

Helpful categorisation or limiting label?

Caitlin Cherry with the latest in our series for budding writers (see www.bps.org.uk/newvoices for more information)

ESFJ, INTP? Maybe ISJF? When this string of letters catches your eye you may feel the thrill of familiarity or you may remain bemused. 'Like MMR?', one of my friends enquired. 'No', I replied, 'I'll explain'.

Some months ago my brother came home with more than a little to say. Surprising for a 14-year-old! His idle conversation lingered in the air whilst my family gave assuring nods and half answers. However, the thing that struck me was his absolute enchantment with the 'MBTI' test, which he had been introduced to at school. My parents revealed that they had taken it through work and that it had enhanced their understanding of themselves and others. This spurred me on to try the online version. I gave the required 'yes' or 'no' responses to the 72 questions and awaited my result.

The test is a self-report questionnaire; the participant must choose their answer as truthfully (to themselves) as possible. The questions are not explicit; they ask how you deal with certain situations. The responses are analysed as to whether you are extraverted/introverted (E/I), if you use sensing/intuition (S/N) to gather information, whether you instinctively feel/think (F/T) your way to a decision, or if you like to live your life in a decisive or spontaneous way, that is you judge/perceive (J/P). The combination, for example ESFJ, determines your innate behavioural tendencies or personality predispositions. There are a total of 16 combinations; they are not unique to you, but connect you to others who tend to behave in a similar way.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the world's most widely used personality questionnaires. The instrument was developed by Katharine Cook Briggs (1875-1968) and refined by her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers, after she saw similarities in Jung's *Psychological Types*. With the help of professors from

the Universities of California, Michigan and Florida, Isabel moulded the theories into a questionnaire; the 'Indicator' was created in 1942. Henry Chauncey, the head of the Educational Testing Service,



We defined, simplified and eroded our personalities down to four letters

published the first questionnaire in 1943, Consulting Psychologists Press (CPP, www.cpp.com) took this over in 1975. They currently make approximately £20 million from the two million people who take the test each year. Oxford Psychology Press distributes the test in 14 different languages and supports research into its validity. Isabel Myers and Dr Mary McCaulley founded the Centre for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT, www.capt.org) as a research laboratory and after Myers' death in 1980, McCaulley updated the MBTI Manual, with the second and last editions being published in 1985 and 1998 respectively.

Only certified experts are allowed to handle the questionnaire. The main distributors train people to administer it and give feedback. Indeed, the feedback is probably more useful than knowledge of the 'combination'. CPP offers two questionnaires, one with 93 items the

other with 144. After both, candidates are given a report to support their communication, stress management, decision making and team dynamics. My parents had both taken the licensed test at work and received feedback from trained counsellors. I engaged in an online test, a clone of the licensed questionnaires. These vary in size from 10-72 questions and offer no interpretation of the result.

So there it began; my quest for more information, about me and my 'result' as an unequivocal 'INFP'. I roamed the internet from the 'portrait page' to the 'MBTI boards', read up on other 'INFPs' thoughts and feelings and matched them to my own. It was as if I had been diagnosed with a rare, unfamiliar condition and I had to find out

everything about it as quickly as possible. To my shock, on reading the descriptions of an INFP, I appeared to meet its 'requirements'. Being 16, I faced the same issues of most at that age - I was a teenager! It is almost universally accepted among Western cultures that this stage of development is about 'finding yourself', and I felt for the first time that I had indeed found myself. I fitted into a category, into society. The sense of belonging was overwhelming.

My days were then spent convincing others to take the internet tests. Those who did, and who were of a similar age to me, were clearly captivated. We shared notes and matched experiences; many hours of valuable study time were consumed! We were engaged by our label, our status and the newfound understanding of our characters to the point where we defined, simplified and eroded our personalities down to four letters. We did not stop to consider that we may have been 'mislabelled', if this was really a 'fad' or whether the MBTI was a valid, reliable or predictive tool. Had I looked thoroughly at the evidence it would have revealed that the licensed test had a questionable scientific base and its use of bimodal, overlapping categories had limited its use in contemporary research (for discussions see tinyurl.com/pyh7r29 and tinyurl.com/ptc59s2).

In retrospect the most foolish thing I did was to try to force myself into 'the category'. I enjoyed the idea that I was an idealist, a dreamer, who used their heartfelt emotions and carefully considered principles to guide them, the person who would fight for a just cause. The P confirmed and justified my untidy room! As one of the rarer types I think I may have aspired to be an INFP because

it generated a sense of belonging to a small but elusive group, countering the loneliness a teenager can feel (only 3 per cent of the population have an INFP combination compared with other types with up to 15 per cent prevalence). However, there were aspects of the INFP personality that unsettled me. My portrait page stated that I couldn't deal with 'hard facts or logic'. I knew and had evidence that I could. I excelled in my science subjects at GCSE. I love science, for the very reason that it relies on facts, yet at the same time it evolves. However, I fought to stay in the category that I had been allocated to. The excuse 'I'm an INFP' often tumbled out of my mouth as I was explaining the change in my behaviour, interests and potential job choices.

