

# A Personal Odyssey: Myers Briggs Type Indicator® Preferences And Personal Responses To Photographs

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider the ways different Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) functions are applied when responding to a photograph, and how a specific photograph connects with personal life themes or interests. The MBTI framework is used to explore four different individual responds to a photograph. The way each individual gathers information about what they see and the strategies brought to making a judgement or decision about what is seen reflects a personal odyssey or way of representing life themes through use of innate preferences.

## Introduction

One visual image can bring forth many different responses or interpretations. What does each person's unique personality combined with personal life themes bring to a photograph?

In his paper for this conference, Rune Pettersson (2001) reports finding "that pictures can generate a great variety of associations in audiences ... [and] ... visual experience is subject to individual interpretation". Pictures should be presented with a caption or guiding question when they are used in learning environments where the learners are expected to understand specific meaning intended by the producer.

Certainly context is important for making meaning of photographs. Each person will provide his/her own context when not directed how to look at a picture. In previous research I have found that, given the same instruction, people respond very differently to the same visual image (Russell, 1997). More recently I have gathered transcripts of responses to a photograph from people who know their Myers Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) preferences. Analysis of these data have lead to the identification of the influence of MBTI preferences in responses to a photograph (Russell, 1999).

One's personal collection of photographs represents a personal odyssey or journey, how do these same photographs tap into the psyche of other individuals with similar or different MBTI preferences?

The purpose of the IVLA Conference workshop was to explore how different MBTI functions are used to respond to photographs, and how specific photographs are connected with personal life themes or interests. During the workshop participants were involved in selecting photographs from a collection

of images and identifying reasons why these images were relevant for them as a life theme or as a personal interest.

The key issues addressed in this paper are:

1. How does a photograph relate to life themes or personal interest for different personality types?
2. How do different personality types make meaning from a photograph?
3. Which Myers Briggs perceiving or judging (decision making) functions are important in responding to a photograph?

In this paper I will introduce the key Myers Briggs Type dichotomies. Then examples of four responses to a photograph will be explored in terms of MBTI preferences and consideration of personal life themes for these respondents.

In order to participate in this paper I invite you to respond to the same photograph (Figure 1) before reading what others have written. Take five minutes to look at the photo and to write (on paper) your responses to this photograph with your normal writing hand and then put your pen in your other hand and, keeping it in this hand, write additional responses which come to mind. In both cases just write whatever comes to your mind as you look at the photograph on the screen. In this paper I will not follow through with what you write using your other hand, however, you might recognise a different perspective 'seen' when using your 'inferior' hand. For some people these responses reflect their MBTI inferior functions.

Figure 1  
Photograph for response



### Myers Briggs Type Indicator

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator is based on the works of Carl G Jung, Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers. The theory suggests each person uses innate mental functions or processes to gather information and to make decisions based on the information gathered. The MBTI has been well researched, has been translated into thirty languages and is the most widely used psychological instrument in the world.

As we view each visual image presented we have certain perceptions and draw some conclusions or meaning from those perceptions. The combination of varying strategies of perception and techniques for drawing conclusions suggests each viewer will bring a different meaning to any visual image. In this exploration we will focus on photographic images which represent a slice of reality and use the Myers Briggs theory of psychological types to address the different ways of perceiving and drawing conclusions about photographs. From here applications could be made in relation to other visual images.

Four dichotomies which are psychologically different rather than logical opposites underlie MBTI theory:

1. Attitude: *Extraversion & Introversion*. The way an individual is energised can be either through extraversion by interacting with people and objects in the outer world (E) or through introversion by reflecting on people and objects within his/her own mind (I).
2. Perceiving Function: *Sensing & iNtuiting*. The way a person perceives or gathers information

may predominantly be through either of two perceiving functions. Sensates gather information using facts supplied via their senses of touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing (S). iNtuitives identify relationships as they search for connections and an overview of possibilities using their unconscious intuition (N).

