

**Media Puzzle:
Responding to Claims about the MBTI® and Psychological Type**
A response to *False Portraits* by Jennifer V. Fayard [Psychology Today](#) January 2020

Peter Geyer

peter@petergeyer.com.au

Werribee, Australia

To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle

George Orwell

[Campbell 2011 p187]

There's something about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI) and the notion of types of people that provokes a consistent stream of criticism, whether it be about the questionnaire itself, or the ideas attached to it. Sometimes this prompts defences from various interested parties, when an explanation might be more relevant.

Jennifer Fayard is the latest contributor to this enterprise with a piece that is more personal experience than investigation. In some ways it's a conversion narrative that starts with the MBTI, stops off briefly at the Enneagram, and finally arrives at the Five-Factor Model, where the world can be set to rights.

She begins with an undergraduate experience of being introduced to the MBTI in class via a "testing company representative" engaged by a professor. I think this person was more likely a certified MBTI practitioner, unattached to the publisher, but I wasn't there, so could be wrong. At any rate, she finds out she prefers INTJ (nothing is said about a feedback and validation process) and heads to her computer to find out more.

This step, although ostensibly logical for these times, is deeply problematic. Internet and social media sites are not the MBTI, but more likely related to what she calls "knockoffs" where the only connection can be the four-letter type code invented by Isabel Briggs Myers. Many of these are very popular, but can be wildly uninformed.

My limited experience in this area includes a site where its owners claim that Jung's feeling function has nothing to do with values, and others where type labels are indiscriminately laid on various figures. C.G. Jung can be labelled INFJ, Bob Dylan INFP and Barack Obama an extravert, indicating these assessments have been made without much investigation at all into these people, including their writings and what they have said.

There are other things, too. Fayard mentions the search for "the ideal date or most fitting city" according to type, but this has nothing to do with the MBTI and the information is demonstrably false and not supported by research.

Many years ago, I was doing some type work with a credit union and a group of young women came up and asked for relationship information i.e. what type to look for. They were very disappointed when I informed them that there were other factors, and one mused aloud about going "back to astrology."

For myself, I wondered why they didn't try to find out more about the people they became interested in. Type may be relevant as a context, but it's how the type is expressed, development and areas of interest. Life partners can be an opposite type, a similar type, or any type with a shared interest. Personality may not even be relevant because there are other considerations.

Types are also not stereotypes, which may be news to Fayard, as she refers to a Harry Potter Type Table, where the distinctly unpleasant Draco Malfoy is identified as an INTJ, and this troubles her. These type tables (and there are many) can have their amusements but they are about the

appropriation of labels to a particular stereotypical behaviour. I find most of the ones I've seen to be implausible, to say the least, but have also got responses that suggest that's what my type would say anyway, indicating that a stereotype has some purchase, and that evaluation and discussion are all too often absent. Jung (1921/1923) suggested this was a form of negative thinking. A few laughs can be had from type humour, as with anything about whatever personality is considered to be. Charts and laughs have nothing to do with the MBTI, or Jung for that matter. The Enneagram is mentioned at about this point, which isn't an area of personal interest or depth of expertise. I read an interesting book on it many decades ago, well before any instrumentation. I'll only note that Enneagram instruments are relatively recent and there are a variety of them. Its ideas have been used to complement the MBTI. The only similarity is that the outcomes are labelled types. Some Five-Factor Model researchers have done that as well, I'm unsure why and have to do more reading.

Fayard was surprised in graduate school to find that the MBTI wasn't favoured by psychologists. There are many reasons for this (see e.g. Geyer 1995). One of the consequences has been there isn't an MBTI school, as there have been for the MMPI, NEO and Positive Psychology for example and it appears to be understood that investigating the MBTI might be a career-ending move.

Whether those who taught her at this point were knowledgeable about the MBTI is another question. This article suggests that to be extremely unlikely.

In the first place she completely misunderstands C.G. Jung's *Psychological Types*. It's not a theory of personality but of types of consciousness. "Personality type" these days encompasses a number of perspectives that aren't Jung's or even those of Isabel Myers. *Personality* for Jung was a calling (1984) and he thought not everyone became a personality. So you can come out an INTJ or ESFP on the MBTI, but not be a personality in Jung's terms.

In addition, she claims Jung developed his theory on personal insights. A reading of his text and knowledge about how it came about and the discussions and research undertaken, will give a different perspective (Geyer 2017; 2018). Jung didn't develop a questionnaire, test it out on groups of people, or conduct laboratory experiments, but he wasn't a logical positivist or behaviourist.

