

Let the preferences speak

Using psychological type theory as a tool within a counselling session, Rowan Bayne helps a teenager look at which kind of career might interest her and why

A mother and her 14-year-old daughter came to see me because the daughter's friends had all decided about their careers but she hadn't. The mother had heard about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is the most widely used, non-clinical personality questionnaire, and thought it would help. The daughter (I'll call her Halle) seemed to me to be mildly curious about the MBTI, very at ease with her mother, and only slightly worried about being different from her friends, so I didn't ask to talk to her on her own.

I then briefly explained the two concepts at the heart of MBTI theory – preference and type – at a general level, using the analogy of right and left handedness for preference. Thus, preference can be defined as 'feeling most natural and comfortable with particular ways of behaving and experiencing' and, people generally behave in the ways they prefer but can behave in the opposite way, just as we usually use one hand but can use the other.

Preferences

At the basic level of MBTI theory, there are four pairs of preferences – although, at this stage and in order to avoid introducing bias into their responses to the MBTI, I didn't tell Halle and her mother what they were:

- Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I)
- Sensing (S) or Intuition (N)
- Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)
- Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)

The meaning of each of the preferences is briefly indicated by the following characteristics (*figure 1*). It's important to note that these are behaviours that tend to be associated with the preferences, rather than definitions of them:

E	More outgoing and active	More reflective and reserved	I
S	More practical and interested in facts and details	More interested in possibilities and an overview	N
T	More logical and reasoned	More agreeable and appreciative	F
J	More planning and coming to conclusions	More easygoing and flexible	P

Figure 1

A person's 'type' includes one from each of the four pairs of preferences, eg ENTP or ESTJ. There are 16 such combinations and therefore 16 types.

We discussed Halle's expectations about her MBTI results. I saw these as realistic but, if they hadn't been, I would have explained that the results were a clue to some central aspects of her 'true' personality (an assumption in the theory) and to the kinds of work she would find most fulfilling. My model of counselling is an integrative one, essentially early Egan, with three stages: explore, new perspectives, action. So other perspectives that I considered were to say that 14 is generally very young to decide on a career and that it seemed likely her friends would change their minds.

In the rest of this article, I'll use this mother and daughter example to illustrate three levels of application of MBTI theory, and I'll touch on using MBTI theory in a more 'upstream', preventive way with groups of young people.

General level use of MBTI theory

MBTI theory proposes that there are several radically different ways of being happy and fulfilled. It counteracts people's tendency to assume that those who are very unlike ourselves are odd or even mad. Counsellors don't need to know their own psychological type for this general use, but knowing it probably increases awareness of our most likely biases.

For example, Halle's MBTI results were ENTJ. I tested their accuracy¹ and they seemed to be true, as are about 75 per cent of MBTI results. ENTJ is an unusual type in females – about two per cent of the general UK population – and contrasts with social expectations (gender stereotypes) of ESFJ for females (a majority proportion of 19 per cent) and ISTJ for males (20 per cent). ENTJs, both male and female, tend to be logical, analytical, tough minded, goal orientated and to take charge, although some ENTJ women, because of the gender stereotype, cover this up and are extremely 'feminine' superficially in their behaviour. There was no sign in our session of this 'type falsification' effect in Halle. Her mother's appreciation of MBTI theory may have helped prevent this.

However, it could present a difficulty for the mother. As an ISFP, her way of being would typically be much more gentle and she might be tempted to encourage Halle to be gentle too, or discourage her, perhaps very subtly, from developing some or all of her ENTJ qualities. Both of us (ISFP mother

and INFP counsellor) should in theory (see figure 1) be more able to empathise with and accept Halle's different personality, regardless of whether we know her MBTI or actual type or not, because we know that there are naturally logical, tough-minded women.

Communication style

At this level, the counsellor observes the client's 'language' and chooses whether or not to match it². This is something many people do to some extent in everyday conversations without thinking about it. What MBTI theory adds is detail about the range of communication styles, and an increased ability to be immediate about them. For example, I said to Halle: 'You seemed to be enjoying debating with me about the reasons for your interests, but less comfortable with saying how you feel about them!' This is a Thinking versus Feeling difference. The simplest approach to the 'communication style' is to distinguish between four 'languages'³:

- ST language is brief and concise, emphasises facts and logic, does not go off on tangents, and starts at the beginning.
- SF language has the same practical, sequential flavour as ST but is warmer, friendlier and more personal.
- NF language is holistic, personal and general, and points to interesting possibilities with details to be 'worked out later'.
- NT language has the same flavour as NF but emphasises intellectual competence and reasoning more, is calm and objective.

In terms of this model, Halle uses NT language primarily, her mother SF and myself NF.

Higher use of the theory

The most sophisticated level of using MBTI theory takes into account 'core' motives, type dynamics and type development and applies the theory to career choice, team building, learning styles etc¹. One model for the motives is to distinguish four broad patterns, which are called 'temperaments' in the MBTI literature.

You may like to ask yourself: 'Which of the following is so central to me that for it to be blocked would be like a psychological death?' and 'Which are relatively unimportant to me?'

SP	Excitement; solving practical problems; freedom (eg from planning in detail); variety.
SJ	Being responsible and useful; stability; planning in detail.
NT	Developing new methods/theories/models/a grand vision; analysing and criticising.
NF	Self-development; supporting other people; harmony; authenticity.

In terms of careers advice, developed ENTJs are most likely to enjoy solving complicated problems, and therefore working as a scientist, architect, engineer, designer or (senior) manager tends to suit them. A corresponding weakness is that they may be too demanding and critical and neglect people's feelings in their push for logic and efficiency. Halle liked the sound of these general characteristics, including the more critical one, and the associated careers.

Using MBTI theory with groups

Brief exercises are often used when testing MBTI results to provide further clues, eg asking your client to tell you about a picture. This may sound like a projective test but is quite different: people who prefer Sensing and those who prefer Intuition will tend to talk differently about the picture. These exercises can be very effective and dramatic in groups because they show type in action. The differences are real!

Very successful groups introducing young people to MBTI theory or temperament theory have been run in schools in the USA and occasionally in the UK. They usually begin with something of great interest to teenagers, like communication with their parents or peers, or indeed decisions about careers and subjects to study. Another factor is that peer influence or fitting in matters much more to young people than it does to adults. In the USA, 'fitting in' means that they are more likely to see themselves as ESFPs and ENFPs, regardless of their actual types. In addition, several of their preferences may not yet be very developed, and their non-preferences, in Halle's case for ISFP, even less so. ■

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References

- 1 Bayne R. Psychological types at work. An MBTI perspective. London: Thomson; 2004.
- 2 Provost JA. Applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in counseling: a casebook. 2nd ed. Gainesville, FL: Center for Applications of Psychological Type; 1993.
- 3 Allen J, Brock SA. Health care communication and personality type. London: Routledge; 2000.

Further information

OPP is the licensing body for MBTI materials and training in the whole of Europe. Tel: 01865 404500; www.opp.eu.com

CAPT (The Center for Applications of Psychological Type) in Florida has a free online bibliography (7,000+ items) of ideas, experiences and research. www.capt.org

BAPT (The British Association of Psychological Type) website is at www.bapt.org.uk

One of the best of the hundreds of MBTI sites is www.personalitytype.com A good UK website is www.teamtechnology.co.uk