

# Type's Critics – Considerations and Responses



Psychological type and type assessment tools have a legion of critics, which is good - it means people are taking the models seriously enough to argue about them. From the National Science Foundation criticisms of the early 1990s to the Murphy review in *The Cult of Personality* (2005), and many other articles since, critics have more or less argued about the same issues identified below.

We need to keep in mind that criticisms about psychological type are not the same as criticisms about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® instrument - or other assessment tools such as the Golden Personality Type Profiler™ or Majors Personality Type Inventory™. Often critics of the assessment tools use objections to the theory as part of their problem with the tool along with numerous arguments about the nature of the items, reliability, and validity. The theory and the measurement of the theory are two very different things and each deserves consideration.

Reasonable arguments can be marshaled on all sides with reference to evidence regarding the theory or assessment tools. It is highly unlikely that we are going to wake up one day and all of the key issues will be resolved. Many researchers on a given side are absolutely convinced that their analysis of the data supersedes all previous efforts and they have "proven" their point. In this pull and push of intellectual banter, some good ideas emerge and lead us to pause with what and why we do what we do with type and associated assessment tools that are outlined below. My response to this is to recall the wisdom of my Cherokee grandmother: "Those with answers are enslaved; those with questions are free."

An observation from my 32 years of using psychological type and type tools: the published criticisms are more often about how psychological type or associated instruments are used. When you read the critics carefully, it is apparent that they are talking about how an assessment was used that caused trouble rather than the assessment itself, or how the

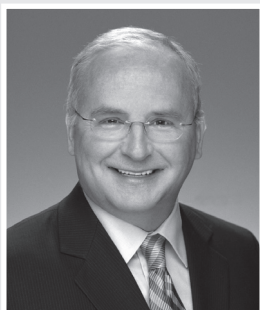
theory was used rather than the value of the theory. As for instruments such as the MBTI assessment, if you Google "MBTI criticism", you will find articles which generally criticize the instrument using pre-IRT revision information and using data from the 1985 *MBTI® Manual*. Sometimes you need to read that criticism very carefully to see the data source. In every group I have facilitated where someone brought in a published criticism, the article was based on pre-revision data. In general, these are what I have heard:

## OBJECTION 1: "THE TOOL ISN'T SCIENTIFICALLY SOUND."

Of course, a great deal depends on what one calls "science." This article is too brief to explore this arena but note that it is no small matter and this should prompt us to inquire about the nature of the "science" to which the individual is referring. This criticism is usually leveled at the MBTI tool, though recently the other type tools have received the same treatment.

In 1998, the MBTI instrument was revised using a powerful statistical methodology known as Item Response Theory (IRT). Using a census sampling technique, the MBTI tool was revised based on a national sample and analyzed with IRT methods. To date, there are no other personality-related tools based on both a national sample and IRT statistics. With IRT, biases related to race, age, gender, and education are reduced, decreasing error and increasing the instrument's reliability. Other tools have used robust methods such as contrasting group analysis to enhance the stability of those assessments.

Claims that the tools are based on an outdated and esoteric method by individuals without psychometric training simply do not hold any water. A panel of Ph.D. specialists participated in the 1998 MBTI revision to ensure the highest scientific standards in the application of IRT methods, and newer tools have been developed by expert psychometricians and psychologists. Now with over



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10,000 published research studies, including brain mapping analyses, this criticism reveals more of a lack of thorough research on the part of the critic than a problem with the tools.

We, as type users, could benefit from the idea that there will never be enough data to convince a large number of research psychologists that type merits recognition as a viable theory. Even though I could list catalogs of research about personality “variables” which any serious user of psychological type would easily recognize as a principle of type, those researchers almost immediately discount type as speaking to their data. David Caruso (of Yale University and EQ fame) has described the “proven” eight processes of emotional intelligence based on decades of evidence and multiple scientific strategies. However, I will never forget his reaction when I suggested he had provided evidence that Jung was right about four ways of perceiving and acting on information; he gagged and nearly fell out of his chair in disgust. For some, their world view cannot accommodate type.