3. Judging Function: *Thinking & Feeling*. The way a person judges a situation, makes a decision or draws conclusions may predominantly be through either of two judging functions. For Thinking preference people, decisions are rationally made based on truth and objective justice (T). The Feeling preference people make their rational decisions based on values and outcomes related to people (F).
4. Orientation: *Judging & Perceiving*. The way an individual is oriented in the outer world is evidenced by either structure and organisation with a focus on closure and decision making (J) or flexibility and organisation with a focus on continuous search for additional information (P).

The focus of this paper is the four functions: The two perceiving functions of Sensing and iNtuiting, and the two judging or decision-making functions of Thinking and Feeling.

### Orientation Of The Four Functions

At a deeper level eight functions are evident in MBTI theory. Each function operates differently depending on whether it is extraverted or introverted. People with a judging orientation, extravert their judging function (Thinking -Te or Feeling - Fe) and

people with a perceiving orientation extravert their perceiving function (Sensing - Se or iNtuiting - Ne). If the judging function is extraverted then the perceiving function will be introverted (Sensing – Si or iNtuiting – Ni). If the perceiving function is extraverted then the judging function will be introverted (Thinking – Ti or Feeling – Fi). This is represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2  
Orientation of the four MBTI functions  
Perceiving functions: Sensing & iNtuiting  
Judging functions: Thinking & Feeling

Judging orientation	Ni Te J	Ni Fe J	Si Te J	Si Fe J
Perceiving orientation	Ne Ti P	Ne Fi P	Se Ti P	Se Fi P

MBTI theory suggests a person will have a dominant function and this will be supported by an auxiliary function. Thus a person who has Ne as a dominant function will have either Ti or Fi as their supporting auxiliary function. The dominant function is identified by the direction of energy as indicated by extraversion or introversion. Thus a person with ESTJ (E Si Te J) preferences will have the extraverted Thinking function as the dominant function and introverted Sensing as the auxiliary function. And an ISTJ (I Si Te J) person will have introverted Sensing function as the dominant function and extraverted Thinking as the auxiliary function.

The way a person responds to a visual image may be different depending on which of the eight functions are dominant or auxiliary. Each response will require a person to perceive (gather information from or about the image) and to make a judgement or decision about the image. A person’s expression of response to a photograph may represent specific mental functions.

In theory the eight functions suggest different perspectives when looking at a photo:

Se – extraverted Sensing (\_S\_P)

This function focuses on the objective details in the photo and makes meaning based on practical usefulness or value for the reality of the moment.

Si – introverted Sensing (\_S\_J)

This function focuses on the sensory detail in the photo and will make connections with previous personal events which will be re-experienced through the inner senses.

Ne – extraverted iNtuiting (\_N\_P)

This function seeks ideas or concepts suggested by the photo and makes many connections with a wide variety of possibilities for the present or future.

Ni – introverted iNtuiting (\_N\_J)

This function seeks ideas within the photo and make symbolic connections with a wide variety of concepts and ideas related to previous personal experiences and imaginings.

Te – extraverted Thinking (\_\_TJ)

This function analyses the photo contents to make logical connections between the photo and well developed principles which govern objective reality in the here and now.

Ti – introverted Thinking (\_\_TP)

This function questions the photo contents to make philosophical connections between the ideas represented in the photo and mental models which are already created in the mind.

Fe – extraverted Feeling (\_\_FJ)

This function considers how the people in the photographed environment organise their lives and relationships according to societal expectations.

Fi – introverted Feeling (\_\_FP)

This function finds in a photo values which match with inner ideals and personal values and explores what it would be like for self or others who are in that environment.

Responses to a photograph and meaning made by an individual represent his/her innate preferences overlaid with personal life experiences. The four examples which follow demonstrate how MBTI function preferences can be applied to responses to a photograph.

### Analysis Of Four Responses To The Photograph

The colour version of the photograph in Figure 1 was the stimulus for non-directed responses by people with different MBTI preferences. I have analysed four responses with reference to the dominant and supporting (auxiliary) functions which may have been operating. Insights from each person pertaining to their personal understanding of how their functions were operating at the time of writing are also provided. All these responses were written with the normal writing hand.

