

# Skeptical 'Deep Dive' on the Myers-Briggs Test

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Corporations, universities, and individuals have tried to find some magic formula to understand personalities and what characteristics and skills someone brings to the table. Over the years and across the globe, people have used handwriting analysis, phrenology—reading the bumps on the head—and even Ivy League diplomas to ascertain if someone has leadership potential or is an ideal team player. Perhaps the best known personality test is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. This episode takes a deep dive into the skeptical side of this topic with APS Fellow [Dan McAdams](#), a professor of psychology at Northwestern University.

**Unedited transcript:**

**[00:00:07.210] – Charles Blue, APS**

Corporations, universities, and individuals have tried to find some magic formula to understand personalities and what characteristics and skills someone brings to the table. Over the years and across the globe, people have used handwriting analysis, phrenology that's reading the bumps on the head, and even Ivy League diplomas to ascertain if someone has leadership potential or is an ideal team player. Perhaps the best known personality test is the Myers Briggs Test, which is supposed to define your personality type. There's even a Myers Briggs Foundation that publishes its own journal. But there has been some thoughtful criticism about the Myers Briggs Test, and if it or any questionnaire can truly

reveal insights about our personalities. I'm Charles Blue with the association for Psychological Science, and this is a special deep dive into the skeptical side of under the Cortex to help us understand what Myers Briggs does and does not tell us. I have with me Dan McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University. Welcome to under the cortex.

**[00:01:16.050] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

It's great to be here. Thank you.

**[00:01:18.390] – Charles Blue, APS**

Over the years, I've had to take the Myers Briggs test, but for our listeners, could you explain a little bit about what this is and where the heck it came from?

**[00:01:27.560] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

Well, where it came from is maybe the most interesting. It's a mother daughter duo. Catherine Briggs in the late 19th century was raising her daughter Isabel and had all these really interesting ideas about human potential and how everybody is really unique. And she began a column in Lady's Home Journal describing her interactions with her daughter. And eventually her daughter went off to college, and Catherine discovered the writings of Carl Jung, a great psychoanalytic theorist. And he wrote a book Jung did in 1921 called Psychological Types, and it became Catherine Briggs's Bible. And in that book, she learned of a number of particular personality types that Jung posited. He kind of developed these ideas, and she and then later, with her daughter Isabel Meyer, put together a series of questionnaire items. And over a long period of time, these items became part of what is now called the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. So that's where it came from, and it's supposed to slot you in to one of 16 basic personality types. And people love this instrument. They like to know what their type is.

**[00:02:46.870] – Charles Blue, APS**

It does seem like almost a fun party game. And we've made it at past places. I've worked sort of an afternoon out of doing it, and then we were given our personality type and then went merrily on our way to actually get work done. But what does this actually try to tell us? Does it give anyone any skills or ability or insights or is it more just, okay, I fall into this category like I'm a cancer or capricorn and not supposed to have any bearing, really, beyond categorizing us.

**[00:03:18.800] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

Well, I'm glad you brought up the horoscope, because it is a little bit like that. But let me put a caveat in here. There are well validated self report questionnaires that measure personality traits and so forth. There's a whole science of this, going back to the 1930s and so on. Isabel and Catherine were outside of that tradition. They were not interested in the criteria for scientific inquiry in personality science. And so it puts you into a type. And actually, in principle, there's nothing wrong with that. It's just that these particular types, there's no really evidence that they are valid in the sense that if you are this particular type, it will predict your behavior. There's really kind of like two big problems. The first is the idea of a type in general. So here's one of the dimensions, the only valid dimension really in the Myers Briggs, it's called extroversion introversion. It turns out that's a real trait in personality psychology. And there

are 70 years of research showing that people who are high and extroversion are indeed very different from people who are lower on extroversion, or that is more an introversion. It's a continuum.

