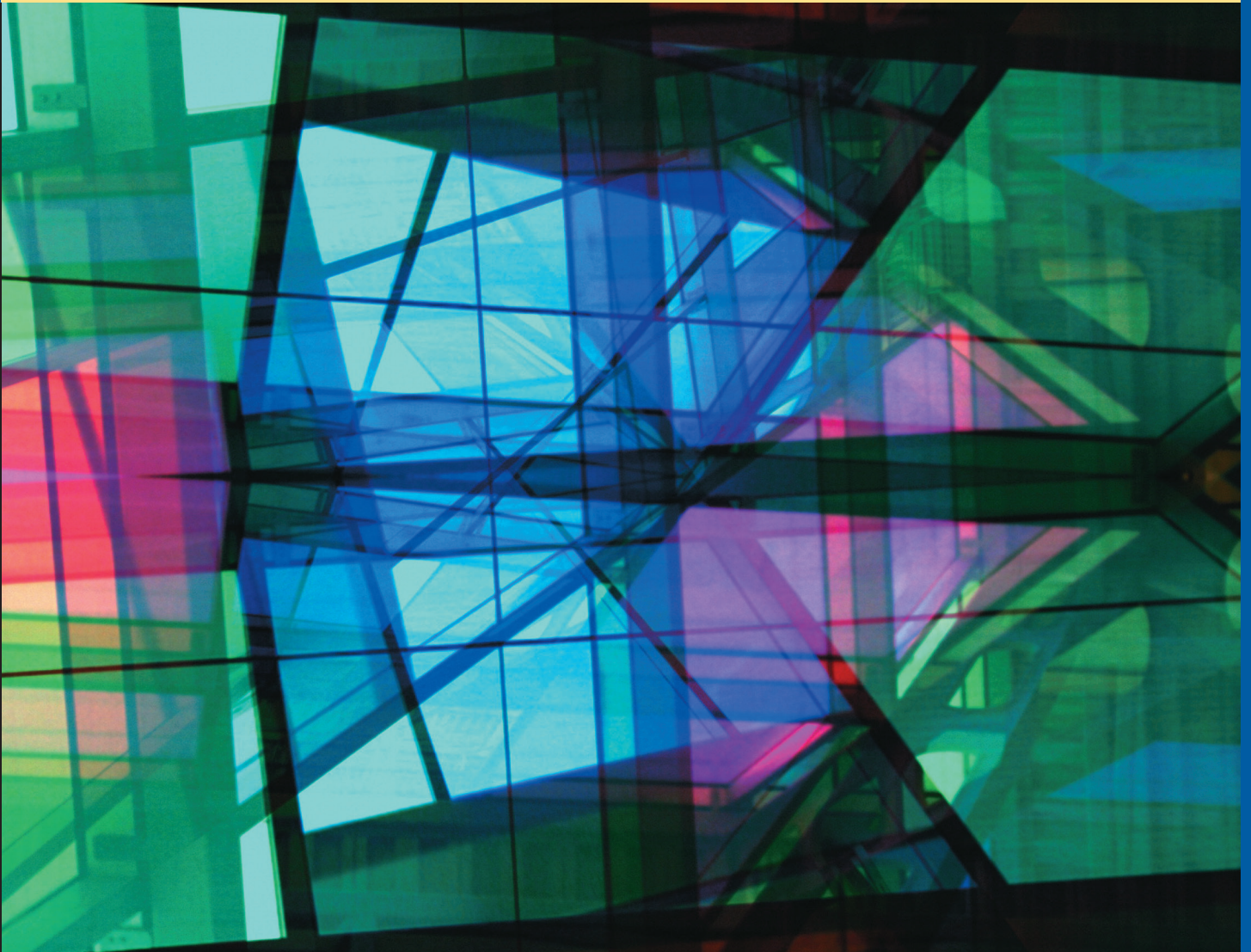


Finding the Fit

Helping Clients Clarify MBTI® Type

TYPE PRACTITIONER SERIES



SALLY CARR

Introduction

This booklet has been inspired by the experiences of newly qualified users of the MBTI®. Over and over again, when I ask where they would like more help, they respond:

“How can I help people who are unsure of their type preferences?”

I’m always pleased to hear the question, because it shows that the person has understood the importance of allowing clients to decide for themselves where they fit into the type framework. They recognise that reported type is only a hypothesis, and that the individual is the best judge of their type. But when people say things like...

