

The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing

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An unprecedented history of the personality test conceived a century ago by a mother and her daughter--fiction writers with no formal training in psychology--and how it insinuated itself into our boardrooms, classrooms, and beyond

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is the most popular personality test in the world. It is used regularly by Fortune 500 companies, universities, hospitals, churches, and the military. Its language of personality types--extraversion and introversion, sensing and intuiting, thinking and feeling, judging and perceiving--has inspired television shows, online dating platforms, and BuzzFeed quizzes. Yet despite the test's widespread adoption, experts in the field of psychometric testing, a \$2 billion industry, have struggled to validate its results--no less account for its success. How did Myers-Briggs, a homegrown multiple choice questionnaire, infiltrate our workplaces, our relationships, our Internet, our lives?

First conceived in the 1920s by the mother-daughter team of Katherine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, a pair of devoted homemakers, novelists, and amateur psychoanalysts, Myers-Briggs was designed to bring the gospel of Carl Jung to the masses. But it would take on a life entirely its own, reaching from the smoke-filled boardrooms of mid-century New York to Berkeley, California, where it was administered to some of the twentieth century's greatest creative minds. It would travel across the world to London, Zurich, Cape Town, Melbourne, and Tokyo, until it could be found just as easily in elementary schools, nunneries, and wellness retreats as in shadowy political consultancies and on social networks.

Drawing from original reporting and never-before-published documents, *The Personality Brokers* takes a critical look at the personality indicator that became a cultural icon. Along the way it examines nothing less than the definition of the self--our attempts to grasp, categorize, and quantify our personalities. Surprising and absorbing, the book, like the test at its heart, considers the timeless question: What makes you, you?

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To investigate the history of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the most popular personality inventory in the world, is to court a kind of low-level paranoia. Files disappear. Tapes are erased. People begin to watch you.

In the fall of 2015, I was seven months pregnant and rifling through the archives of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey. Many people are familiar with

the ETS as the long-time publisher of the Standardized Aptitude Test (SAT), but it was also the first publisher of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the first institution to try to determine its scientific validity in the 1960s. Some months before, I had written a controversial article on the origins of Myers-Briggs, and it seemed my reputation had preceded me. In anticipation of my arrival, the staff had removed a folder containing letters from ETS staff to Isabel Briggs Myers, creator of the type indicator. When I asked to see the letters, there was a bit of hushed talk and a brief consultation with a lawyer, before the archivist told me that he would not share them with me because of the "sensitive information" they contained. Later that day, a young male ETS employee who, I would later learn, was charged with surveilling me during my visit, posted the following message to his Twitter account: "Today I'm creeping on a pregnant lady as part of my job." He seemed an ambivalent creeper at best or perhaps just an incompetent one. He proceeded to post a link to the article I had written and tagged me in his subsequent post. "Great article by the lady I had to creep on this morning," he wrote.

If anything, this sort of occurrence has been more typical than not of my journey into the world of personality testing. In the years that I have spent writing this book, I have encountered secrets and lies and various strategies of bureaucratic obstruction, some more obvious and objectionable than others. It started early on in 2013—the moment when I started researching the life and work of Isabel Briggs Myers about whom very little was known, other than that she was born in 1897, died in 1980, and created the type indicator somewhere in between. After her death, her son had donated her personal papers to the University of Florida, Gainesville, which was a five-minute drive from the Center for the Application of Psychological Type (CAPT): a non-profit research center that Isabel had helped found just before she died, but which now served as the guardian of the type indicator's trade secrets and protector of its creator's legacy. Although her papers were technically the property of the university—and thus should have been open to public use—they required permission from CAPT to access. I applied to CAPT for permission, and twice I was assured by the university librarian, a gentle and apologetic man, that I would never receive it. "The staff is very invested in protecting Isabel's image," he warned me. In the past, they had done whatever they needed to do to keep people from scrutinizing her life too closely. Why her image should need protection, I did not yet understand.

After nine months of waiting to hear back about the status of my application, I was asked by CAPT to prove my commitment to Myers-Briggs by undergoing a "re-education program": a nearly two-thousand dollar, four-day Myers-Briggs accreditation session that took place in the International Jewish Federation building on East 59th Street in Manhattan. The accreditation session was led by a dark-haired, fashionable woman in her fifties named Patricia, and she promised to teach me and my twenty-five fellow participants—Fortune 500 executives from the U.S., U.K., South Africa, and China, high school and college guidance counselors, dating coaches, a Department of Defense administrator, an astrologist, a retired priest—how to "speak type fluently." This was how Patricia put it, as if speaking type would soon become most natural thing in the world to us. "This is only the beginning!" she said when we first filed into the room. "Just think of this as a language immersion program."