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## **OBJECTION 2: “THE INSTRUMENT STEREOTYPES PEOPLE.”**

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A careful reading of the various manuals of type assessments, and other official documents related to the tools, clearly suggests that the assessments are about preferences, tendencies, and potentials in development. Usually any stereotyping is done by those who do not know how to use the instrument. Isabel Myers carefully called it an Indicator rather than a test, a measuring tool, or a categorizing device. A description is not a prediction. All psychological tools can face this same criticism, if not used appropriately.

It is useful to point out to naysayers that the tool being used is providing a summary of an individual’s votes and as such is identifying some personal baselines from which an individual can learn to flex. The goal is to know the baseline and to learn where to flex to increase effectiveness.

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## **OBJECTION 3: “PEOPLE ARE MORE COMPLEX THAN FOUR LETTERS.”**

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By this type of statement, if critics mean a fixed, trait-like quality, competent users of psychological type and type assessments around the world would agree. The model, articulated by Carl Jung, is simply that there are dimensions of perceiving information and acting on experience that affect how we adapt, learn, and grow throughout life. Among these ways of perceiving and judging, we have a dominant psychological energy around which the others are organized. It is often the proposition of a dominant and auxiliary process that leads researchers and initial users of type to object. Yet, when you patiently invite an individual to look at how he or she deals with the world through extraverted energies and process experience through introverted

(mind’s eye) patterns, individuals readily confirm that this is how their minds work.

The instruments were designed to help individuals learn about typical ways of perceiving and judging information; furthermore, the theory suggests you are likely to be consistent over time. Notice the words tendency, likely, and patterns rather than fixed, unchanged, or predictions. As indicated above, this is an attack on the theory based on a superficial understanding of the model and how to use it. The instruments suggest and propose, while a careful interpretation uncovers and clarifies.

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## **OBJECTION 4: “EVERYBODY HAS DONE IT; THERE ISN’T ANYTHING NEW. EVERYONE’S BEEN THERE AND DONE THAT.”**

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Millions have taken type assessments and by many accounts have received pretty bad interpretations. Regrettably, those who have had a bad experience are unlikely to be open to reviewing the information in the light of a proper and correct interpretation. The main criteria associated with a bad interpretation is that the information shared was superficial, stereotypical, and a “fun and games” presentation. Many individuals have rarely been given the opportunity to go deeper than preferences into the dynamic and psychological mindsets of the type he or she confirmed.

A good interpretation would include these frames or perspectives. The type assessments are designed to identify preferred approaches to taking in information and making decisions while:

- Exploring how we can use preferences more effectively.
- Discovering how non-preferred psychological resources can be developed to enrich our life choices.
- Considering aspects of how our patterns in perception and judgment affect career choice, learning strategy, values orientation, problem-solving, and general orientation toward daily life. In other words, link understanding of self, based on psychological type, to whatever the goal of using it is.
- Increasing awareness of the complexity of individuals, as well as mutual understanding of differences.

All of the type assessment tools published by major publishers include various subscales or facets to show the depth of the preferences and how we may have developed aspects of our non-preferred processes. For example, those with a preference for introversion may have learned the importance of being expressive, or those with a preference for extraversion may have learned the value of participating in more one-on-one communication. These elements give a look at our preferences and various facets that reveal the personal variations within the type pattern. This rich data source provides insight into greater elements of complexity of how we adapt and grow.

The viability of any tool or model is directly related to its

appropriate use. When you look at the questions that professionals are seeking to address in applying psychological type, the potential applications of type and type related tools are numerous for individual development. These applications extend beyond the purpose of this article, though it is important to note that how the model and tools are used affect judgments of them. For example, when type tools are used for selection or promotion, none of which were designed for such purposes, the theory and tools get black eyes.

