

Glibly Attractive: Reading Annie Murphy Paul's *The Cult of Personality*

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Annie Murphy Paul: *The Cult of Personality - How Personality Tests are leading us to miseducate our children, mismanage our companies and misunderstand ourselves.* Free Press NY 2004 ISBN 0-7432-4356-0

I am trying to read your mind

W have stopped to smell the roses

I am trying not to lose mine

The roses or my mind.....Jonatha Brooke
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Musicians and songwriters at the top of their craft have the licence and ability to speak insightfully, if sometimes starkly, about aspects of life experienced by them and others. Beauty, angst run together at times in their work. Although these professions are not intended for the conventional, it would be a grave mistake to assess the quality of output on selected personal life events and peccadilloes. On that basis, there wouldn't be much to listen to at all, no matter the taste and inclination.

In the past few months Annie Murphy Paul (identified as someone educated at Yale and a former senior editor at the magazine *Psychology Today*), has gained considerable attention with her book *The Cult of Personality* (2004). In this book, she attacks the use of personality testing in the United States, and several prominent or recent writers offer praise for her work

Given that quantification and the American way of life has a close association (e.g. Banta 2004), this view might seem a little incongruous. From the Stanford Binet to the MMPI, the NEO-PI and beyond, the US has led in the development and use of psychological instruments across many professions and has exported that approach elsewhere, particularly in business, where the connection between testing and the workplace originated in the 1920s.

Theories have also been quantified, the best known being C.G.Jung's theory of psychological types by the Gray-Wheelwright Jungian Type Survey and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Other Jungian instruments have also appeared since these were developed, independently, in the 1940s. But the notion of testing *per se* has never had universal appeal. Hanson (1993) and Gould (1996) are two critics, also Rogers (1994), in a standard student text on psychological testing.

Paul's broad proposition seems to be that personality is too complex to be covered by any test, preferring what she calls "narrative", a process we get a glimpse of toward the end of the book. Its chapters are arranged in a roughly chronological sequence dealing with aspects of the lives of certain originators of personality tests. The tests are a mixture of projective (pictures) and objective (pencil and paper questionnaires) tests.

However, the content of each chapter is not organised in a time sequence, with several jumps in time, purpose and topic, a somewhat confusing and, at times, misleading practice. Curiously, there is no bibliography, simply endnotes organised by chapter

that refer to quotations made in the body of the text. Some of these notes are an incorrect reference. When adding this to several factual errors in the book (particularly in the MBTI section) it means that this review is interim, rather than comprehensive, and will focus on the material in the chapter devoted to the MBTI, my specialty research and teaching area.

The focus of the book as a whole is not on the development of such instruments and the social and intellectual context surrounding these developments, but the developers themselves, particularly something about their lives. It would not be unkind to say that these stories are inclined to sensationalism. At times the material is simply salacious, a theme the author, an obviously skilled writer, enhances with cleverly placed personal comments, fairly close to innuendo.

The implication is that these people as a group are eccentric, perhaps even unsavoury, although Paul has difficulty with the relatively benign Costa and McCrae of the 5 Factor model and the NEO-PI. One suspects that Harrison Gough, Theodore Millon and others have led exemplary lives, at least as far as can be ascertained from this presentation.

Nowhere is there any presentation as to what personality might be and how the people profiled in the book missed the boat. Apart from misuse of instruments in various situations (something not distinguished from other experiences), there's simply a journalistic assertion that testing activities don't help people.

The central assertion of the book, in fact, is not even thematically presented other than loosely at the start and end. There's further confusion because the nature and purpose of the personality assessments varies widely and it's fairly confusing when the author leaps from projective tests to instruments and back again in a few paragraphs. Nothing about technical definitions about reliability and validity and what the purpose of a test might be. This is particularly a problem with the MBTI, the only theory-based pencil and paper and test assessed here.