Scott

E Ni Te J - extraverted Thinking is supported by introverted iNtuition

*A winter's day at a market in France. A day out with the family on Sunday morning. It could also be Saturday morning. The chemist sign in French confirms the location. A typical French village square. The feeling that it's cold and that it could rain, despite the sunny appearance. The baguette in the woman's hand gives me the impression of a typical French family scene. A morning at the market buying food and maybe some cheap clothes. The photo makes me feel quite good, as it's the weekend. I get a relaxed, enjoyable pleasant feeling. The cobblestone plaza is another indication that it is a European setting. I can't quite make out the colours on the right-hand side of the photo. I think they are probably flowers. Looking at the shadows and light makes me think that it's morning. Also, the atmosphere seems quite lively. A mixture of old and young people. The building on the right is most probably the town church, which is situated in the main square (grande place). The lady on the right could have just purchased some food after attending Mass.*

The extraverted Thinking function is evident throughout the writing where objective justification or explanation is given for derived meaning ('sign in French confirms the location' and 'shadows and light makes me think that it's morning'). Supporting introverted iNtuition is represented with a number of symbolic connections to prior understanding ('the atmosphere seems quite lively' and the baguette symbolising a French family). The focus is on the objects rather than the people and their interactions.

Scott reports how he approached the photo:

*I described the atmosphere of the photo [as] 'it seems quite lively' and I also said 'I get a relaxed, enjoyable, pleasant feeling'. I am an extravert and like to convey energy and enthusiasm. When I first looked at this photo I was very pleased to be able to establish in which country it was taken. ... arriving at these conclusions gave me a sense of satisfaction. I think the fact that I enjoy activities like this implies that I am an N type and that I particularly like doing things with an innovative bent. ... even my description of the scene indicates that I quite enjoy this type of situation.*

Maree

I Si Fe J - introverted Sensing supported by extraverted Feeling

*At first glance it appears to be taken in a market place. There are many people strolling about, and a family out together. On looking longer, perhaps a European open air market. The stalls are covered in canvas roofing and a 'pharmacie' is in the background. Stalls are selling clothing and fresh flowers. The family has bought a long loaf of bread, perhaps returning home for lunch after a morning stroll through the village square. The street is paved in cobblestones and the buildings surrounding the area are stone brick, suggesting a very old site. It appears to be cool weather as people are dressed in overcoats, jackets and boots. Their clothing is colourful; happy colours of red, white and blue; suggesting a happy time of year, perhaps Spring due to the fresh flowers, or maybe dressing in an attempt to cheer themselves up despite some inclement weather. The people tend to represent a mix of locals (woman in overcoat) and tourists (people ambling and browsing) suggesting the market is in a holiday destination. On sitting and looking longer I can hear the excitement in the children's voices and the parent's laughter. I can smell the fresh bread and flowers and feel the warmth of the sun on a cool day.*

Maree presents a focus on providing subjective justification for description of what is in the photo. Whereas Scott's justification was from clues given by objects, Maree's focus is on people and what they are doing. It is interesting to notice that Maree twice says 'on looking longer' before she describes more detail using information gathered through her introverted sensing function. In conclusion her sensing function recalls sounds and smells which are represented as if she were present instead of just looking at a photo.

Maree reports how she responded to the photo:

*I tended to look for clues in the photo, and took a great deal of time to think before responding. ... I looked for evidence first, and noticed the details of the picture rather than the overall scene. I observed the images in the photograph sequentially, starting in the background moving to the foreground, where I focussed on specific examples in the photo. ... My responses were brief and concise and I used a logical approach to form my conclusions ... I talked of the purpose and direction of the people in the photograph and sought structure in the image.*

Jo

E Si Fe J - extraverted Feeling is supported by introverted Sensing

*Ahh...the market place! As a child I remember outings to the South Melbourne markets, in Victoria. On a Saturday morning I would go with my Grandma and buy the weekly fruit and vegetables for the family. It was my Grandma's way of helping mum. Later as a young adult, I continued to take my elderly grandma to these markets, and she would buy something yummy for me as a thank you for the outing. I remember the crowded aisles with fresh fruit and vegetables, the fishmongers (and holding my nose due to the smell). We always bought a special treat from the Chinese stall (I can still taste and smell it now) and a bunch of flowers for gran's special vase. The memories have flooded back- but on a recent visit to the local markets, I found things not the same.*

