

Jung and Evidence

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator is one of several instruments that operationalise Jung's theories of psychological type. Others include Insights Discovery, TMP and Golden. The MBTI® is regularly criticised on a variety of grounds. Some of the criticism arises from a misconception about what type is supposed to do and a misunderstanding about how the instrument works. Other criticisms suggest poor reliability or validity - many of these criticisms are addressed in the peer reviewed paper by Hackston and Moyle¹ and in other papers cited [here](#).

I want to focus on **what type is intended to do** and on **what evidence there is** to support Jung's theory of psychological type.

What is it intended to do?

Academic psychologists tend to be interested in tools that predict outcomes, but that is not the purpose of the MBTI. According to the publisher, *"It is not, and was never intended to be predictive, and should never be used for hiring, screening or to dictate life decisions"*².

Unfortunately, some users apply it in these ethically dubious ways. Type expert Roger Pearman writes *"the use of this tool (and others) tends to be far beyond the bounds of what the tool's purpose is, how the tool was constructed, and how the tool should be deployed"*³.

So what is it for? Type is a theory about how your mind works - your mindset or habits of mind. It is primarily about your cognitive processes – how you perceive, think and feel. Pearman writes *"psychological type is a model attempting to get individuals to think about how their minds work"*⁴.

Being aware of how your mind works, how you perceive, think and feel, and how this might be different from other people, means that you can learn to manage your thoughts and feelings and learn to behave in ways that enable you to get on better both with yourself and with other people.

Jeff Hayes says *"people use it because they find it meaningful in their lives. To be specific, the MBTI instrument helps people develop self-awareness and other-awareness which are among the most valuable characteristics that one can possess"*⁵.

The British Psychological Society review⁶ of the MBTI concludes that:

"The MBTI is an instrument which, in the hands of an experienced user, can facilitate a high degree of insight. Its strongest application on an individual basis is in counselling or developmental situations. In other work situations its best use is in promoting team development through discussion of the team members' differing positive characteristics".

It's clear that the MBTI is intended for self-development, and indeed Jung's theory is essentially a theory about personal development through life.

What evidence might support Jung's theory of psychological type?

Jung *"was concerned with the fundamental mechanisms of perception and judgment"*⁷.

What evidence is there that people perceive the world and make judgements using the mental functions that Jung proposed (ie Sensing, Intuition, Thinking and Feeling)?

1. Is there evidence that people perceive the world around them using their five senses (Sensing), and also perceive it through making connections, meanings and associations

(Intuition)? And that while everyone can use both means of perception (Sensing and Intuition), individuals tend to use one more readily and frequently?

- Neuroscientists such as David Eagleman⁸ and Leonard Mlodinow⁹ suggest that there is evidence that people do use both means of perception and that our brains do not merely record experiences (what's there) but also create meaning by making connections and associations.
 - From every-day experience (eg when looking at a scene or a picture), we know that some people focus more on what they perceive with their senses while others focus more on associations and meanings. Some people have a bias towards facts and present reality (Sensing) while others have a bias towards ideas and future possibilities (Intuition).
2. Is there evidence that people make judgements and decisions using impersonal objective evaluation, and also using personal empathetic evaluation? And that while everyone can use both means of judgement (Thinking and Feeling), they tend to favour one over the other?
- Management theorists¹⁰ have described over many years how some people are more task focused and others more people focused, which broadly aligns with the preferences for Thinking and Feeling.
 - We know from research¹¹ that decisions have both a rational and an emotional component (but note that Jung described both Thinking and Feeling preferences as *rational* decision-making processes).
 - We most likely all know some people who take decisions based on their principles and give more weight in decision making to objective analysis and seeking for truth (Thinking), while others take decisions based on their personal values and give more weight to human impact and seeking for harmony (Feeling).
3. Is there evidence that people show a bias towards either more extraverted behaviour (ie focus energy on external world of people and things) or more introverted behaviour (ie focus energy on internal world thoughts and feelings)?
- Most academic psychologists agree with the Five Factor Model of personality, which includes Extraversion. The MBTI preference pair of Introversion and Extraversion correlates with the NEO-PI¹² measure of Extraversion.
 - Evidence (Eysenck¹³, Kagan¹⁴) suggests that introverts are physiologically more sensitive to external stimulation (and therefore prefer less of it), while extraverts are physiologically less sensitive to external stimulation (and therefore prefer more of it). Extraverts also seem to be more sensitive to external rewards, such as those gained from social interaction, (Nettle¹⁵) and therefore seek it more. These findings fit with Jung's theory.

I believe that the answer to these three questions is "yes". Findings in neuroscience about perception and processes in the brain, many years of management research into topics such as task vs people focus, and our own experience of other people, provide support for Jung's theory of the cognitive processes and preferences.

If the answer to these questions is "yes", (ie if academic researchers find evidence that people do indeed use these cognitive processes to perceive and judge), then isn't this sufficient validation of Jung's theory of psychological type?

And if Jung's theory has validity, then instruments such as the MBTI serve a useful and valuable purpose by introducing Jung's theories to the lay person.

The important questions then become: What can you do with this knowledge of psychological type? Does it help your self-esteem, self-confidence and ability to function in the world? Does it help you to be more empathetic and get on better with your family, friends and colleagues? Does it help you to have a happier life?

Taking the MBTI indicator (or other Jungian based instruments) can lead to outcomes like these that are worth having. At a minimum, people realise, sometimes for the first time, that the differences between them and their family members or work colleagues on, for example, extraversion and introversion, can be a source of difficulty and conflict. Once they are aware of this, they can adapt their behaviour to take account of these differences

I would love to see academics conducting outcomes-based research into the impact that knowing about type has on people in their work and home lives. Indeed, BAPT is willing to offer bursaries to support this. Are there any academics willing to take up the challenge?

References

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