

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator as a tool for researchers

Using her experience as a researcher, collaborator and coach, Dr Helen Lawrence shares her reflections on the MBTI tool and how it plays out in research relationships and collaborations.

In the years since I qualified as an MBTI practitioner in 2005, I have used the tool in many contexts both in the research sector and outside of it. I have professional history in social science research so perhaps I'm biased, but I've often felt that the research sector and the varied talented professionals that work in it provide particularly clear examples of how this tool can be useful.

I use the word 'tool', and that is precisely what MBTI is. A spanner is useful for some tasks and a pipette is useful for others, and one wouldn't want to have access to only one or the other of those pieces of equipment. Likewise, MBTI does not provide the answer to every question surrounding the wondrous ways of the individual. It can, however, be very useful in examining some of the ways in which people can be different.

As human beings, we have common traits and we have idiosyncrasies. The MBTI, based as it is on the psychology of difference as posited by Jung and interpreted in the post-WW2 era by two women with the intent of increasing understanding between people, can provide some insight into how our differences can be named without pejoration. As I have noted the preferences of those I have collaborated with, particularly where they differ from my own, I have found that both my appreciation of my colleagues and my confidence in my own contribution has grown.

MBTI does not describe ability, nor does it necessarily describe behaviour, as we are all at choice as to how we behave at any given moment. Instead, it describes our innate preferences, our default settings as it were. If all other things are equal, if no other more significant factors are at play, these preferences indicate the way we would probably like our world to be. Jung's notion of preference is possibly best defined by example: I generally prefer pears to apples. But if the pear is hard or overripe, or if the apple in question is a Braeburn that is cool and crisp, I may well choose the apple instead. Certainly if someone gives me an apple I will eat it happily, and I am definitely capable of eating either without demonstrating my preference. The same is true, perhaps to a greater or lesser extent, with the dichotomies presented as MBTI preferences.

Introversion and Extraversion

We know these terms as they have been adopted into common parlance. However, although the Jungian terms (our friend Carl coined them both) have some connections with the bubbly, outgoing image we may have of extroverts and the quieter, self-contained individuals we know as introverts, the correlation is not complete. It is not how much we like people which determines our preference for Introversion or Extraversion, but rather from where we draw our energy. Do we find our necessary 'recharge' at the end of a stressful day by looking inwards, by giving ourselves space and time alone in order to regroup? Or do we seek connection with the outside world, other people, other places, or other interests in order to gain energy?

Do we need the company and contribution of others in order to formulate our ideas? If so then it may be that an Extraversion preference is our natural habitat. Those with extraversion preferences will thrive working with others, will often seek feedback at an early stage, will need to externalise ideas in order to make sense of them – either by talking or quite possibly by writing them down. Research group meetings are stimulating and if they can't be achieved in person then something is lacking. New information is welcomed and often discussed spontaneously.

Or do we need time to sort out our ideas before sharing them with others to check and hone? If this is the case then an Introversion preference may be more comfortable. Research meetings may then be a productive sharing of formulated thoughts, feedback being welcomed on fully or at least partially formed ideas, most productive with an agenda provided and agreed in advance. Information and discussion can productively be shared and feedback provided asynchronously.

A co-author and I both have clear Introversion preferences. This has the advantage that we appreciate a need to think and write in solitude. However, a true collaboration requires some communication and unanimity about what is to be written and I still chuckle at the memory of our early attempts to share unformed thoughts. There was a lot of “Ahhh, ummm, I don't quite – I mean, I think there's something about X which is important...” from both of us! I believe we got better at it, and some of that was because we both understood the importance of what we were trying to do and the reason why we were struggling.

There are also challenges when a research group is mixed in terms of preference on this point. Where those with Extraversion preferences tend to leap on new information and are able to discuss it and its implications quickly, those who prefer Introversion may need to take some time to consider before joining the conversation. Without the understanding of preference, this can lead to those with Extraversion preferences appearing shallow to the others as their early contributions are indicative only of the early stages of thinking, probably not to be committed to, however definitely those thoughts are expressed. Those with Introversion preferences may appear slow, as they are often unwilling to share their thoughts until they have had time to process the new information internally.

Sensing and iNtuiting

We differ also in terms of how we process information and the kinds of information we pay attention to. When I was engaged in postgraduate work, I had a colleague who had the most spectacular ability to glance at a table of figures and interpret them almost immediately, coming up with a 'story' which would explain what we were seeing. However, when it came to demonstrating or proving her hypothesis, she would sometimes struggle to know where to start. I was the opposite. I would look at the same set of figures and start picking them to pieces, noticing an anomaly here, or an unexpected detail there, noting individual questions which could be asked and gradually building towards a conclusion which was solid and demonstrable. I paid attention to detail first and built towards conclusions, my colleague would see the conclusion and have to laboriously drill down to find the proof. Gloriously when, post-PhD, we were collaborating on a joint project, our preferences meant that our talents dove-tailed and the results were quite impressive.

I like to think that Jung would have chuckled at the textbook illustration we provided of his notion of the Sensing (i.e. using the physical senses) and iNtuiting preference. My sensing

preference meant that I naturally used my senses to garner information that I then use to build to a conclusion. I trusted experience (what are the factors I or others have tested before in this kind of scenario), and I worked step-by-step towards a proof or otherwise of a hypothesis. My colleague's preference for iNtuition meant that she naturally followed her 'gut' – and a high percentage of the time her gut was spot on! – so she would know exactly where she was heading when she had to work back to find the proof (or otherwise) of what she 'knew' to be the case.