Among the various people and instructions that I observed at my re-education program, the most striking was Patricia's insistence that one's ability to "speak type fluently" depended on regulating with great care the language one used to describe the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to the uninitiated. The first rule of speaking type, Patricia said, was that you had to memorize the history of type. Sometime in the 1940s, during the closing years of World War II, two women, a mother and a daughter, named Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, designed a lengthy and ingenious questionnaire that assessed one's personality along four dimensions of ordinary human behavior: extraversion (E) and introversion (I), sensing (S) and intuition (N), thinking (T) and feeling (F), and judging (J) and perceiving (P). The categories were easy to understand and universally relatable, Patricia claimed. "Do you prefer to focus on the outer world or on your own inner world? This is called Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I)," explained the first slide she showed us. She clicked to the second. "Do you prefer to focus on the basic information you take in or do you prefer to interpret and add meaning? This is called Sensing (S) or Intuition (N)." The third: "When making decisions, do you prefer to look first at logic and consistency or first look at people and special circumstances? This is called Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)." And the final one: "In dealing with the outside world, do you prefer to get things decided or do you prefer to stay open to new information and options? This is called Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)."

How one answered the 93 items on the questionnaire would determine one's personality: one of the sixteen possible four-letter combinations that revealed your true self-your "shoes-off self," as Isabel liked to say-to you. Both their questionnaire and their categories of personality (E/I, S/N, T/F, J/P) were based, we were told, on the writings of Carl Gustav Jung: one of the twentieth-century's most influential personality psychologists and author of the 1923 book *Psychological Types*. It was not necessary for us to know anything else about Jung other than his name. "Jung is a very respected name, a big name," Patricia told us. "Even if you don't know who he is, know his name. His name gives the test validity."

The second rule of speaking type was that you did not, under any circumstances, refer to the type indicator as a "test." It was a "self-reporting instrument" or an "indicator," Patricia explained. "People use the word test all the time, but what you're taking is an indicator. It's indicating your personality based on what you told the test." Although her statement sounded tautological, Patricia assured us that it was not. Unlike a standardized test like the SAT, which asked the test-taker to choose between right and wrong answers, the type indicator had no right or wrong answers-only two competing preferences. "In reading for pleasure, do you (a) Enjoy odd or original ways of saying things; or (B) Like writers to say exactly what they mean?" "If you were a teacher, would you rather teach (A) Fact courses; or (B) Courses involving theory?" And unlike a standardized test, in which a higher score was always more desirable than a lower one, there were no better or worse types. In a riposte to the long and punishing tradition of psychological testing in America, which had proceeded by separating apparently normal people from neurotics, psychotics, and sociopaths, all sixteen types were created equal. They each had their strengths and weaknesses and their special place in the world.

The final rule of speaking type was, to my mind, the most important and the most

unsettling: you had to conceive of personality as an innate characteristic; something fixed since birth and immutable, like blue eyes or left handedness. "You have to buy into the idea that type never changes," Patricia ordered us, and she asked that we chant after her: "Type never changes! Type never changes!" "We will brand this into your brains," she promised. "The theory behind the indicator supports the fact that you are born with a four-letter preference. If you hear someone say, 'My type changed,' they are not correct." Her insistence on a singular and essential self—a self whose moods and mysteries were crystallized by four simple letters—seemed to me impossibly retrograde amidst the cheerful promises of self-transformation through diet, exercise, travel, therapy, and meditation that I encountered in popular culture every day. Yet it also struck me as an irresistibly attractive fiction. There was a certain narcissistic beauty to the idea: a certain luminance to the promise that, by learning to speak type, we could learn to compress the gestures of our messy, complicated lives into a coherent life story, one capable of expressing both to ourselves and to others not just who we were, but who we had been all along. What type offered us was a vision of individual identity in its most transcendent and transparent form. "Who are you?" the type indicator asked. "I am a clear ENTJ," Patricia answered. "I am an ISFP," the woman sitting next to me whispered in return. What other language could afford such clarity?

