute my own!

Adam Savage, *Mythbusters*

Wikipedia is fast becoming the first resort for information on all sorts of subjects. Its entries are subject to the vagaries of the 'wiki' ideal of a self-regulated community of collaborators, but on the topic of type it fares quite well. Along with brief entries for 'personality type' and 'psychological type', it offers a long entry on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, plus entries for each of the 16 MBTI types.

These individual type descriptions vary in shape and size. The ESFJ description, for example, is short and sweet at 376 words, and a peek behind the scenes discloses 40 edits since it was created in 2006. In contrast, the entry for the 'opposite' type, INTP, is more than three times as long at 1267 words, and has 215 edits logged—eclipsing even the diligent efforts of John Howard's shadowy protectors.

Well, that's type for you. It's probably safe to assume that the most frequent readers of, and contributors to, each description are individuals of that type. We INTPs are a prolix, pernickety and pedantic lot, while ESFJs (in the words of Wikipedia) prefer to 'pretend to agree'.

The INTP entry is quite sound, apart from its garbled account of the attitudes of the less-preferred functions. In the middle of its straight-bat treatment, however, there's a sour note:

... it should be noted that Jung's work in this field tends to be rejected in the modern field of cognitive psychology as having no basis in scientific method.

This dissenting intrusion is sourced to **The Skeptic's Dictionary**. A check of that web site, however, reveals no such claim. Under the headword 'Myers-Briggs Type Indicator' Robert Todd Carroll devotes more words to Jung than to his putative topic. Instead of the primary source, *Psychological Types*, he quotes Jung's recollections, 36 years later, of the origins of his theory. And from the piles of MBTI research published over six decades, he picks David J Pittenger's 'Measuring the MBTI and coming up short' (1993).

Carroll is a retired professor of philosophy. Neither a psychologist nor a scientist, he is hardly an authoritative source for claims that psychologists reject Jung's theory as unscientific. His principal objection is that Jung's evidence is 'merely anecdotal', not based on controlled studies. By his own account, Jung contented himself with 'the observation of facts'.

In an earlier (2001) version of his web page Carroll was harsher in his criticisms:

Psychological tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator seem to be little more than sophisticated parlor games. They will be validated by their seemingly good fit with the data ... by confirmation bias and the ambiguity of basic terms and the Byzantine complexity that ultimately allows any kind of behavior to fit any personality type.

Oddly, that passage is missing from the current web page. Perhaps Carroll took feedback on board and toned down his tirade. But he still can't resist the parting shot that the potted type descriptions in the MBTI report 'read like something from Omar the astrologer'.

Anyone who's worked
in psychology would
say that to classify
everyone as one of
16 types is ridiculous

Winston Horne,
University of NSW

An 'argument' is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition. ... Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says.

*Monty Python's Flying Circus,
'Argument' sketch*

Scepticism of the MBTI is not confined to online sources. The print media sings from the same songbook.

Earlier this year the *Australian Financial Review's* glossy monthly, **Boss**, profiled AusAPT life member and Institute of Type Development founder, Mary McGuiness. Mike Hanley's tone verges on patronising, he misspells his subject's name, and he has Katharine Briggs, who died in 1968, visiting Australia in the 1980s (he means Katharine Myers). Early in his article he deflates his account of the MBTI's world-wide popularity with the remark: 'All this for a test whose scientific base has often been questioned'.

Hanley nevertheless maintains a positive line for much of his report. He quotes Julie Cogin, senior lecturer in psychology at the Australia Graduate School of Management, on the value of recognising type differences, before wheeling in the MBTI critics. 'The test has no scientific credibility', declares Winston Horne, of the University of NSW school of psychology. 'Anyone who has worked in psychology, or any person with common sense, would say that to classify everyone as being one of sixteen types of person is ridiculous.'