Some general errors of fact include Ernst Kretschmer misrepresented as being associated with Nazis (see Bair, 2003, for a different view), David Keirsey as a follower of Isabel Myers (See Keirsey, 1998), William James tough-minded - tender-hearted miswritten, and also Jung's development of his idea of psychological types and his depiction of Freud as an extravert (a claim Jung did not make). A number of references taken from *C.G. Jung Speaking* (Misreferenced as *C.G. Jung Speaks*) are incorrect and a search is still on for the correct pages. Paul's understanding of Jung's ideas, including an associated timeframe for them, is minimal at best and this is reflected in the few references given.

In the MBTI chapter, Paul starts off with a slightly more colourful description of its developers in Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers and their families than what you might find in her text reference (Saunders 1991). There's a slight slip when Paul refers to Briggs' alma mater by its current designation, not what it was in the 19th century when she attended, nor is there reference to Briggs' academic family background. This and other data might make it harder to use the term "housewives" to describe the two women, when the nature of their intellectual surroundings and activities belie that sort of label.

Paul's description of Jung's development of his theory of psychological types is cursory and incoherent. She uses the term "extrovert" for instance, rather than his "extravert", and misinterprets his description of Freud. "Extrovert" is used continuously throughout this chapter, notwithstanding the lack of reference to that designation in any MBTI material. Her designation of Jung's three sets of opposites is also technically not correct, and she can't quite manage to get the classical Temperaments: Choleric, Melancholic, Sanguine, Phlegmatic, putting Bilious in instead of the latter. She misidentifies Freud's stages of development as a typology per se, as well as Jung as a follower of Freud.

There's a certain undertone of cynicism to the description of Isabel Myers' life as a crime novelist, particularly her spirited defence of a murder technique. One is left with the idea of a crazed woman who could willingly kill, rather than a benign author defending her work. This theme, one might call it demonizing, actually continues throughout this section, with respect to interpreting Myers' behaviour.

"People-sorting instruments" follow, and are treated with disdain, something to keep in mind when Myers and Briggs get to construct the MBTI. But any notion of how the questions might have been developed is jumbled: no explanation is given of "forced choice" questions as a conventional method for instruments or her methods.

History isn't a strong spot either. Typologies in American psychology, were in little favour from the 1920s at the latest, not World War II; "scientific" psychology antedated World War I. She shows little knowledge of either the development of instruments as a whole or their association with business. This is partly because she doesn't refer to intelligence tests, but it may also be that she hasn't read a couple of the references she provides, which actually deal with this topic. Most of the references seem to be more of a quick internet cruise.

A diversion is made into Ernst Kretschmer and William Sheldon follows, which has nothing to do with the MBTI, but more with David Keirsey, whose publication of *Please Understand Me* had to do with their ideas more than Isabel Myers. This is followed by a strange interlude with Frederick Taylor, whose life (he died in 1915) and work in organisations antedates the MBTI by some decades.

An implication here, and one strongly made, is that Isabel Myers was interested in orderly workplaces in the same way as the inventor of "scientific management" and promoter of the "one best way". By definition, the MBTI's 16 types are the opposite of Taylor's views about workers and management, so it's difficult to see where the facts for this assertion come from.

No mention is made of Isabel Myers' researching gender differences in MBTI responses from the start, nor that her presentation to ETS was clouded by the fact that she was female, in addition to her qualifications and her topic. Her "improvised vocabulary" is not explained. Presumably these are the questions and the scales, but it's hard to know.

The first dissertation of any kind, in 1949, by A.R. Laney is also not mentioned, nor the use of the MBTI from 1948 at IPAR at UCLA(Berkeley).

Paul appears to imply that Myers did not write an *MBTI Manual* for ETS (this was published in 1962, and Paul seems to think that ETS had published the MBTI for sale. This date is attested to be associated with ETS' publication of the MBTI, whereas Form F, the subject of the manual, was available from 1958, as a research instrument. The author implies that it was for sale, which leads to some confused language when CPP Inc., the current publisher, come into the picture in 1975.

Paul's selected MBTI practitioner, Shoya Zichy, doesn't even use the instrument, but Keirsey's *Temperament Sorter*, which is an entirely different questionnaire made up for different reasons. Paul is unaware of this, and in any case can't pick that Zichy's use of the Sorter immediately discounts her as an expert on the MBTI. At any rate, Zichy seems oblivious to its complexities (see e.g. Quenk, 1999). This is later confirmed by Paul's outline of Zichy's *Color Q* development.