That was the end of day one. The rest of the week was busy, crowded with tutorials and tests, group exercises and games. It ended on a rousing note with a sales pitch delivered to us by two executives who had flown into New York that morning from Sunnyvale, California, home of Consulting Psychological Press (CPP), the current publisher of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. They urged us to use our accreditation status to purchase as many Myers-Briggs products as we could afford and to attend as many workshops as our schedules could accommodate. Then, in a graduation ceremony of sorts, they presented each of us with a pocket-sized diploma and plated metal pin with the words "MBTI Certified" embossed on it. At the end of the week, my contact at CAPT informed me that, based on my performance at the accreditation session, they had decided not to allow me into the archive. In response to my request for more information about their decision, he cut off all further communication. His evasiveness raised the very question I suspected the organization would have most liked to avoid: What did they have to hide?

Quite a lot as it turns out, but the most interesting secrets of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator are not the secrets that the skeptics of personality testing might expect. For some time, it has been a well-known fact that the type indicator is not scientifically valid; that the theory behind it has no basis in clinical psychology; and that it is the flagship product of a lucrative global corporation, one whose interests sit at the shadowy crossroads of industrial psychology and self-care. For some time too, critics of typological thinking have issued scathing indictments of personality assessment's "liquidation of the individual," to quote social theorist Theodor Adorno. For Adorno, as for many skeptics writing today, type performs a rather insidious sleight of hand. It convinces people of their status as rounded and exceptional beings. Yet it does so by flattening human behavior into a static, predetermined set of traits; traits that often register the interests of the powerful

institutions that use personality assessment to rationalize their daily affairs. By the late twentieth century, these institutions included corporations like Standard Oil and General Electric that used type to hire, fire, and promote employees; elite colleges like Swarthmore and Bryn Mawr that used type to admit students; churches that used type to ordain ministers; government bureaucracies that used type to appoint civil servants. Under the rule of type, the labeling of live human beings emerged as one technique for annihilating individuality—for treating people as interchangeable, and sometimes disposable, parts of an unforgiving social whole. Type was, in short, one of the bluntest and best disguised tools of modernity; a wolf in sheep's clothing.

None of this is new. What remains unexplained is why, in the face of this knowledge, so many people—2 million a year, in nearly all Fortune 500 companies and U.S. colleges and universities, in community centers and churches and couples' retreats, in the Army, the Navy, and the CIA—continue not only to embrace the type indicator, but to defend its inviolability with the kind of ardor usually reserved for matters of the deepest faith. "Myers-Briggs is like my religion" is a familiar refrain one hears at accreditation sessions like the one I attended. "It helped me find myself." "It changed my life." "I was never the same again." What I have witnessed time and again, and what this book seeks to understand, is the unwavering belief in type's ability to comprehend who we are—why we work the jobs we work, why we love the people we love, why we behave in the apparently various and contradictory ways we do; a belief that persists despite how shamelessly type classifies individuals and conscripts them into the bureaucratic hierarchies of the workplace, the school, the church, the state, and even their own families. At the heart of this mystery is a set of questions fundamental to all human existence. What is a personality? Where does it come from? Why are we so intent on categorizing it? And, of course, the greatest question of all: Who am I?

Other Books

Puing-Puing Kehidupan, Indonesian version of The Remains of The Day Manusia memang tak pernah merindukan sesuatu sebelum dia kehilangan. Dan Begitulah Stevens. Puluhan tahun lamanya dia mengabdikan sebagai kepala pelayan di Darlington Hall, seluruh jiwanya didedikasikan demi profesinya. Cita-citanya menjadi seorang kepala pelayan yang sukses, yang bermartabat, yang luar biasa, telah dia raih. Dan dia bangga meraihnya. Yang tidak disadari olehnya, begitu banyak hal yang telah dia korbankan, salah satunya adalah Miss Kenton, seorang gadis menawan yang begitu cerdas dan cermat. Gadis yang dulu menjadi staffnya, ternyata mencintainya. Dalam perjalanan mengelilingi pedesaan Inggris yang dilakukannya kali ini, barulah dipahami oleh Stevens, bahwa ternyata dia pun mencintainya. Namun bertahun-tahun telah berlalu sejak itu. Miss Kenton memang menulis surat kepadanya. Mereka memang akan bertemu. Tetapi akankah ada kesempatan kedua bagi Stevens? *** "Patut dirayakan...Gambaran yang menyeluruh dan sangat meyakinkan tentang kehidupan manusia yang terurai perlahan di depan mata ini begitu terkadang lucu, absurd, dan yang jelas sangat menyentuh." Sunday Times "Mimpi sebuah buku: komedi tingkah laku yang secara magis mewujudkan dalam pembelajaran menawan tentang kepribadian, kelas, dan budaya." New York Times Book Review [Mizan, Hikmah, Novel, Inspirasi, Indonesia]

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