Jung's theory isn't a theory of behaviour. It was derived using the scientific method as understood by his culture. Isabel Briggs Myers operated according to the scientific method and selected a scoring system that suited the task. She didn't apply a generic method that would have been unsuitable for her purpose, and not been science. Perceptive comments about scientism in psychology have recently been made (Gantt; Williams (eds) 2018)

The MBTI doesn't determine the type, nor do the results. They indicate. Indicators are a legitimate kind of measurement. It also doesn't have extremes. If you answer everything one preference over another, it represents a level of confidence in the results – a probability that the results are correct. There are levels of clarity as a consequence. I answer all the I questions, but there are no pathological repercussions implied, nor if I do the reverse. The language of a Five-Factor questionnaire can imply something quite different.

Fayard claims there are results given in percentages, which suggests she's not talking about the MBTI at all. She may have misread a paragraph in recent MBTI profiles that explains the probability index, a recently introduced term that helps explain how the MBTI has always operated. That explanation completely excludes the notion of amounts or extremes (Hirsh and Kummerow; Quenk and Kummerow; The Myers-Briggs Company 2018).

Here's the last two sentences of a short paragraph in these profiles describing this index:

“The probability index does not measure how much of a preference you have or how well you use that preference. It simply shows how likely it is that the preference you reported is accurate for you.”

The claim that types are bundles of traits is also false, unless you agree with the tendency for some Five-Factor people to claim that from their research results, hence, personality types from traits. There are many papers that claim this; some also get on the media. To this way of thinking, there are traits and not these types, therefore everything must be traits and anything that is a personality type must be a bundle of traits.

The psychological type researcher and author Gordon Lawrence wrote on this issue some time ago (2007), pointing out that seeing types as bundles of traits comes from a perspective that sees the four scales of the MBTI, which are statistically independent as denoting separate traits, so therefore additive, discarding or ignoring its purpose as an indicator to a dynamic theory of personality. The preferences relating to the MBTI are theoretically content-free; there are suggested behaviours and tendencies, but no skill assertions can be made.

This is why it's unsuited to selection, although a number of people use it that way, or apply a label to select or not select. This is lazy, uninformed thinking, but I suppose it saves time, like excluding people who are too old, or overqualified, or have the wrong kind of name or appearance.

As an aside, it's important to note that in principle the MBTI does not create the type, notwithstanding labels like *MBTI Types*. The type code might derive from Isabel Myers' measurement work, but it applies to a theory not based on measurement.

Fayard interrupts her process by asking why people like personality tests. She gives two answers:

1. We seek hidden information about ourselves
2. We want to belong

I don't think either of these things are true, even if the absolute nature of this claim (“we”) is discarded, although they may reflect issues for the author. Actually, all the “we” statements in this section are surface generalisations that have obvious exclusions or exceptions.

When working with groups or individuals there's often active resistance to completing any kind of questionnaire, let alone one on personality. Whatever result there is may be forgotten about and filed away or discarded.

I think it's more that people find themselves described, rather than hidden information, although perhaps this is contingent on age, or self-awareness. Fayard links this to the *Forer effect*, which is something routinely thrown in the direction of type, particularly with descriptions. The theme here is “confirmation bias” which implies that people are easily gulled, or have a number of delusions about themselves. Peer feedback can be a useful remedy, if they can be bothered

I don't understand this at all, as a decent description shows quite large differences between the types. There are similarities between those who share a category such as introversion, or thinking, but a complete description contains a variety of statements and is more than a paragraph, or a few dot-points.

Selecting a sentence from an unreferenced type description, as Fayard has done is hardly evidence of anything and no, I didn't identify with all the selections she provides. Isabel Briggs Myers' descriptions were carefully constructed (Myers 1970). Having said that, type descriptions can be oversimplified and a brief statement therefore insufficient; adequate information rests with the practitioner, including what sites to look at online, so they need to be well-informed. Gordon Lawrence (2010) has informatively discussed type descriptions and their content, making suggestions for improvement.

Fayard rightly critiques the excess of labels underpinning type categories, her examples being from the Enneagram, and one from psychological type. To me, these are distractors from the core information and people can rely on these labels as an overall description or stereotype, when some reflection and thought is required.

One of the things about type is that a number of people find out they don't belong; in some respects, Fayard's initial experience appears to be like this – why she appeared different to her peers. This can be a great relief. Now you have an idea why you don't fit in with your family for instance and you can simply walk away or learn some strategies to manage that. Sometimes people won't disclose their results because they feel they might be ostracised, which puts some pressure on the group facilitator. So "belonging" is also a complex issue. There can be presumed compulsions that go with it, such as whether you salute a flag or sing an anthem, or adhere to a dress code, do what you're told. Literature on organizational citizenship is conjectural in this way. The author introduces the Five-Factor Model (FFM) as "a better way to slice personality" which I think is similar to the title of an early article in this field. I'm unsure whether slicing or carving something up is an appropriate term and it suggests a different approach than asking what different kinds of people there are, given Jung said he wasn't into individual differences. They were surface behaviours to him, and in fact Isabel Myers described her MBTI items as being about surface behaviours that mean nothing in themselves, but may point to Jung's constructs. People do the same things for different reasons.