“Well I do both, I can see myself in both – I can’t decide which is more like me.”

“When you described the preferences I thought I was a Sensing type, but I’ve come out as an N.”

“Last time I did the Indicator I came out as an INTJ – this time I’ve come out as an ENTP – I’m confused!”

“On the whole I’d say I’m more Extravert, but there are some situations when I’m definitely Introvert.”

“I used to be very much a Perceiving type, but now I’m more Judging.”

...many new practitioners feel they need more strategies up their sleeve!

A recent UK study investigated the proportion of people who decided that the type reported by the

MBTI “fitted” for them, after time for consideration. The results indicated that about 76% of people agreed with all four letters of their reported type. Of those who did not, most disagreed on only one letter, and this was most likely to occur when the preference had been reported with a low degree of clarity.

It is clear that the MBTI report provides an excellent starting point for somebody wishing to identify their best fit type. It is equally clear, however, that there will be a significant proportion of people who need time and help to clarify their type. Working with people who are in this situation calls for considerable sensitivity, and represents one of the most important skills a practitioner must acquire.

Type clarification is detective work. It is an art, and like all arts, it includes techniques, but cannot be fully taught. In the end, you will develop your own skills and style through practice. This guide can, however, offer you some suggested avenues which may be useful to explore.



Basic Assumptions

Before going into the strategies, it is worth reiterating some of the assumptions underlying the exploration of type preferences.

First, the theory assumes that there is such a thing as true type, and that this does not change throughout life. However, this is not something that we can observe directly. Nor is it directly assessed by the MBTI. We observe directly our tendencies and behaviour, and these are influenced by type preferences, but not determined by them.

Similarly, the questions on the MBTI ask for responses to simple items which provide clues to the preference, but do not define the preference. For example, it is more typical for an Extravert to “introduce others” than to “be introduced”, but there is nothing in the core meaning of Extraversion to say that this will necessarily be the case. Many other influences also affect our tendencies and behaviour. Type clarification is a sifting process, in which the practitioner tries to help the client to isolate their basic, enduring preferences from other influences on their behaviour.

As a very general statement, we may assume that people would behave in ways consistent with the dominant and auxiliary functions* of their true type if they could remove every “should”, “must” or “ought” from their mind. However, in practice, this is not a simple matter, and of course these “shoulds” are not necessarily conscious.

To complicate matters further, the way people express their type is expected to change and develop over time. Children and adolescents may be uncertain about their preferences, because these are not yet fully differentiated. On the other hand, as people move into mid life, there is a good probability that they will become more interested in using their tertiary and inferior functions.

Summary of Assumptions**

1. Each of us has a true type, which is assumed to be inborn and unchanging.
2. The way we respond and behave is influenced by our type preferences, and by our current and past environment.
3. In early years, we “discover” and exercise our most preferred functions, and are likely to show behaviour mainly consistent with exercising these preferences. Exceptions to this will occur if something in the environment impedes the expression of a person’s type, or if there are situational demands which require that a less-preferred style be adopted.
4. As we move through mid life we may become increasingly drawn to the positive exploration and use of our less preferred functions.
5. The type framework will be much more meaningful and valuable to people if they can uncover their true type than if they attempt to “fit themselves into” a different set of preferences.

**Note that, while many practitioners find that these assumptions are supported by experience, we cannot claim them to be fact. For this reason, we must always respect the client’s right to disagree with the assumptions and not accept the model.

*If you are in need of a “refresher” on the dynamics of type (the interplay between dominant, auxiliary, tertiary, and inferior functions), I recommend *Introduction to Type® Dynamics and Development* by Katharine Myers and Linda Kirby (1994).

Steps in Giving Feedback



hen giving feedback on the MBTI, practitioners are encouraged to follow a model in which the person first hears a description of the framework and makes an assessment of where they believe they fit, and then goes on to examine their MBTI results. Typical steps in the feedback process would be as follows:

- Remind the client of the purpose of the session and of confidentiality agreements.
- Describe briefly the background of the MBTI and how it can be useful for people.
- Explain the nature of “preference” – for example, by using the analogy of right and left handedness.
- Describe each of the four pairs of opposites, giving examples to illustrate these, and asking the client to self assess as you go along.
- Show the client how he or she has come out on the Indicator – their “Reported Type”.
- Show one or more whole type descriptions, for example from *Introduction to Type*® or *Introduction to Type*® in Organisations.