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### **OBJECTION 5: “TYPE IS COMPLETELY DISCREDITED. THE FIVE FACTOR MODEL IS THE ACCEPTED FRAMEWORK FOR LOOKING AT PERSONALITY.”**

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The research psychologist in the field of personality would find this a strange statement in that the literature on personality is diverse and rich, and can hardly be said to be “settled” on the nature of or elements of personality. The five factor model is popular and four of the five factors highly correlate with type preferences. For example, studies show correlations of four of the five factor variables with type preferences as follows: Extroversion with E/I, Originality with S/N, Accommodation with T/F, and Conscientiousness with J/P. The fifth factor, neuroticism or emotional reactivity, is not measured by type-related tools. This model begins with a different set of assumptions from those of type theory.

Of course, I am more interested in a dialog between users of various personality models than I am in trying to spend energy proving one over the other – there is lots of evidence to go around. I have no problem with the idea that we are all tapping into the same source of psychological reality and that our descriptions of that reality have somewhat different forms. Fundamentally, though, type offers two things other models do not: (a) differences are neither good nor bad and (b) a proposition about a system of psychological energies that explains how our external and internal worlds are so dynamic. I have yet to find a single document from the other schools of personality outside of type that propose a equal value for the range of personality factors available to measure. In the five factor model, it is clearly considered more healthy to be Extraverted, Original, Accommodating, and Conscientious, and not neurotic. When this topic comes up, I simply say, “Okay, there are different takes on the make-up of personality. Would any of the following apply to you?”

- Reflect on the details of an experience and imagine how things might play out in a scenario
- Think through the logic of a situation and ponder how the course of action aligns with one’s values
- Quickly summarize an observation and identify an idea or possibility
- Express the rationale behind a situation and the values to be celebrated

If so, then type is a part of your reality because we have just discussed introverted sensing and introverted intuiting, introverted thinking and introverted feeling, extraverted sensing and extraverted intuiting, along with extraverted thinking and extraverted feeling.”

Discredited? Only to those who do not understand the theory and how it works.

### **SUMMARY**

While type tools are frequently purchased for development uses, it is likely that these are also the most under-utilized tools as is the theory on which they are based. I am fond of suggesting that psychological type is a 600 horsepower engine of understanding that is usually driven about 15 miles per hour. Too many facilitators, who can purchase but have not sought out training on the tool they use, provide a “drive by” introduction to the basic concepts and never really tap into the results in a way that promotes individual development and understanding of group behavior.

Ninety years after Jung first published in 1921, type continues to suggest that this method of understanding differences enables us to both attribute appropriate intent to others’ behavior and tap into our potential resources. It encourages us to ask questions about how we work with our talents and engage with others. In the hands of a knowledgeable and artful user, the theory and instruments are like a Stradivarius. Unfortunately, and for far too many learners, they tend to be played like a dime store violin.

We need to respond to the critics unapologetically that type theory continues to provide useful guidance for encouraging individual growth. We need to feel comfortable with the idea that there are many ideas about type that are unproven, yet provide a useful heuristic. We need to stay in touch with the research so we can answer questions with precision. Keep in mind that some things have to be believed to be seen.

As to the assessment tools, type practitioners can point out that assessment tools published by reputable publishing houses are guided by the standards of educational and psychological tests applied to all assessments and type tools generally pass all the standards with flying colors. For example, the standard to show test-retest reliability is very strong for the MBTI, Golden, and Majors instruments, and these compare favorably with other assessment tools for skills or personality measurement. As such, we can only ask that the tools we use should be treated as fairly as other tools, recognizing their limitations and usefulness.

Psychological type scares some people because it proposes something quite radical: individual differences can be understood and embraced without judgment. We owe it to ourselves and to the next generation to stay the course in promoting research, asking questions, and knowledgeably responding to type’s foes wherever they emerge. ■