Anyway, Fayard likes the carving and gives a brief description of the FFM constructs, mentions correlations with the MBTI (a rationale for the bundles of traits idea) and also that the MBTI doesn't have a scale for *emotional stability*, which is also called *neuroticism*. This is a consistent criticism of the MBTI, even from those who favour it, yet the MBTI is about "normal" personality and so by definition can't have such a scale.

It's relevant at this point to discuss language and interpretation. Extraversion on the MBTI isn't the same as extraversion under FFM. There are a variety of descriptions and an alternative spelling. Labels like Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are hardly objective, and point to a bias against the way some people, me included, go about things. These presumptions have implications regarding social adjustment and other issues (Geyer 2014). Kurt Danziger (1997) writes entertainingly about psychology and its labels.

Language is important. Jung didn't invent a new set of terms, but used others already in existence, for which he provided descriptions. This renders arguments about the "right" meaning for a word somewhat moot, yet they still occur, particularly around feeling and thinking. Malcolm Westcott (1968) notes several definitions of "intuition" and points out that Jung's definition, which he describes well and without judgement, is very different to the others.

Roy Schafer (1978) appears to have been successful in encouraging the use of action words rather than nouns in personality, so *extraverting*, *intuiting*, and so forth. These are used routinely in personality type areas. A problem with action words is that exercising one of Jung's functions, thinking, for instance, doesn't necessarily require or presume an action, or implementation.

Fayard now tells us "why the Big Five tests win handily over the MBTI and Enneagram." I wasn't aware there was a competition, given all these have value in their own right, notwithstanding some dubious statements by followers. "Big Five tests" also implies all of them, of whatever length and origin, and I would think that's indefensible by definition. Anyway, she has 4 reasons:

1. They were developed using the scientific method
2. Continuums [continua?] are better than categories
3. They can show how you've changed

4. They predict things that personality should predict

The “scientific method” claim I discussed earlier, and here it reflects a limited definition that is in favour in this field, but certainly doesn’t represent the whole of the scientific enterprise. Some reading on the topic would be advisable here.

The *lexical hypothesis* arises from Allport and Odbert’s classic 1936 paper on the topic in which the Webster’s New International Dictionary was consulted for words that might characterise “Personal Behaviour and Personality,” therefore words from American English. The idea of traits had been around before then. The authors write in the style of their period, which has some resemblance to that of Jung, a contemporary. The outcome of the FFM as presented here neglects the variety of responses, from rejection of the idea to different numbers of factors e.g. 2, 3, 6, 15, 16.

Fayard mentions the research method as being factor analysis, a method not favoured by Isabel Myers herself, but nonetheless it was the method for producing MBTI Forms J and K.

The “continuum versus category” argument relates strongly to ideas of scientific method and presumptions about what personality is in the first place, as well as what kind of scoring. Once again, the author presumes that the MBTI offers static personality results, neglecting its associated development theory of Jung’s and that the MBTI isn’t about behaviour.

Also lost is the issue of distribution. Fayard favours the conventional bell-curve, with most people being in the middle, roughly 68% and within one standard deviation of the mean. This is the gold standard from a particular perspective. It excludes and pathologises the normal behaviours of some psychological types, demonstrated by evidence of change where apparently people are more likely to be more emotionally stable, assertive, agreeable and conscientious as they get older. I’m not sure whether I’ve managed to do that.

Fayard asks whether personality type would be able to do that; there are studies of older people as well as the notion of development that is associated with the MBTI (but not part of it) presumes that normal development implies developing what you don’t prefer in the context of what you do; it’s a natural process but not everybody does it, whether by circumstance or inclination.

Fayard lists a number of areas where the FFM has produced (she says “predicts”) outcomes in various studies about life, education and employment issues. Her presumption is that “if your personality leads you to approach the world in characteristic ways, we would expect it to be related to the choices you make and what happens in your life, right?”

Well, not necessarily. The presumption about “choices” is problematic because life can involve a lot of things you don’t want to do for whatever reason, but circumstances have you doing something else. Choice is contingent on power or agency, education, locality, employment, gender, ethnicity, finance and so on. Kent Greenfield’s book on the topic (2012) is instructive, and there are others.

