

3 Things HBO's 'Persona' Got Wrong About the MBTI®

This is an edited version of a LinkedIn post published on March 1, 2021



Roger Pearman

Managing Partner, TalentTelligent at TalentTelligent, LLC

HBO Max's new documentary is an all-out attack on how personality assessments, like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®), are being used throughout talent management at companies — hiring, developing, and placing employees.

A great deal of what Executive Producer Merve Emre is reporting is true: The wholesale abuse of personality tools occurs throughout organizational life.

Yet, it does not have to be this way. 'Persona' fails to recognize that these tools can, and have, effectively pointed people to tremendous constructive outcomes.

'Persona' Ignores the Rigor Behind MBTI

There are a great many things 'Persona' does not include, which should be part of the narrative if the intention is to give a true look at the nature and proper use of tools. But this would not be sensational enough.

Well developed, psychometrically sound tools like the MBTI are designed to provide useful and complex information efficiently. Further, publishers who adhere to the standards of psychological testing are rigorous about how items are created, norms are established, reliability and validity are estimated, and utility of the data and reports are verified. [See: [Standards](#)]. It is an inconvenient truth that good science is hard work and complex, especially when it comes to looking at human behavior.

The Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychologists have published very exacting standards and procedures for the use of psychological assessments in hiring, selection, and placement. Fulfilling these requirements greatly enhances the use of psychometrically sound tools. [See: [Tests for Hiring](#)]. The seemingly wholesale rejection of these standards is nothing less than appalling.

Psychologists and professionals who have been thoroughly trained in the use of personality and interpersonal surveys or behavior sampling tools are all too aware of the dangers of misuse and are attuned to the value of such tools when properly utilized. I do not know of any professionally trained user who recommends the use of personality tools as a single source of decisions or uses

tools that are not designed especially for personnel selection. All training professionals are aware of measurement error and the need to be sensitive to that fact in the use of assessments and surveys.

3 Major Issues About ‘Persona’

The documentary attacks various personality tests and zeros in on the MBTI, which is a type indicator. The producers fall into the same trap as nearly all critics of the MBTI do. It is a source of fascination that critics repeatedly do three things:

- They ignore the revision of the MBTI by a team of PhD psychologists who used three different and valid analytical methods to finalize the personality assessment;
- They conflate how the MBTI is used and grossly misinterprets how it was designed to be used;
- They interview critics who attempt to evaluate the MBTI from the lens of other models which have nothing to do with the framework of the MBTI.

1. ‘Persona’ ignores the research and revisions to the MBTI.

A common criticism is that the MBTI was developed by a woman who had no professional training, Isabel Briggs Myers. This argument is neutered when you look at the revision of the MBTI in 1994 and later in 2016 using the most powerful statistical model and method known to psychology: item response analysis. I have yet to see any critic attempt to consider this fact in their review of the tool.

At the same time that this analysis was being done, two other research groups were using the normative sample that was collected and applying different statistical and psychometric analysis. The result was a revised and reconstructed tool using the most respected analysis known.

Yes, there are plenty of examples when the MBTI doesn’t work as is predicted but the same is true of all self-report tools. And there are more examples of how the tool boosts self-confidence, enhances understanding of self and others, and facilitates deeper personal insights. It is not "the truth" and only seeks to provide probable trends in how an individual approaches daily activities.

2. ‘Persona’ grossly misinterprets how the MBTI was designed to be used.

The misuse of personality tests is reinforced by the millions of web sites with MBTI type related information. There is no doubt that the abuse of reported type scores and patterns is rampant. The “look alike” type tools are prolifically advertised. Completely lost is Myers’ stated goal of helping individuals make their perceptions clearer and judgments more sound. Her intention and the purpose of the tool was to knock at the door of awareness of tendencies, not to define and predetermine. She sought to elevate the notion that there are multiple ways of seeing things and making decisions. Myers did not create a personality test and yet that is how it is constantly portrayed and viewed. She called it “an indicator” rather than a survey, assessment, or psychological test.

3. It's inappropriate to evaluate the MBTI through the lens of unrelated personality tools.

I approached the Jungian framework differently when I created the Pearman Personality Integrator because I was interested in more traditional personality-related factors. Independent researchers have shown the reliability and validity using the same standards applied to all well-designed tools. Myers approached the topic one way; I approached it another way and the two cannot really be compared. Yet, critics attempt to make comparisons all the time, usually to promote their idea of what personality is or how personal styles “should” be assessed.

All personality tools published by reputable companies will readily note the limitations and challenges the tools present. For example, professionals in the know realize that measuring how reliable or how valid an assessment tool is, *at best*, an “estimation” of just how consistent and accurate the tool may be.

I could list the coefficients of all the most respected personality and interpersonal surveys in the market and all of them would have a range of reliabilities—none of them perfect; all of them would have different strategies to show accuracy and none of them are “proven.”

Raising Important Questions

At a minimum, I hope ‘Persona’ raises questions and elevates a dialogue about the standards for assessments and the proper, evidence-based, science developed methods for using the tools and applying them.

In the age of artificial intelligence and manipulation of “big data sets,” *we should all be concerned about how information gathered for one purpose gets repurposed for other outcomes.*

And in an age when respect for scientific and psychometric standards are at an all-time low, we should become ever aware of the poet’s worry that “self knowledge should not be gained with a loss of power.” Becoming self-aware does not mean we have been defined, categorized, or limited unless you surrender your ability to learn and grow. These tools provide likely and probable data points worth considering if you want to navigate your development and use your talents.