- Help the person to explore areas where they are uncertain about their type and, if possible, to establish a “best-fit” type – that is, the type they believe to be their true type.

- Begin to explore applications of type.

This guide offers strategies for the practitioner to follow at the point where a client has been given a full explanation of the type framework, and is trying to determine for him or herself a best fit type. Quite often, this is very straightforward. The client hears the preferences described, says “I know where I fit in”, and then agrees wholeheartedly with the description of the complete four-letter type thus chosen. However, in many cases, things do not go so smoothly.

The strategies in this booklet are for the less straight-forward cases, which represent at least half of the people to whom I give feedback. At first sight, this figure may seem at variance with the research results mentioned earlier, but those results concerned the proportion of people finally agreeing with their reported type. Many may have had doubts along the way!

Cautions

H

owever much one wishes to
help someone become clear about

their MBTI preferences, and however convinced the practitioner is of the value of this to the client, three things must always be borne in mind:

- Clients (and practitioners) should feel it is perfectly normal and reasonable to end a feedback session without reaching clarity about all, or indeed any, of the preferences. If the client remains interested in clarifying preferences then they may find it helpful to observe their everyday responses over a period of time, and possibly return for a follow up session to discuss their thoughts. The range of exploratory strategies discussed here would be just as applicable to later, follow-up sessions as to an initial feedback session.
- We cannot unequivocally say that the type framework will be useful and meaningful to everyone. It is true that its appeal seems to be very wide, and remarkably general across cultures and settings. Nevertheless, there will no doubt be people for whom it just doesn't "work", for one reason or another. A colleague of mine once put it nicely when she said "remember that people can live long, happy and fulfilled lives without knowing all or any of their MBTI letters!"
- As practitioners, we need to ensure that the exploration process is driven by the client's desire for clarity rather than our own. Some years ago I received a reminder of this fact when feeding back to a reported ESTJ who had some questions about the accuracy of the J. I was most interested in exploring this, and began asking questions about possible work pressures, etc. After a short while, my client was looking impatient, and he said, with

admirable directness: "Look, I really don't care that much whether I'm a J or a P – can't we go on to something else!"

To those of us who have found great value in the MBTI, it may seem surprising that someone could "not care" about understanding their preferences, but whatever the potential value of knowing their true type, some clients may not be at a point where they are ready or willing to look at this question in depth. Unless their interest has been engaged in this process, they will be reluctant partners in the search, and the search is not likely to be fruitful. I was grateful to this client for his openness, and wondered whether any previous clients might have been quietly and politely put off by a zeal they did not share.

Here are a few other cautions:

Avoid Biasing Your Descriptions Toward the Type Reported by the Client

If you know the person's reported type before you begin feedback, there can be a seductive temptation to bias your descriptions to make the reported type sound more attractive. Doing so increases the likelihood of quick agreement between reported and self assessed type. Here's a real, not very subtle, example, taken from a new MBTI user practising feedback in a workshop: in front of him was the person's MBTI report, which had come out N. In describing S/N he asked "Do you prefer to use your imagination, or do you find it interesting to look at long lists of data?" Not surprisingly, the person agreed that she preferred to use her imagination!

Resist this temptation firmly. The short term advantage of apparent ease of establishing a best fit type is quite illusory. The individual will get little real benefit if they have an inadequate opportunity to explore the preferences and make a real choice as to where they fit. In addition, some of the richest, most valuable discussions about an individual's type take place when they are *not* immediately clear. Some practitioners have told us that to avoid this problem they ask the client to self assess before they (the practitioner) have scored the MBTI.

Try Not to Bias Your Descriptions Toward Your Own Type

The danger of this will be well-known to all qualified practitioners, so this is just a reminder of the importance of demonstrating equal value for the preferences in your language, your examples and your response to questions. An alternative danger to own type bias is over-compensation – developing such awe and respect for your opposite that you overplay its virtues to the detriment of your own type. There is no simple cure for this problem; however, the best regime is to notice and build up excellent positive, enhancing examples and anecdotes, and to test these on friends and colleagues of the same and opposite type. Most importantly, do not assume that your own personal experiences of type are typical; check with others.