Within weeks my parents sat me down to find out what was going on. I was reluctant to admit it, but after some reflection I realised that I had let myself fall under a spell that had stopped me enjoying the things that I usually relish. After studying the boards again, it became clear that others, outside my peer group, had also become attached to the MBTI. I banned every crumb of it from my computer. I made an effort to go out with my friends, something I had stopped doing due to my misinterpretation of the word 'introversion', which, much to my humiliation, had rendered me into a hermit-like state. I went for runs. I worked harder with facts. I had more fun and accepted myself more easily. I also reviewed the uncertified 'internet clones' of the test and recognised that they were particularly destructive.

So grew my sub-thought, why had I tried to change, so desperately, to fit in to the category? As humans we seek to understand others and importantly ourselves, to frame where we stand. This need is heightened by teenage insecurity and lack of experience. The understanding we seek often requires simplification as we struggle to grasp the complex and interrelated concepts of personality and neurophysiology. Whilst modern technology such as the MRI, PET and fMRI scans have helped us to understand autism and defined functional areas of the brain (e.g. frontal lobe for high order thinking), it has not yet revealed how personality is determined or developed. Perhaps it will always be a mystery? Hence, in our need to simplify we use labels and categories to organise and translate our thoughts, to help make the concepts clearer. This is just what the MBTI seeks to do.

However, whilst labels are used in most professions they have their

limitations. In fashion, labels define and categorise people into those who can and cannot afford them or are beautiful, talented or young enough to wear such brands. The media enhance this distinction; people buy the label not the clothes. 'Labelling' is also significant in wider society. The class system has, for many centuries, defined a person's position and worth, which in turn has restricted them from fulfilling their true potential. The four-letter MBTI combination that the 'internet clone tests' generate can also become a label – one that we wear like our clothes, except that it is more personal. Just like a prisoner's identity tag, this label can dehumanise us.

These online tests are not a valid or reliable representation of you as a human, or your or others' complex personalities or potential. The 'type' is not specific to you, it has limited relevance to you. It is just a label, an oversimplified, maybe not even accurate, explanation of how you prefer to perceive the world. So given these caveats, I would question whether there should be universal, open access to cloned questionnaires on the web, particularly for children and teenagers who, without appropriate guidance, could be vulnerable and misinterpret the MBTI findings.

Oversimplifying a concept to categorise, organise, understand and communicate it, is something we should only do if we respect the limitations it brings, as we may overlook important aspects of the issue – in this case our unique selves! It is in our nature to organise but we should refrain from attributing superfluous, superior or predictive value to some and not other categories. We should certainly not force ourselves into a single type. I am free to say that there are aspects of me that do not match 'INFP'. Sometimes I'm not kind and considerate, sometimes I do like moderated conflict and debate and I can deal with logic but, like many INFPs, I do love to write, have strong values and seek harmony.

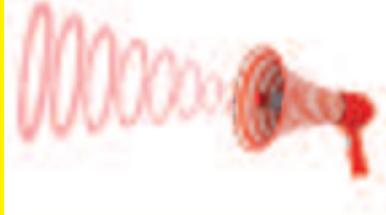
So, my message is this. Do not let any MBTI-style test you stumble across online define you. If you use them make sure you challenge and question the results to help you develop. Like all typologies they have limitations in the way that our personalities, actions and words do not.



Caitlin Cherry is a Junior Sixth student at Manchester High School for Girls
caitlincherry@gmail.com



The British
Psychological Society
The Psychologist



Calling all new voices

When someone is making waves in psychology in years to come, we want to be able to say they published their first piece in *The Psychologist*. Our 'new voices' section will give space to new talent and original perspectives.

We are looking for sole-authored pieces by those who have not had a full article published in *The Psychologist* before. The only other criteria will be that the articles should engage and inform our large and diverse audience, be written exclusively for *The Psychologist*, and be no more than 1800 words. The emphasis is on unearthing new writing talent, within and about psychology.

The successful authors will reach an audience of 50,000 psychologists in print, and many more online.

So get writing! Discuss ideas or submit your work to jon.sutton@bps.org.uk. And if you are one of our more senior readers, perhaps you know of someone who would be ideal for 'new voices': do let us know.