I'm sure you can imagine the advantage of knowing in a research group who focuses on detail and who uses their intuition to go to the big picture. We all do both, this is part of the rigour and professionalism of research, but when we are able to collaborate with those with the opposite preference the results can be truly satisfying for all involved. If, of course, those preferences are recognised and acknowledged for what they are. If they are not, those with detailed Sensing preferences are frequently seen as being bogged down in trivial detail; whereas those with the more visionary iNtuition preferences can be felt to lack rigour and method. Naming the preferences here is a genuine step towards valuing one another and combatting at least some of the niggles of working with others.

Thinking and Feeling

If the preference above is about the kind of information we pay initial attention to, this one is about what we do with that information and the ways in which we use it to make decisions. It's significant to note that this is not necessarily about the outcome of the decisions we make, rather the process that we use to make them. Let me explain.

I have a Thinking preference. This doesn't mean I don't feel, I promise. But I use logical processes to make decisions, then I let my emotions help me to manage the outcome of those decisions. A friend (an MBTI practitioner with a doctorate in lab-based science) has a Feeling preference. This doesn't mean he doesn't think! It simply means that he attaches primary significance to the impact on people of his decisions. This friend once asked me what I would do if a person came to me in distress. The answer was simple: I would seek to calm and comfort them first. So would he. However, I explained that I would act in that way because I would see it as the quickest and most effective way to establish what the problem was and therefore be able to solve it – my ultimate aim. My friend would do exactly the same thing, but his motive would simply be to offer comfort. The person is primary, the problem would come later, if at all.

Our decisions always have a range of factors which must be weighed up: time; interest; the scope of a project; funding; space; equipment; people. Those with a Thinking preference are likely to weigh these up objectively, looking at the relative significance of each one in a given circumstance. Once they have made a decision, it's likely that they will recognise the same kind of circumstance another time and apply the same principles again. Those with a Feeling preference will see each of the factors, but the needs of the people involved will almost always take priority, and if someone is likely to be negatively impacted by a decision or the decision is likely to cause disharmony amongst a team, the situation becomes quite painful. If the decision is about whether or not to buy an additional piece of equipment for the department, this is often relatively straightforward and often not terribly controversial. However, if it is about who gets funding to go to a prestigious conference, or whose contract gets renewed, the difference in approach can often lead to a tortured cry of 'How can you be like that?' from both sides of Jung's Thinking/Feeling fence.

Acknowledging the different approaches can be useful in taking the heat out of some of these clashes of approach. Where someone with a Thinking preference is likely to seek to do the 'right' thing, someone with a Feeling preference might look for the 'best' thing to do. The former might act consistently, applying principles. The latter might aim to act conscientiously, applying values. There's a structure which comes with a Thinking preference, where a Feeling preference might present with grace. None of these attributes could be thought to be wrong; all of them might be felt to be helpful. Understanding our own approach as simply that – an approach – can enable us to appreciate the value in a different way forward in making decisions which affect the people around us.

Judging/Perceiving

The final dichotomy presented by the MBTI is about which one of the previous two one prefers to use. Do we like to organise our lives by gaining information (whether by Sensing or iNtuiting), or by making decisions (either by Thinking or Feeling)?

This is frequently exemplified by our relationship to deadlines. Do we work steadily towards them, planning and structuring our time in order to allow a safe margin of error for the printer to malfunction at the last moment or the internet to go down just at the moment when we are ready to submit the paper? Or do we spend a lot of time thinking, letting things percolate, adding a new idea or taking a whole new tack just at the moment when our colleagues with the opposite preference are filing away the notes and getting out the diary to look at the next task, barely concealing their slightly smug smiles as we sweat and scurry until the last moment?

The notion is that if we like to organise our lives by making decisions our lives will be ordered and structured and our progress towards a deadline will be calm; and if we like to organise our lives by perceiving information we are likely to be aware of time rather than governed by it, experiencing a creative, stimulating scramble to meet a deadline as all the garnered information is distilled at the final moment. This is part of the outworking of this preference.

However, there is another facet of this which, particularly in the research field, is worth paying attention to. Organising our lives by making decisions can result in us believing a decision has been made and investing time and effort accordingly. I have a Judging preference – I make decisions or judgements without noticing it sometimes, so natural is the process. I once was involved in a fantastic collaborative writing project with two co-authors, both of whom I respect greatly and love working with. And both of whom have a preference for Perceiving, for organising their lives by gathering information. We would meet, discuss, and allocate work to be done by the next time, which I would then go away and do, because I assumed the decision had been made that this was the next stage of the project. I would send my work to the others in advance of the next meeting and wait in hope for their contributions. When we met next they would talk about how helpful what I'd written was, and then proceed to turn my work over, take it apart and reject parts of it as the discussion meant that the tack we needed to take had changed and what I'd done was no longer relevant. They had assumed that my work was not a nearly-finished article to be honed, but source material to fuel the developing ideas that would eventually go to make up the book we were writing together. Galling as it is to admit it, the final project was far better because of this process!

Organising one's life by gaining information, rather than making decisions, allows for a far greater degree of flexibility and spontaneity, a heightened ability to react to changing circumstances and – particularly when combined with a healthy regard for the sensibilities of one's colleagues – can allow ideas to widen and deepen thus enriching the final result.

However, as with each of these preferences, collaborations are richest when these differences are named and valued. My co-authors valued my structured approach, and I was inspired by their responsiveness and creativity. We were able to discuss what was happening and each party was able to learn from it. And within an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, our collaboration thrived.

As I wrote at the outset of this piece, the MBTI is a tool and is only one tool which can be used in understanding oneself and others. I've found it a useful one, and the examples above describe just some of the areas in which I've found it useful to understand what's going on in research settings, and to enable greater effectiveness when working with others.