

Myers-Briggs Objections Answered

For decades people have been claiming that the Myer-Briggs personality evaluator tool is so deeply flawed that it should never be used. These objections fall into two categories: it is unsupported by psychological research, and it is misused.

I am not a trained psychologist, so I have no ability to critique or defend MB for its psychological basis. I do not use it because research supports it. I use it because it is a tool that works very well in helping people understand each other. My relationship to MB is similar to your relationship to computers. Most people have no idea what goes on inside that case. You just turn it on and use it. It either works or it doesn't, and that is all you need to know. You don't need to know the clock speed of the CPU and how it was tested, etc. Used correctly, MB is excellent at facilitating discussion about matters which typically fracture relationships. It works, and that is all I need to know.

You can find a lot of articles written by professionals in psychology and related fields who are mighty upset that people use a tool which has not passed their scrutiny. It's hard not to see some self-serving motives in this. MB claims to be based on the personality theory of Carl Jung. How much this is true, how accurate this is, and how much it matters I do not know. And of course many psychologists strenuously object to Carl Jung's theory itself. Psychology is a field in which there seems to be no consensus (says the geneticist!). But we are not psychologists and we are not researchers. We are people doing ministry. We need a tool that works, however it is constructed.

It might sound like I am against academic scholarship. Far from it! But the academy has its place and the pulpit has different place. It is sad and embarrassing when a preacher proclaims some scientific theory which he obviously fails to understand. It is similarly sad when academics decry a ministry practice which they don't understand. The sermons of great preachers are not necessarily academically rigorous. That's fine – good, actually. Sermons should communicate easily to ordinary people. It doesn't matter if the academics are unimpressed. The preaching of the likes of John Stone and Rod Mays would receive the same treatment at the hands of the academics as the MB tool receives. But their preaching works!

The second set of objections deals with the misuse of personality tools, MB in particular. The short answer is that we can profit from these tools if we use them correctly, and that misuse by some should not discourage others from using them profitably. This is really a fundamentalist argument – the same one used against alcohol. "Since alcohol ruins lives, it should be banned." No doubt, alcohol ruins some lives. But that does not mean it will ruin everyone's life. It is possible to drink alcoholic drinks properly.

One problem that particularly vexes some is the possibility of putting people into boxes. Well, that is a problem, but you don't need a personality tool to do it. We can label people just fine without a personality tool to help us. There is a large gap between a healthy discussion of difference and an unhealthy pigeon-holing. People are different, and that makes us uncomfortable. We all naturally see the world a certain way and we instinctively think that is the "right," "normal" way to see the world and that there is something wrong with people who don't think as we do. We impulsively judge others by our own standards. A personality tool can help us to see that some differences are natural, and to understand those people better. It is OK if others see the world differently than I do! But beyond personality there are real moral differences, and these are not OK. It is important

to be able to distinguish between personality differences and moral differences – and most of us do this poorly.

It is unhealthy and wrong to use personality tools as a basis for hiring or promotion. Someone with a personality that tends to be weak in counseling may surprise us and be a great counselor. This is an example of a misuse by putting people into boxes. But note this: people constantly hire on the basis of personality without the assistance of personality tools. They don't even know they are doing it. They say they are looking for shared vision and team players, but in reality they are looking for people who are much like themselves. This creates homogenous churches and ministries, which soon leads to stagnation. However, a personality tool can alert us to our natural shortcomings and help us to resist them.

Myers-Briggs is a tool to assist us toward understanding each other better. If the questionnaire labels you a certain way and you feel that does not describe you, the exercise is not a failure. The ensuing discussion will help us understand each other better. *The goal is not a MB label – it is a healthy discussion leading to better understanding.* MB is merely a tool to facilitate discussion. One way it does this is by providing a common language. I use the Myers-Briggs personality tool because it is very effective at helping us to understand each other better.

C. David Green