

FAMILY MEASUREMENT TECHNIQUES

Dennis A. Bagarrozi, Editor

THE UTILITY OF THE MYERS-BRIGGS PERSPECTIVE IN COUPLES COUNSELING: A CLINICAL FRAMEWORK

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This paper outlines a step-by-step clinical framework for using the Myers-Briggs personality preferences in couples therapy. The paper also discusses how a Myers-Briggs perspective can be useful in facilitating couple communication.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is an instrument that measures an individual's personality preferences on four dimensions (Keirsey & Bates, 1984; Kroeger & Thuesen, 1988). The first dimension assesses an individual's level of *introversion* or *extraversion*. The second dimension reflects an individual's preference for dealing with detailed facts in the here-and-now (*sensors*) or for looking at the big picture and future possibilities (*intuitives*). The third dimension reflects whether an individual's preference is for making decisions based on principles or logic (*thinkers*) or for preserving interpersonal harmony (*feelers*). The final dimension reflects an individual's preference for having closure and structure in one's life (*judgers*) or keeping things open-ended and spontaneous (*perceivers*).

The MBTI (Form G) is a 126-item instrument, which can be completed in approximately 20–30 minutes. The MBTI can be hand scored or scored by a computer. In a review of the literature, Carlson (1985, 1989) concluded that the MBTI yielded satisfactory internal and test-retest reliabilities (with *r* values of individual scales often exceeding .80). Carlson also found favorable validity measurements across a variety of studies, but recommends more research to validate the instrument in a variety of settings.

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE MBTI IN COUPLES COUNSELING

Couples frequently get into conflict over personality differences (Keirsey & Bates, 1984; Kroeger & Thuesen, 1988). For example, a judge

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may try to get his or her perceiving partner to become more organized, while the perceiving partner in turn tries to get the judger to be more spontaneous. The couple is soon engaged in a power struggle and becomes polarized by the issue. The following steps can be successfully used to help couples resolve the polarization, regardless of which personality dimensions are causing the conflict.

Step One: Discussing the Personality Types. The first step is to educate the couple regarding each partner's personality preferences. The therapist should describe the primary characteristics associated with each partner's personality preferences, and include concrete examples to support the descriptions. The therapist should also confirm that the MBTI results fit the clients' own perceptions of their personalities.

Step Two: Depathologizing Differences. It is also important that the therapist clearly communicate that no personality type is better or worse than the other. One way to do this is to show how one person's strength is the other's limitation, and vice versa. For example, an intuitive's strength to envision future possibilities is the sensor's weakness, while the sensor's ability to focus on the details in the here-and-now is the intuitive's weakness.

Couples with markedly different personality preferences will sometimes wonder if they are incompatible. It is important to assure couples that having different personality preferences is not as important as what they choose to do with these differences (Notarius & Markmam, 1993). Illustrating how the differences can work in a complementary fashion is usually effective in addressing incompatibility concerns.

Step Three: Taking the Other's Perspective. It is important for the therapist to describe how the couple's personality differences contribute to their conflict. A key task in this step is to help each partner interpret what the other is thinking and feeling from the perspective of the opposite personality type.

In some cases, being able to take the other partner's perspective is enough to detoxify the issue for the couple. For example, a premarital couple named Jeff and Julie were having conflicts over lists that Julie made each weekend outlining wedding preparation tasks for the couple. As a strong judger, Jeff assumed Julie's lists were definitive plans, and he felt resentful that he was not involved in the planning. Jeff demonstrated his resentment by being irritable or complaining, which caused Julie to feel unsupported. Since Julie was a perceiver, her lists were tentative and open to change. In fact, Julie would have welcomed Jeff's input as a sign of his investment in the wedding and the relationship. The key to resolving this issue was helping both see how differently perceivers and judgers interpret lists.

Step Four: Finding a Compromise. In many cases, the therapist will still need to help the couple arrive at a compromise based on the different

needs of each personality type. For example, an extraverted partner may guarantee his or her introverted partner private time in exchange for some guaranteed couple time.

