How Accurate Are Personality Tests?

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If you’re looking for insight into the true you, there’s a buffet of personality questionnaires available. Some are silly—like the internet quiz that tells everyone who takes it that they are procrastinators at the core. Other questionnaires, developed and sold as tools to help people hire the right candidate or find love, take themselves more seriously.

The trouble is, if you ask the experts, most of these might not be worth the money. “You should be skeptical,” says Simine Vazire, a personality researcher at the University of California, Davis. “Until we test them scientifically we can’t tell the difference between that and pseudoscience like astrology.”

One famous example of a popular but dubious commercial personality test is the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator. This questionnaire divides people into 16 different “types” and, often, the assessment will suggest certain career or romantic pairings. It costs $15 to $40 for an individual, but psychologists say the questionnaire is one of the worst personality tests in existence for a wide range of reasons. It is unreliable because a person’s type may change from day to day. It gives false information (“bogus stuff,” one researcher puts it). The questions are confusing and poorly worded. Vazire sums it up as “shockingly bad.”

Personality questionnaires began evolving about a century ago, says Jim Butcher, an emeritus psychologist at the University of Minnesota. “They started asking questions about an individual’s thinking and behavior during World War I,” he says. “These were to study personality problems and mental health problems.” And importantly, he adds, the U.S. military wanted the questionnaires to help weed out soldiers who weren’t fit to fly military aircraft.