

Introduction to Personality Typing

As stated in the General Introduction, many personality models have been developed. The personality model/system presented in this Summary is the most well-known one in the world-at-large, generically called “Personality Typing”. Personality typing was first developed by Carl Jung in the early 1920’s. In its purest form, Jungian personality typing is arguably the most complex view of human nature ever described, and even today it is quite a task to attempt to understand Jung’s writings on personality (see the Resource Material section at the end of this Summary for references to Jung’s works).

Fortunately, in the 1950’s, Myers and Briggs resurrected Jungian personality typing, modified it somewhat by adding a fourth scale, simplified its description, and developed a psychometric called the MBTI, the “Myers-Briggs Type Indicator” for measuring their revised system of personality typing. The MBTI test and associated model has become so famous that today many people refer to personality typing as the “MBTI”, but in a rigorous sense this is not true; the MBTI is only one test instrument among several for determining personality types, though it is by far the most widely used. Hereafter, unless qualified, ‘personality typing’ refers to the personality model developed by Myers and Briggs, and adapted by others such as Keirsey and Bates, while the MBTI refers to their test.

In a somewhat oversimplified nutshell, personality typing as defined by Myers and Briggs, and more recently by Keirsey and Bates and others (I will not even attempt to explain Jung’s view of personality typing), essentially assumes that much of our personality can be defined by dividing it into four orthogonal (or independent) preference areas or scales: energizing, attending, deciding, and living (defined in detail below). Within each scale we have a preference for one of two opposites that define the scale (also described below). This makes for a total of 16 different combinations (2x2x2x2), each of which defines one particular and unique personality archetype.

Here’s where Jungian thought comes into play since particular combinations of preferences can have profound effects on overall personality by interacting in quite complex and dynamic ways, even though the preference scales themselves appear to be independent of one another in a practical sense. (Some minor correlation has sometimes been observed in the preference scales. From a practical viewpoint, however, the four scales can be considered orthogonal).

It is a curious and interesting observation that personality typing is not used nor studied much within the research/academic psychological and psychiatric communities, at least compared to other models/metrics, nor is it universally accepted. Some reasons for this are that, first of all, personality typing is automatically rejected by some schools of thought on purely philosophical grounds (e.g., cognitive psychology, social psychology); it would not matter to many of the proponents of these schools of thought whether or not personality

typing was shown to work in the real world! These people tend to focus more on scientific purity/orthodoxy than on “engineering” practicality. (Both of these “world views” of science and its application are equally valid and important.)

The second reason is more pragmatic: personality typing does not measure mental health since it assumes that all preferences and types are equally normal and healthy. Thus, many therapists who are treating mental illness do not usually find it useful for their purposes since they almost always need to understand the mental health of their patient and so they tend to use other psychometrics, such as the MMPI, which are specifically designed for this purpose. However, this doesn’t mean that practicing psychologists totally eschew personality typing - some do use this system for their patients/ clients, particularly for helping people to “find themselves” and for other non-mental health related purposes such as marriage and career counseling. In addition, counselors find that their clients can quickly understand this model, and the many lay-oriented books on the subject of personality typing are a great aid to understanding, thus augmenting the efforts of the counselor.

Outside of the psychological community, however, personality typing (with the MBTI being the most used metric) is by far the most widely-used model of human personality. It is used extensively in career counseling and development, business and education. Its penetration into these areas stems partly from the fact cited above that it does not touch upon the tricky aspect of mental health, which is better dealt with by trained counseling psychologists and psychiatrists.

Personality typing also assumes that all types, preferences, and temperaments are equally valid and good, which fosters an appreciation rather than a mistrust of diversity. This, combined with its “intuitive” credibility, makes personality typing very popular.

For those who take a more scientific approach to personality, let me make four final comments (and if you quickly get bored by the following deeper discussion you can skip to the next section).

First of all, many researchers in personality typing believe that other independent scales could be added to the four to more accurately model human personality, and they are probably correct. However, this is an area that has not been well researched. To many, the four Myers-Briggs scales appear to be adequate for most practical purposes.

The second comment concerns the scientific validity of personality typing and its associated

metrics, which is of great interest to scientific psychologists and others who generally take a rigorous scientific approach to matters (and personality typing can identify those people!). Though there is no universal agreement, partly for the reasons cited above, it is my belief that over 30 years of data gathering has essentially confirmed the usefulness and accuracy of personality typing. For further discussion about its reliability, validity, and overall quality, which to psychometric specialists have very specific meanings, consult the review article by DeVito in the 9th Mental Measurements Yearbook (MMY) as referenced in the Resource Materials section of this Summary. Overall, this review article is quite comprehensive and objective, showing both the strengths and weaknesses of personality typing and its most often used metric, the MBTI. It essentially supports the viewpoint that personality typing is useful and accurate.

The third comment deals with how we are to view the four preference scales. Some view them as strictly dichotomous (some relax that a bit and assume a third choice, no preference, is equally valid). Others view the scales as continuous scales, which can be measured by the appropriate metric. This Summary, by default, takes the pure dichotomous approach, but the continuous approach has some interesting possibilities in fine tuning the model. The continuous scales approach, however, makes the interpretation much more complex, putting it out of the reach of the average lay person to quickly comprehend. It is also unclear whether an accurate measurement along the continuous scale is even possible, since it is highly dependent on the choice, number, and quality of the questions used in the measuring metric - no metric can possibly cover all the life situations that a person could experience.

The fourth comment concerns whether personality types are genetically determined, or develop during childhood and adolescence from cultural and family influences (better known as the "Nature" vs. "Nurture" debate). This is a very controversial area, which has become quite politicized because of the obvious social/political ramifications with accepting either extreme. The general consensus seems to be that personality type is determined by both in a fairly complex way, though which one dominates has not been established.

To complicate matters even further, there are theories as well as observations that personality type can change or shift as a person ages. Some view this shift as a natural progression towards the "true" or "innate" personality, due in part to the stripping away of the personality masks that many put on in early life in response to strongly incompatible type-influences, such as from family and the surrounding culture. Others, who believe that "Nurture" plays the dominant role in human personality, view the personality type change as more of a random process due to the integral effect of outside influences. Further discussion on the "Nature" vs.

"Nurture" debate is beyond the scope of this Summary.

I personally take the view that human personality is at least 50% genetic - this is mentioned so the reader is aware of my bias in the event I elsewhere make or imply such a viewpoint in this Summary. There are many personality type experts/proponents who do not share my views in this regard. Personality typing is just as valid for the "Nurture" school of thought - it just has different interpretations and ramifications.