**[00:04:37.390] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

Okay? So Catherine and Isabelle, they imagined it instead as a type. There's two kinds of people here. There's introverts and there's extroverts, and they are categorically different. And it's kind of like saying there are two types of people in the world. There are short people and there are tall people. And you say, well, how about we just measure them? Like, this guy's six foot two, oh, he's a tall. This person over here is five foot nine. Oh, he's a short. Well, it's much more precise to say I'm six foot three or five foot eight or whatever, than to say, oh, I'm one of the shorts, right? That being a full type by itself. So the Myers Briggs slots people into tall versus short. That is extroverts versus introverts. But if you look at the continuum on it, it's just like height. When it comes to the Myers Briggs introversion extroversion scale, most of us are sort of in the middle of the scale. And yet to kind of slice it right down the middle and say, oh, you're 49th percentile, therefore you're an introvert, you're 51st percentile, you're an extrovert. It's really like saying people who are five foot nine, they're the shorts, and people who are five foot ten, they're the tall.

**[00:05:52.290] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

And the five foot tens are just like the seven foot two s, and the five foot nines are just like the 4.8. I mean, it's that imprecise.

**[00:06:01.930] – Charles Blue, APS**

Well, being five foot seven myself, hearing that someone five foot nine is short, makes me feel good that I'm sort of lumped in that category. But I do recall taking the test, and it was so hard for me to determine for myself, well, if I'm in this circumstance, yes, I like to get out in front and be very interactive with people. And other times I'm at a party and I just really don't enjoy talking to people. So it seems almost again impossible to put myself into that category. Is this really a problem with self reporting or is it just that the fact that it's a duality and we can't shoehorn ourselves into it.

**[00:06:41.840] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

It's more the duality issue. The problem you're sort of hinting at here is the problem of traits in general. So let's just take a regular trait scale. One of the many that are very well validated. There's something called the Big Five Trait Inventory and it gives you a score on five basic traits. One of those being extroversion introversion. And let's say you're like a 95th percentile. Like you're way over there on the extroverted end. You tend to be in general an outgoing, happy, energetic, abulliant, socially dominant person overall. And other people go, yeah, that's you man. You're like that you're kind of like on that end. But of course not every moment in your life you wake up on a Sunday morning, you're not feeling so good. Something bad happened the day before. You don't want to go out there and mix it up with people. You're going to stay home and read a book or watch TV or sleep or whatever. So nobody is extroverted every moment, even if they score at the top of the heap. And similarly, even people who are way on the other end in terms of introversion occasionally want to go to parties and have fun and mix it up.

**[00:07:49.620] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

It's a general style of interacting. So there's nothing really wrong in principle with measuring dispositional, personality traits and placing people on the continuum. It is instead with respect to extroversion introversion, splitting it right down the middle and making it either or. Let me say another thing about the problem. The other second problem with the scale Myers Briggs. And that is first of all, there's the types, not good. Second, there's the other dimensions. The Myers Briggs has four dimensions and you cross them and you get 16 types. I talked about the only one of the dimensions that has any reasonable psychological reality at all and that's extroversion introversion. But there's three others. One's called thinking, feeling, sensing, intuiting and perceiving judging. So take thinking feeling. The idea here is some people are thinkers. They think a lot and some people are feelers. They have a lot of emotion and that's two different kind of people. Well there is no evidence for that ever, anywhere. It doesn't matter what your score is on that dimension. That truly is like a horoscope there. It's completely random. People don't sort out that way. And so when they've done research and by the way, the people who push the Myers Briggs don't do research.

**[00:09:12.000] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

But when scientists do research with the Myers Briggs and they look at, well this guy, he's high on thinking and this one over here is low more on feeling end. They don't turn out to be different from each other on anything beyond their test scores. So these other three dimensions have no psychological reality. They're just like made up out of the blue. They came out of Carl Jung's head and okay, he was a brilliant man, but he was wrong about those particular dimensions.