Step Five: Strengthen Less Developed Side. The therapist should also encourage individuals to strengthen their less developed side. This is especially important for individuals who have an extremely strong preference, since they often have difficulty responding to situations that draw upon their less developed side. For example, a highly introverted person may need to develop his or her extraverted side to become more comfortable going to social events with his or her extraverted partner.

Strengthening each partner's less developed side will make it easier for a couple to make compromises that meet both partners' personality needs. It also prevents individuals from using their personality type as an excuse for ignoring their partner's needs. For example, an individual may use his or her introversion as an excuse to avoid going to any social events with his or her extraverted partner. In this case, social events can be re-framed as an opportunity for the introvert to strengthen his or her extraverted side.

Step Six: Warn Couples About Times of Stress. It is important to warn couples that in times of stress, each partner will become even more dependent on his or her preferred personality style. For example, an introvert will want more solitary time while the extravert will need to interact with his or her partner during times of stress. Unfortunately, these conflicting needs can set up vicious patterns, such as distancing-pursuing. To avoid these negative patterns, couples need to be more flexible in using their underdeveloped side, even though their natural tendency is to rely on their preferred style.

Working with Similarities

The above guidelines can also be used to help couples who face problems arising from their similarities rather than their differences. For example, two highly extraverted partners may compete to talk and will need to compromise by taking turns listening (step four). Or two strongly introverted people could be encouraged to develop their extraverted sides (step five) to help build social support outside the relationship.

Communication: External and Internal Processors

The Myers-Briggs perspective can also be helpful in improving communication between couples, particularly if problems are related to the different ways in which introverts and extraverts communicate and process information. Extraverts (external processors) generally have a need to externalize their thinking. Extraverts talk as they think, and think as they talk. In contrast, the thinking process for introverts (internal processors) is generally hidden or internalized. Introverts must organize their thoughts internally before they speak. Gender also appears to be a determining factor in whether or not an individual is an external or internal processor.

Clinical experience shows that men (regardless of whether they are extraverts or introverts) are more likely than women to be internal processors.

Difficulties can arise between an internal and external processor if they do not recognize their different ways of communicating. For example, internal processors often assume what the external processor says is the final word (as it would be for the internal processor). The internal processor then becomes confused or angry when the external processor later says something different, not having recognized that what the external processor initially said was a rough draft subject to revision. Internal processors can also become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of talk as they listen to their partners externalize all their thoughts. In contrast, external processors often wrongly interpret their partner's reluctance to talk things out as a lack of caring rather than as a need to reflect on or process one's own thoughts.

Several steps can be taken to improve communication between internal and external processors. First, both can indicate when they are processing internally or externally. If internal processors know that their partner is processing externally, they will not feel as much pressure to react to everything their partner says initially. This in turn allows the external processors more freedom to let their thinking and talking evolve. It is also helpful for internal processors to tell their partner they are internally processing the information and not ignoring the issue.

Second, both parties need to respect the other's need to process internally or externally. Internal processors need to give external processors time to talk so they can think. Likewise, external processors need to give internal processors time to sort out their thoughts before they talk. Compromise is key to accommodating these different communication styles.

Third, communication can be improved by each partner's finding a better balance between processing internally and externally. Strong external processors are encouraged to do some internal processing to avoid overwhelming their listener with multiple drafts. Likewise, strong internal processors are encouraged to do some external processing so others can have some input before the final word is given.

Indications and Contraindications

Clinical experience indicates that the Myers-Briggs perspective is most effective in work with couples who have low-to-moderate distress in their relationship. The Myers-Briggs is also excellent for working with couples seeking to better understand their relationship through marital enrichment or premarital counseling. Couples who are highly distressed or conflictual usually do not respond well to the Myers-Briggs ideas because they usually have deeper issues that need to be addressed first. However, once these deeper issues have been resolved, a Myers-Briggs perspective may be helpful in enhancing the relationship.

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