This is not to denigrate the research, which is interesting, nor the value of the FFM idea. It’s just that this piece ends up being a sales talk. The usual presumption that the success of other tests in being well-known (e.g. the MBTI) is because of marketing by for-profit test companies is trotted out. The history of the MBTI and 30 years of personal experience actually demonstrates the dubious nature of such assertions.

It appears that all too often, those involved in measurement of personality can privilege the wrong information, taking a narrow perspective and presuming there’s only one way. This is curious in a field where there is continual and robust discussion about measurement methods and

It would be better in this contested field if research was conducted in accordance with fundamental principles that lay outside any particular field, and acknowledge that there are presumptions that

need to be acknowledged and dealt with, rather than presenting something as pure fact, when it might just be plausible.

References Consulted and Further Reading

- Gordon W. Allport and Henry S. Odert (1936) *Trait-Names: A Psycho-Lexical Study* Psychological Monographs Vol XLVII No 1
- Charlie Campbell (2011) *Scapegoat: A History of Blaming Other People* Duckworth Overlook
- Kurt Danziger (1997) *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language* Sage
- Jennifer V. Fayard (2020) *False Portraits* Psychology Today <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/articles/201912/false-portraits>
- Edwin E. Gantt and Richard N. Williams (2018) *On Hijacking Science: Exploring the Nature and Consequences of Overreach in Psychology* Routledge
- Peter Geyer (1995) *Quantifying Jung: The Origin and Development of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* MScThesis University of Melbourne www.academia.edu
- Peter Geyer (2013) *Fundamentals of Personality Type: 1. What is Personality Type? An Introduction and History* APTi Webinar Series October–November 2013 www.academia.edu
- Peter Geyer (2014) *C.G. Jung's psychological types, the MBTI, and ideas of social adjustment* AusAPT Meeting Adelaide SA 20 March www.academia.edu
- Peter Geyer (2014) *Psychological Types and Traits: Some Fundamentals* Bulletin of Psychological Type 37.2
- Peter Geyer (2017) *C.G. Jung in his own words: on himself, his work and his world* AusAPT Conf. Sydney 22 October
- Peter Geyer (2018) *Building a Type Library: C.G. Jung and Psychological Types* (submitted for publication)
- Kent Greenfield (2012) *The Myth of Choice: Personal Responsibility in a World of Limits* Biteback
- Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jean M. Kummerow (2018) *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Global Step I: Interpretive Report for Organizations* The Myers-Briggs Company
- C.G. Jung (1921/1923) *Psychological Types or the Psychology of Individuation* Trans. H.G. Baynes Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co
- C.G. Jung (1921/1971) *Psychological Types* Trans R.F.C. Hull CW6 Princeton
- C.G. Jung: (1972/1975) *Letters* Vol 1:1906-1950 Vol 2: 1951-1961 Princeton
- C.G. Jung (1984) *The Development of Personality* CW17 Princeton
- Gordon Lawrence (2007) *The Validity of Jung's Theory: Are Types More than Just Bundles of Traits?* Bulletin of Psychological Type Vol. 30 No 1 pp36-38
- Gordon Lawrence (2010) *Refining the Language of Type Descriptions* Journal of Psychological Type Vol 70: Issue 12 December
- Isabel Briggs Myers (und.) *Construction of the Type Indicator; Forms Zero to F* Unpublished
- Isabel Briggs Myers (und.) *Validation of the Four Dichotomies Which Underlie Function-Type by the Briggs-Myers Type Indicator* Unpublished
- Isabel Briggs Myers (vs) *Audiotapes and Transcripts: IBM 11.7.72; IBM Construction; IBM History 6.10.72 South Carolina; IBM 4/77 (CAPT; Private Collection)*
- Isabel Briggs Myers (1945) *Type as the Index To Personality* Privately Published
- Isabel Briggs Myers (1970) *Introduction to Type* First Edition Privately Published
- Naomi L. Quenk and Jean M. Kummerow (2018) *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Global Step II: Profile; Interpretive Report* The Myers-Briggs Company
- Graham Richards (2010) *Putting Psychology in its Place: Critical Historical Perspectives* Third Edition Routledge
- Roy Schafer (1978) *A New Language for Psychoanalysis* Yale
- Brent D. Slife, Kari A. O'Grady and Russell D. Kotsis (eds) (2017) *The Hidden Worldviews of Psychology's Theory, Research, and Practice* Routledge
- The Myers-Briggs Company (2018) *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Global Step I: Profile (3p; 6p); Interpretive Report; Personal Impact Report.*
- Malcolm R. Westcott (1968) *Toward a Contemporary Psychology of Intuition: A Historical, Theoretical and Empirical Inquiry* Holt Rinehart and Winston