**[00:09:41.270] – Charles Blue, APS**

And it's kind of hard to separate being right and wrong from someone who has done such brilliant work. But that raises a really curious question and how did this become almost a cornerstone of the hiring process in many organizations and so tied into whether or not you will be a success? What takes this from all the other personality tests and suddenly vaults it into the must do idea for corporate America in certain organizations?

**[00:10:10.540] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

It's incredible, isn't it? So Isabel Myers worked with the Educational Testing Service for a while and I guess this would have been in the try to give the test some validity. And she kept getting pushback from the scientists there who wanted her to try to improve it and establish norms and so forth. So finally she said, forget this, I'm not doing it anymore. And she took it to another publisher called Consulting Psychologist Press and they were much more entrepreneurial and they started to market it in the 1970s to corporate America and so on. When she died, Isabel Myers died, the test was just starting to pick up steam. But in the decades or two that followed in the now, even up till today, it just boomed. It became such a big thing. Different companies, colleges use it, corporations use it and so on. They love it because they feel that they're doing something that's precise and scientific and they're able to like, well, it's really important to know if this leader is an extroversion feeling type as opposed to an introverted sense thinking type and so forth. Even though it has no validity, they like it.

**[00:11:25.420] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

And the people who take the test, they like it too. And this actually goes to another thing I haven't mentioned on the Myers Briggs, and that is all 16 types. They're all good. They're great. You can find something good in each one of them. There are no psychopaths in the Myers Briggs world. There are no mean, aggressive people. Everybody is happy here and positive and so well, who wouldn't want a personality type that validates you? It puts you in a group, it says, oh my God, there's other people like me out there on this type. You got support groups out there for it. You got people who are just like you. People love to be categorized. So this just took off and it's actually a great example of how hype and public desire ultimately trump science hugely. Myers Briggs is the most used personality test in the world. If you know nothing about personality psychology, if you know just one thing about personality psychology, you might go, oh, the Myers Briggs, like a lot of people know it. It's a disgrace to the field of personality psychology that that's the one thing that many people know.

**[00:12:39.170] – Charles Blue, APS**

You talked about how people take it and they sort of put themselves into all these good categories. And we talked previously a little bit about horoscopes. There was an example that James Randy did to a group of high school students, and he had all of them provide their birth dates ahead of time. And he created what they thought were individual horoscopes for each person, handed them out, asked them all to raise their hand if they thought it was 90% or 75%. And everyone really felt like it was well tuned to them. They then picked it up, handed it to the person behind them, and then brought it to the front. And they all realized everyone there was reading the exact same horoscope. But it applied to them because I think it made them feel good. How much of this is really wanting to feel good about yourself? So you see yourself in again all these positive characteristics.

**[00:13:31.490] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

Yeah, I think it's two things. It's wanting to feel good about yourself, which we all, of course, want. It's a basic human phenomenon. And so you get a portrait that is positive, that suggests you have certain skills and qualities that are valued. And then the second part of it is being part of a group. And I think that's almost as I mean, that might be just as big a deal. Like, there are other people like me out here. People want to be sort of unique, but not totally. So yeah, people I think they like to feel good about themselves. That's not a profound insight. And they like to feel part of group. That's like Social Psychology 101 right there. And the Myers Briggs ingeniously, I guess, fulfills both of those needs.

**[00:14:18.530] – Charles Blue, APS**

So we do have some problems with it, clearly. But when did the chinks first appear in this armor? Was it when it was first proposed? Were there people out there who were researchers saying, no, this is false? Or was it after it started to take on more of a mainstream life that people turned their attention to it and decided, we need to start picking away at this and make people realize that the foundation just isn't there?

**[00:14:42.570] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

So early on, there were scientists who pushed back at the Educational Testing Service. One of them was Larry Stricker, who's a very well regarded scientist. But they were doing it in a friendly way. They were

know, we can work with you. Because Isabelle Myers had some interesting ideas. She had some good insights. And I think if she had worked with the scientific community to sort of redevelop these items and test them out and run research, had she done that, maybe the test would have developed in a very different way. But she didn't. Okay, but so then, all right, was really underground for a long time, and then it started to become the cat's meow and everybody's using it in industry and so forth. And then scientists began to push back and others as well. But it's tough to push back hard because there is so much positive regard for that test. I mean, I've been at cocktail parties and gotten into arguments with people about the test, and my wife has to just sort of restrain me because I get too worked up. But having said all this, I don't want very important points to get lost here.