Paul in any case seems to be more interested in this sort of thing rather than the MBTI itself. Something called the *Omnia Profile* and the *Similarity Index*, or *Management by Strengths* all seem to have their purpose and intent locked into the vision and aims of Isabel Myers. There's actually an opportunity here for Paul to launch a substantial critique here on the trivialisation of both Myers' and Jung's ideas in the use of such tools in organisations. This would have been a worthwhile enterprise, in my view, but Paul's lack of knowledge and acumen allows this opportunity to be passed by.

A later comment on Myers, regarding her genius, by Mary McCaulley is given a different meaning because two following words are not provided. Regrettably, Lynne Baab, a prominent MBTI user, makes an inappropriate comment regarding assigning volunteers in church work, something Paul is surprised to be an area where the MBTI is used, possibly indicating that she'd made a conclusion and set out to find the data to prove it. She'd probably be discomfited to know that the MBTI was brought to Australian by Roman Catholic priests and nuns and that there are several books on this topic.

Some of the quotes made in the book are genuinely bewildering. The comment "a Jungian horoscope" refers to a paper by T.G. Carskadon (1982) that in fact suggests the opposite, implying Paul actually hasn't read it.. This paper is also presented erroneously in the endnotes as unpublished. Data on MBTI test-retest presented in the text is presented without reference anywhere.

Two final references are intriguing. The first is to the report *In the Mind's Eye*, a 1991 publication. This report actually supports the MBTI rather than what is claimed by Paul and others. But you have to read it closely in order to find that out.

The second is to the well-known *Barnum Effect*, which proposes that if you say something nice or positive to someone, they'll probably agree that it's an attribute, whether or not that's the case.

The author seeks to illustrate this by taking one sentence from various brief type descriptions (INFP, INFJ, ISFJ, INTJ, ISFP) that are provided on one page of the booklet *Introduction to Type* (1998). The statements, part of much longer statements, are selective and taken out of context. It also means that she ignores longer

descriptions of each of the 16 MBTI types that commence just over the page, let alone going elsewhere for longer descriptions.

All 5 of the examples provided prefer introversion and four of the five examples prefer intuition or feeling. No attempt has been made to give a variety of descriptions, nor go from this page (13) to the longer type descriptions that follow. As an INTP, I didn't feel inclined to agree with any of these statements; perhaps the author agreed with most of them in some way, and chose them because of that.

In my research on the MBTI, I've become aware that the depth of knowledge expressed, particularly in critiques, but whether as articles or in books, is uneven to say the least. So a well-researched critique of personality testing in organisations and schools (including the MBTI) would have been welcome, from my point of view at least. Instead, there's just some more random accusations to wade through, poorly researched and largely *ad hominem* in approach. Perhaps the issue here is self-promotion rather than the topic itself.

The final chapter, which presents the author's preferred method of looking at personality through life story is fairly incoherent in terms of point and direction. I was unable to ascertain the point of the exercise, or that this was in some way enlightening. The difficulties of this sort of narrative, or biography have been well pointed out by Ludwig (1997). From an MBTI perspective, it was quite easy to work out that the person concerned, who was engaged in sailing around the world, was probably ISTP, but of course it could have been anyone from the author's point of view.

The issue of testing and associations with business and so on is an important issue, and should be discussed. The few decent examples provided and, from the MBTI perspective, Zichy's cameo, presents a number of problems in that respect; as far as I see it.

The critiquers of the various projective or objective tests are also accepted as being factual without argument, or broad references showing the topic has actually been researched in some depth.

As a consequence, this is an interim review. I've decided to search amongst what references are provided, because I can't ascertain whether the arguments presented are well-founded or not.

I am also extremely concerned at the lack of attention to detail and the poor editing of both quotes and chapter organisation from someone with claims to editing experience. Certainly the author doesn't seem to have much self-doubt; but you need more than a belief to be convincing as far as I'm concerned.

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