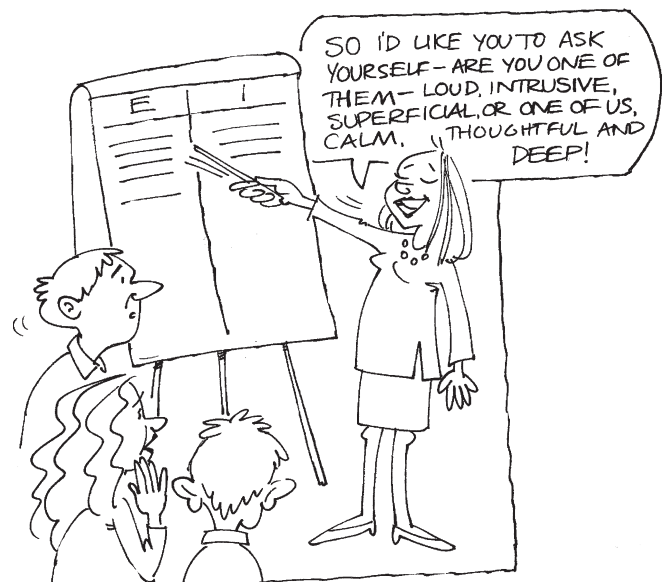
Avoid Using Single “Deciding” Examples

S/N: “How do you cook?”

T/F: “Would you tell the truth or would you be tactful?”

When asked about strategies for clarification of type, less experienced MBTI users often suggest offering example situations and getting the client to choose what they would do. The danger of this is that single “pet” examples may be brought out and used as if they provide the definitive answer. I have heard it suggested that, if someone is struggling with an S/N uncertainty, one should ask the person how they cook. “S’s will follow a recipe and weigh out the ingredients precisely. N’s will just make it up as they go along.”

This is really equivalent to asking a single MBTI question, and assuming that the result will be 100% indicative of type. If it were possible to find individual examples that indicated type with complete consistency, we wouldn’t need the MBTI – just four questions (one for each of the pairs of preferences). Isabel Myers tested hundreds of questions and found *none* that could be used in this way. Example situations can be very useful as vehicles for discussion, and it is certainly a good idea to develop a repertoire of anecdotes and examples relevant to your setting. However, responses to one example should not be relied upon as a criterion for someone’s preference.



Matthew – ENFJ or ENTJ?

Matthew completed the MBTI as part of an individual development programme. During his feedback session he readily identified with preferences for E, N and J but felt torn about T/F. As usual, I first asked him:

“What do you see in yourself that makes you say you could be either?”

Matthew replied:

“I know that I’m very logical in the way I make decisions, and I can certainly make tough decisions, but I do care very much about people, and I try to think about what matters to them.”

This reply reveals two possible sources of confusion. Firstly, I might inadvertently have given the impression that people preferring Thinking are uncaring. Secondly, Matthew might not have fully understood the notion of preference as something which is not absolute, but a matter of ease, naturalness and order. My response was as follows:

“Perhaps I gave you the impression that only F’s care about people. If I did, that’s quite wrong. T and F are decision-making processes, and are concerned with what tends to come first and most naturally as criteria in decisions. T’s tend first and most naturally to consider decisions from the outside, and to apply logic to the objective situation. It may take a more deliberate effort for them to put themselves inside a situation and consider it from the standpoint of impact on people. The reverse is true for F’s; they will more naturally evaluate situations in terms of the impact on those involved, and may find it harder to ‘step out’ and consider the situation from the standpoint of objective logic. Whichever is your preference, you are likely to make at least some use of both processes, but the preference tends to show itself in which of these ‘just seems to happen’ and which needs to be more deliberately brought into the picture.”

Note that this clarification was intended to be neutral as to the resolution of the individual’s uncertainty. Although the initial response indicated some misunderstanding of the implications of having a T preference, it did not mean that Matthew was a T. Further discussion was needed in order to move forward. On hearing this explanation, Matthew went on to say:

“I do think about impact on people, but you see, with all the problems of the UK economy at the moment, there’s little I can do about this. We don’t have the power to give promotions, or increase people’s salaries, so I feel a bit helpless.”

I chose to take the opportunity to feed back Matthew’s behaviour. As mentioned before, this can be a very useful strategy. Let me say again, though, since it is so vital, that the client must remain free to say, firstly, whether the interpretation of the behaviour was accurate and, secondly, whether the behaviour displayed was typical of them and representative of their natural self.