**[00:15:45.950] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

And that is the Myers Briggs is an aberration in the scientific community. It may be the test that everybody knows, but there are very well validated tests that assess fundamental differences in personality. And those are good, and those are real. And there's a whole strong research tradition there. So I don't want to debunk the idea that people have dispositional personality traits that are really important. Extroversion introversion is a real thing, and it's maybe the most researched trait. We probably know more about extroversion introversion than we know about almost any other dispositional personality trait. Conscientiousness is a real thing. Agreeableness. There are these basic dimensions, and there is a lot of evidence for their predictive efficacy. And they predict important stuff like they predict divorce rates. They predict how long you live. They predict happiness. I mean, dispositional personality traits are real and they're strong. But the Myers Briggs, it's bogus. And it just pains me to say that because it is so closely associated with a field. I love personality psychology.

**[00:16:54.530] – Charles Blue, APS**

Well, if one of our listeners wanted to go and do a little more digging and find really the valid personality tests that are out there, what would be just the right direction to point them in?

**[00:17:05.690] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

Sure. So there's a lot of layers of personality, or at least three of them, I would say. But the fundamental layer, what people are most interested in is dispositional personality traits. These are general stylistic tendencies and behavior. And the consensus in the field of personality psychology is that at this level, at that basic level of traits, there's five or so fundamental traits. It's called the big five. And there are many different tests that assess them, many different, well validated tests. And by the way, you typically don't have to pay for them. It's not like you have to go to a seminar and learn how to do the Myers Briggs and pay the money. They're kind of out there in the public domain. There's one called the Big Five Inventory. I think it's maybe 20 or 40 items, very simple. And it gives a rough estimate of where you stand on these basic Big Five traits. By the way, the traits are extroversion introversion. That's one of them. That's real neuroticism, which means negative emotionality. People who are high on that suffer from a lot of anxiety and sadness and so forth. People lower are emotionally calm as a general tendency, of course.

**[00:18:19.380] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

Agreeableness which is friendliness, caring, altruism versus the other end, which is aggressive, mean spiritedness, openness to experience, high openness, being daring and intellectually adventurous and so forth. Low openness, being sort of prosaic. And did I mention conscientiousness? Being rule governed and self disciplined? So those are the basic ones. Extroversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. There are five of them. There are many different measure trait scales out there that assess these differences. They are valid, they predict stuff, but they don't give you that nice, neat type. And moreover, there's bad stuff, right? It's not good to be low in conscientiousness, right? People higher in conscientiousness, it turns out they live longer. It's a strong predictor. Being low in conscientiousness is a risk factor in life. It's like having high cholesterol, right? It doesn't mean you're going to die early. But I don't want high cholesterol. I'd rather have low cholesterol. To tell. Between you and me, I'd rather have high conscientiousness. Neuroticism predicts divorce and a lot of unhappiness agreeableness. Oh, my goodness. People high in agreeableness. You can trust them. They're caring. They're altruistic. If you want a life partner, in my mind, I want somebody high in agreeableness almost more than anything else.

**[00:19:40.970] – Dan McAdams, Northwestern University**

So these traits are real. They predict stuff, but they don't give you the simple feel good types.

**[00:19:49.610] – Charles Blue, APS**

Well, that's just disheartening. But it's good to face the reality of it all. Yes. I now have to go on the Internet and see where I sort of fall into those five personality traits, but I think I can pretty much guess where I fall now. So I'd like to thank you for joining me today. This has been Charles Blue with the association for Psychological Science, and I've been speaking with Dan McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University. Thank you for joining me on Under the Cortex

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