Hanley then recites the MBTI's alleged failings: 'preferences change relatively frequently'; type descriptions suffer from the Forer (or Barnum) effect. He cites no sources for these assertions, but he may have browsed *The Skeptic's Dictionary*:

... no behavior can ever be used to falsify the type, and any behavior can be used to verify it. (Carroll, 2007)

... just about any behaviour can be used to verify the type, and none can falsify it. (Hanley, 2007)

Two weeks before the *Boss* article, the MBTI also featured in *The Age's Summer Age* magazine. AusAPT life members were again to the fore: this time, Meredith Fuller and Peter Geyer. And again, much of the article was favourable. Karen Kissane had assembled a range of views, including the inevitable note of caution:

The MBTI has been criticised for not being solidly grounded in reliable psychological methods. It has been revised extensively by professionals but many trained psychologists continue to regard it with disdain.

Is it really true that psychologists regard the MBTI with 'disdain'? As with climate change, there seems to be a hard core of MBTI sceptics doggedly denying the rising tide of evidence.

Into that contested shadowland, John C Norcross, Gerald P Koocher and Arielle Garofalo have now shone a light, with a study undertaken in support of evidence-based practice. The title of their paper, 'Discredited psychological treatments and tests', does not seem to offer much hope of support for the MBTI—but read on ...

Norcross and Koocher are PhDs in clinical psychology and Garofalo, at the time, was a doctoral candidate in that field. Norcross is professor of psychology and distinguished fellow at the University of Scranton, and Koocher is dean of the School for Health Studies at Simmons College.

Their research was published through the American Psychological Association: first at APA's annual convention, and then in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, an APA journal concerned with the application of psychology, including its 'scientific underpinnings'.

The researchers were seeking consensus on psychological treatments and tests that have been discredited by research, clinical practice or professional consensus. Using literature searches, email list requests and consultation with peers, they created lists of supposedly discredited treatments and tests. One of the tests that made their list was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

The lists of treatments and tests were sent to a panel of experts for rating on a scale from 'not at all discredited' (1) to 'certainly discredited' (5). The researchers used the Delphi two-pass method, with results from the first pass fed back to the respondents before they offered their second set.

The experts were all doctoral-level mental health professionals. 93% had trained as psychologists, and most were fellows of the American Psychological Association or the American Psychological Society, in clinical, counselling or school psychology. The experts also included journal editors, members of the APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, and chairs or editors of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The 290 invited participants returned 85 usable responses in round 2.

For each of 55 treatments and 25 tests, the experts were asked to indicate if they were unfamiliar with it, and (if not unfamiliar) to rate it on a 5-point scale, 1 denoting 'not at all discredited' and 5 'certainly discredited'.

Before we turn to the tests, let's set the scene with the **treatments**.

Reassuringly, two quack 'treatments' vied for the bottom rung of the credibility ladder. *Angel therapy* and *pyramids for restoration of energy* both scored 4.98, a whisker short of the maximum 5, 'certainly discredited'.

Other treatments with a pop-psychology cachet languished in the zone of doubt between 'possibly' (3) and 'probably' (4) discredited: *neuro-linguistic programming* (3.87); *Freudian dream analysis* (3.67); *psychotherapy for penis envy* (3.52); and *critical incident stress debriefing* (3.25).

The treatment rated least discredited was *behaviour therapy for sex offenders* (2.02), nudging the 'unlikely discredited' line.

Turning to the experts' ratings of the **tests**, some personality assessments were rated between 'probably' (4) and 'certainly' (5) discredited: *Luscher Color Test* (4.48, the worst rating); *handwriting analysis* (4.27); and the test some tout as an alternative to the MBTI, the *Enneagram* (4.14).

In the next band up, between 'possibly' (3) and 'probably' (4) discredited, were *use of dolls in testing for child sex abuse* (3.90); *Wechsler IQ scores for personality assessment* (3.42); and *voice stress analysis for lie detection* (3.31).

In the ambivalent band between 'unlikely' (2) and 'possibly' (3) discredited were such tests as *Rorschach to diagnose specific disorders* (2.84); *Thematic Apperception Test for personality assessment* (2.51); and *office-based cognitive task assessments for ADHD* (rated least discredited at 2.23).

How did the **MBTI** rate?

Just 9.6% of the experts reported that they were *not* familiar with the MBTI, indicating that more than 90% were familiar with it.

The MBTI rated at **2.63**, between 'unlikely discredited' (2) and 'possibly discredited' (3). On that basis, Norcross, Koocher and Garofalo include the MBTI in their list of instruments '**consensually viewed as unlikely discredited**'.

