Introverts, Extroverts, and the Limits of Personality Tests

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Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Have you ever taken a personality test, online or at school? What did it say about you, and did you agree?
2. Would your friends describe you as more outgoing or more reserved? Does it change with the situation?
3. How might attitudes toward personality tests differ by country, age group, or workplace?

Reading: Introverts, Extroverts, and the Limits of Personality Tests

People often ask a new acquaintance: "What's your MBTI?" Four letters have become a convenient **shorthand** for personality. In South Korea a few years ago, some cafes and companies even asked job applicants for their type. Many people find their online test result **uncanny**. It seems to know them better than their friends do.

Part of the reason is the Barnum effect. In 1948, a psychologist gave all of his students the same personality profile. It was vague and **flattering**, yet on average they rated its accuracy 4.3 out of 5. Almost anyone can see themselves in lines like these.

The MBTI places people in one of two boxes on each of four scales, such as introvert or extravert. But most people score near the middle of each scale. A cut-off at the midpoint is **arbitrary**. It can **pigeonhole** two almost identical people as opposites. The types are also **flimsy**. Many people get a different type when they retake the test after about five weeks.

Most researchers prefer the Big Five, which measures five traits, each on a **spectrum**. The evidence for it is far more **robust**. Scores are fairly stable, and conscientiousness predicts job performance and even a longer life. Still, it is not clear that the model **holds up** everywhere. Among the Tsimane people of Bolivia, the answers did not fall into five groups. Self-reports are also prone to bias.

Introversion is not shyness. Shyness is a fear of being judged, while introverts simply prefer **stimulation** in smaller doses. A **gregarious** person can be shy, and a confident speaker can feel **drained** after a party. Extraverts tend to seek out excitement and social contact. Most people sit somewhere in the middle. On average, people tend to **mellow** between their twenties and forties. A four-letter type can start a conversation, but it is worth being **wary** of letting it decide who gets a job. One **telling** detail: the MBTI's own guidelines say the test was not designed for hiring.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

stimulation **robust** **flimsy** **arbitrary** **telling** **mellow** **flattering** **shorthand** **uncanny** **holds up** **pigeonhole** **gregarious** **wary** **spectrum**

1. In text messages, "BRB" is _____ for "be right back."
2. The painting showed an _____ likeness of the old man, as if he might speak.
3. Everyone enjoyed his _____ speech, full of praise for the team.
4. The deadline of 4:17 p.m. seemed completely _____ to the students.
5. It is unfair to _____ people as lazy because of one bad day.
6. The tent was too _____ to survive the storm.
7. Political views in the class covered the whole _____, from left to right.
8. The findings are _____: they have been repeated in many countries.
9. Her argument _____ even when you look at the details.
10. My _____ sister organizes a big party every month.
11. Too much noise and light can be more _____ than some people can handle.
12. Many fiery young athletes _____ as they get older.
13. Be _____ of apps that ask for too much personal information.
14. It was _____ that the manager stopped smiling when the topic came up.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. an uncanny	_____	**a.** of strangers
2. a flattering	_____	**b.** spectrum
3. an arbitrary	_____	**c.** excuse
4. a flimsy	_____	**d.** with age
5. across the political	_____	**e.** decision
6. feel emotionally	_____	**f.** resemblance
7. mellow	_____	**g.** photo
8. be wary	_____	**h.** drained

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. The description was _____ accurate, as if it had been written by a close friend. (*uncanny*)
2. He tried to _____ his manager with compliments before asking for a day off. (*flattering*)
3. The winners were chosen _____, so nobody understood why they had won. (*arbitrary*)
4. Some people find a busy market _____, while others find it exhausting. (*stimulation*)
5. Three hours of video calls can be very _____ for anyone. (*drained*)
6. She looked at the strange email with some _____ before she opened it. (*wary*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. What did some cafes and companies in South Korea ask job applicants for?

2. What happened in Forer's 1948 experiment?
3. How does the MBTI sort people?
4. Why is a cut-off at the midpoint of each scale a problem?
5. Why does the writer call MBTI types flimsy? Give the evidence.
6. How is the Big Five different from the MBTI, and why do researchers prefer it?
7. What are two weaknesses or open questions about the Big Five?
8. How is introversion different from shyness?
9. Why do you think the writer ends with a detail from the MBTI guidelines? Is it a convincing ending?
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The students in the 1948 experiment were studying psychology."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that four-letter types should never be mentioned, even in casual conversation."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer describe the 1948 experiment? Is it (a) to explain why a type description can feel accurate even if the test is weak, (b) to show that astrology can predict personality, or (c) to explain how the MBTI was first created?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. Some companies in South Korea asked job applicants for their MBTI type. **T / F**
2. Forer gave each student a different personality description. **T / F**
3. Forer's students rated the description as quite accurate. **T / F**
4. The MBTI places people in one of three boxes on each scale. **T / F**
5. Most people score near the middle of each MBTI scale. **T / F**
6. The Big Five measures traits on a spectrum instead of sorting people into types. **T / F**
7. Among the Tsimane, the answers fell into five clear groups. **T / F**
8. Introversion and shyness mean the same thing. **T / F**
9. A confident speaker can feel drained after a long party. **T / F**
10. The MBTI guidelines recommend using the test for hiring. **T / F**

Language Focus: Expressing Tendency: tend to, be prone to, on average

tend to / tend not to + base verb: a general pattern, not a rule. *I tend to wake up early.*
be prone to + noun (or **prone to** + base verb): likely to suffer from or do something, usually something negative. *I am prone to headaches.*
on average: across a whole group, even though individuals differ.
From the reading:
"Self-reports are also **prone to** bias."
"Extraverts **tend to** seek out excitement and social contact."
"**On average**, people **tend to** mellow between their twenties and forties."
Tip: In the past, use **tended to**. Do not use *tend to* for a single event: *I tended to go there once* is wrong.

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you.

tend to / tend not to

1. When I am under pressure, I tend to _____
2. At large parties, I tend not to _____

be prone to / on average

3. When I write in English, I am prone to _____

4. When I am tired, I am more prone to _____
5. On average, students in my country tend to _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to answer using tend to, be prone to, *or* on average. *Then ask a partner.*

6. What do you tend to do on a free Sunday?
7. What kinds of small mistakes are you prone to when you are in a hurry?
8. How do people in your family tend to celebrate birthdays?
9. What do first-year university students tend to worry about?
10. On average, how much time do you spend on your phone each day?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. How often do people around you talk about MBTI types? In what situations?
2. When do you feel most energized: in a group, with one close friend, or alone?
3. Describe a time when you felt drained after socializing. What helped you recover?
4. Have you ever been labeled by others in a way that did not fit you? How did it feel?
5. Why do you think personality tests spread so easily on social media?
6. Have you ever read a horoscope or a description of yourself that felt uncanny? Looking back, why might it have felt that way?
7. Can a person be both shy and outgoing? Give an example from your own experience.
8. Is it fair for a cafe or a company to ask job applicants for their personality type? Why or why not?
9. In a job, which matters more, personality or skills? Can the two really be separated?
10. Should people try to act more outgoing than they naturally are, for example at work or in class? What are the costs and benefits?
11. How has your own personality changed since you were a teenager? What caused the change?
12. Most personality tests were developed in Western countries. What problems might appear when they are used in other cultures?
13. If a perfectly accurate personality test existed, who should be allowed to see your results, and why?
14. Is it more useful to think of people as types or as positions on a spectrum? What do we gain and lose with each?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/personality-tests** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.