Here’s how I responded to Matthew:

“That’s interesting. What you just described sounds to me like an example of T reasoning because, while you are clearly concerned with people’s welfare, you appear to be looking at the situation from the outside, and thinking of it in objective terms – what you can and can’t do for them in terms of money or promotion. Using Feeling in that situation would involve putting yourself in their position, and asking: ‘What would have an impact on them?’; ‘What really matters to them?’; ‘What would I really care about if I were in their shoes?’ It might be that you would come to the same conclusion – that the only things that matter are money or promotion. Or you might conclude that, despite your inability to alter these objective factors, there are still things you can do.”

TRY IT ON AND SEE HOW IT FITS!



At this, a look of comprehension spread across his face. It was a look which betrayed a deeper comprehension than the mere understanding of my words.

“Ah,” he said, “I think perhaps I now understand what my wife’s been trying to tell me for a long time.”

In this case, Matthew recognised the behaviour he had just displayed in the session as typical of himself in many situations, and went on to describe, with some excitement, anecdotes from his past which he had found puzzling, and which now fell into place. He ended the session comfortable with a best fit of ENTJ.

Sally – ESTP or ENTP?

In my own case, when I first completed the MBTI, I reported ENTP, and it seemed a reasonable enough fit. However, it never seemed to do anything for me or help me to understand my reactions.

I had particular doubts as to where I fitted on the S/N index. I felt that I was able to handle complex, theoretical subjects, and that I enjoyed the challenge of dealing with abstract matters. On the other hand, I recognised many aspects of S – seeing myself as observant of everyday detail, having a good memory for facts, and finding it easy and relaxing to focus

on immediate practical realities. After some time of struggling with this question on my own, a fellow trainer suggested we talk the issue through properly. I found the session so helpful that it provided a good part of the motivation to write this booklet.

My colleague, Catherine, asked whether I felt that I “should” be S or N. I didn’t hesitate.

“I really feel I should be N – that to be S would be inferior. Anybody can learn facts – there’s nothing very clever about that. It’s figuring out what the facts mean that’s difficult.”

Catherine’s questioning helped me to identify a variety of sources for my feeling that “N was better”. One of these was my family of origin, but I had also experienced occupational group pressure, since my subject (psychology) typically attracts a very high proportion of Intuitive types. I had worked very hard to grasp complex theories, and had become quite adept at doing this. In retrospect, I realised that the way I would do this was by taking the concepts and figuring out what they would mean in specific examples. If I could not do this, I would find the concepts frustrating and meaningless. I developed a particular talent for picking out the flaws in an argument, when this was subjected to rigorous analysis.

A final source of confusion was the portrayal, in some of the type literature, of S types as non-intellectual. Academic success had come relatively

easily to me, and I had never had difficulty in learning from written materials.

As we talked, I realised that I was getting tired of working with concepts, and I no longer wanted to expend the energy necessary to work continuously at this level. I was losing patience with theoretical approaches and becoming much more interested in seeing things work in practice. Fortunately, rather by chance my work had recently taken a turn which was much more practical and applied in nature.

During our discussion, I realised that I had often felt unconfident about who I was meant to be, and that I had always looked for admired figures as role models. I had never fully valued my S abilities, tending to feel that if something came easily, it couldn't be worth very much. For example, for a time I took up painting as a hobby, and found I was able to produce quite attractive, realistic representations of still life arrangements. I gave it up, however, saying that the work "lacked imagination" and wasn't worth doing. At university, I focused so much on grasping theory that for a while I was in danger of not learning enough facts. However, a helpful tutor suggested that it was

important for me to include facts in my essays, and to learn some facts for the purpose of passing exams. I then set myself to the task of absorbing copious amounts of information in a short period of time, and found it fairly easy and quite enjoyable.

I concluded that I wanted to "try out" ESTP. This decision was associated with an immediate rush of excitement and energy, as seems to be characteristic of people discovering their true preferences. I felt a sense of release and new freedom to enjoy aspects of myself which I had tended to undervalue. It was not that I now devalued the N skills I had worked so hard to develop, but I now felt entitled to stop forcing myself to use N all the time. After a week of experimenting with "being an S", I was confident that this was, indeed, my true type.

By contrast, when I later began to wonder whether T or F might fit me better, I tried out living as an ESFP for a week. That one week was quite enough to convince me that, much as I valued F, it was not my true preference.