The standard deviation of 1.09 suggests a spread of ratings from 'not at all discredited' (1) to 'probably discredited' (4) (and maybe a few outliers at 'certainly discredited' (5), more than two standard deviations from the mean).

While this signals a range of views among the experts, it does *not* support the claims of a general rejection of the MBTI by psychologists. On the contrary, it implies that the respondents who rated it as 'unlikely discredited' or better outnumbered those rating it 'probably discredited' or worse.

Of the 25 putatively discredited tests put to them, the experts ranked the MBTI fourth in credibility, pipped only by *office-based cognitive task assessments for ADHD*, *use of IQ scores to identify specific learning disabilities*, and *Thematic Apperception*.

Norcross, Koocher and Garofalo present their findings as a 'first step in consensually identifying a continuum of discredited procedures.' The graph (*over*) depicts where the MBTI and a representative selection of the other tests fall on that continuum.

Several instruments [including the MBTI] were consensually viewed as unlikely discredited

Norcross, Koocher & Garofalo (2006)

Experts' ratings of some selected tests (round 2)

1 not at all discredited	
2 unlikely discredited	
2.23	Office-based task assessments for ADHD (1st, <i>best</i>)
2.63	Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (4th)
3 possibly discredited	
3.31	Voice-stress lie detection (13th)
4 probably discredited	
4.14	Enneagrams (21st)
4.48	Luscher Color Test (25th, <i>worst</i>)
5 certainly discredited	

Norcross, Koocher & Garofalo (2006)

Few intellectual tyrannies can be more recalcitrant than the truths that everybody knows and nearly no one can defend without any decent data ...

Stephen Jay Gould

It's no surprise that the MBTI made it onto the list of putatively discredited tests: there is a lot of critical opinion in the media and in the air. The surprise is that, on balance, the experts did *not* rate it as discredited.

That finding falsifies the claim in Wikipedia that psychologists reject Jung's typology, and curbs Winston Horne's claim to speak for 'anyone who has worked in psychology'. It may be true that many psychologists view the MBTI with disdain; but, if the experts polled in this study are representative, then that disdain is a minority view.

A few caveats apply to the research.

Firstly, the experts were asked to rate the tests in a mental health context. The MBTI is designed for normal, healthy individuals. Had the experts been asked to assess its credibility for its designed purposes, some may well have rated it more favourably.

Secondly, the researchers note that their targeting of association fellows yielded a disproportionate number of cognitive and behavioural experts who consistently rated procedures as more discredited than did their fellow experts. The wider profession, where the cognitive and behavioural 'hard markers' are not as predominant, might be more favourably disposed to the MBTI.

Lastly, as Norcross, Koocher and Garofalo note, experts can be wrong. Accordingly, their findings need to be interpreted 'carefully and humbly'. Psychological science is founded on empirical evidence and 'tends to be self-correcting', they maintain, citing a number of worthy publications dedicated to publicising discredited procedures—*The Skeptic's Dictionary* among them.

Regrettably, self-correction is not a virtue shared by *The Skeptic's Dictionary*. On his feedback page, Carroll curtly dismisses a reader's critique: 'I ... do not intend to alter anything I have written.' Then, after posting

an article on Marston's DISC instrument—unrelated to the MBTI—with the gratuitous guilt-by-association remark that it 'seems worthy of the MBTI', he declares: 'I am not accepting any more comments.'

The lesson here is to treat such sceptics with scepticism. Next time you encounter a claim that psychologists reject the MBTI, cite Norcross, Koocher and Garofalo, then ask the claimant for *their* evidence.

Sadly, there are hard cases who not only don't get type, but persist in putting down those who do. Nevertheless, it's out there to see, for anyone with the eyes to see it.

At the recent APT International conference Roger Pearman told of a conversation with some fellow psychologists. 'I don't care about all those arguments about the MBTI', one of them declared. 'It works, as a tool to encourage self-awareness and personal self-management.'

That's what it comes down to. One day we may have enough controlled studies and 'scientific credibility' to convince all but the most rigid of the MBTI's critics. Until then, we'll keep on using it as a well-tested tool with evident face validity for understanding ourselves and others. It works. ❖

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