While Jo has the same functions and judging orientation as Maree, her response as a dominant extravert is quite different. Her extraverted feeling preference is shown with the dominant focus on helping others ('Grandma's way of helping mum' and 'buy something yummy for me as a thank you'). Introverted Sensing is evident from rich memories of tastes, smells and details of the environment.

Jo reports how she approached the photo:

*I quickly started to remember previous trips to the market, before thinking about the picture. I looked at the people in the photo and what they were doing. Past experiences had a huge bearing on how I looked at his photo. The facts of the photo (e.g. the bread, coats) led me to make assumptions ... this photo helped me remember times that I would help my grandma do her shopping (my need to help others). I also looked at how the people in the photo were feeling, the market was warm and friendly.*

Maureen

E Ne Fi P - Extraverted iNtuition is supported by introverted Feeling

*This photo appears French in flavour to me, and centres around a family. The man has a striking resemblance to John Kennedy Jnr. It seems to be cold -there are lots of coats. The family are not tourists, rather they are out for the morning to pick up some bread, perhaps they are on their way home from Church. The child in the red coat has something to say as the mother places the bread in the bag on the back of the stroller. There seem to be some markets. This is a scene of happy*

*family, the children relate well to their father and there is something nice about the way he is leaning down to communicate with the daughter and is the "stroller pusher."*

*The lady in the coat to our right is lost in thought, a chic dresser with red jumper and red boots. There is sunshine on a cold day. Life is going on in an historical setting. There is a chemist shop in the background with quaint attic windows, made from old brick. The square is paved with old stones. The photograph annoys me slightly in its blurred state. The mother of the family reminds me of my sister-in-law. I would love to go there with my husband and daughters...to somewhere "old", and just spend time. To live with the people doing their daily thing. Is this what life was like for Viv? (A friend of mine who spent a few months in a French village researching an historical figure.)*

*The feelings for me are of the peace and love of the family unit the sense of history and people living together peacefully.*

Extraverted intuition is seen in words such as 'appears', 'seems', 'perhaps' as the atmosphere is described from intuitive observation, rather than factual detail. Many possibilities are presented. Introverted Feeling is evident as feelings and actions of people in the photo are explored from the perspective of past experiences relating to people.

Maureen reports how she approached the photo:

*I focussed on the "feel" of the photo, the happiness of the family group, the sadness of the death of JFK Jnr and the warmth of the sunshine. My comments were spontaneous, not planned. My response was very heavily guided by my personal values of the family unit.*

### **Life themes And Interests And Personal Odyssey**

From these four responses to the same photograph and supporting comments on how the photograph was perceived and judged we have insights about four different life themes and interests. We can catch a glimpse of the personal odyssey each person travels.

Scott (ENTJ) is an Australian living in Spain and frequently travels to France where he sees villages just like this. Here he shares his need to make objective sense or judgements about things he sees in the outer world around him. His experiences arise from exploring possibilities through internalising the atmosphere presented in the image. Scott enjoys relaxing Sundays when he and his Spanish wife go to their local village for a coffee. In MBTI terms Scott's dominant function is extraverted thinking and he uses this to make decisions based on the meaning

of objects he sees around him. This is well supported by his introverted intuition which picks up on the atmosphere and makes symbolic connections with similar objects and experiences from his past.

Maree (ISFJ) is oriented towards family values and she experiences details in her environment. Her judgements about the photo are related to people and detail she sees in the scene. Her dominant introverted sensing takes time for inner reflection as she relates the detail she sees to her prior experiences. The detail of these facts need time for deliberation and then are related to situations pertaining to people. Maree's senses of hearing, smell and touch, like Jo's, are stimulated to a much greater extent than those of the intuitives Scott and Maureen.

Jo (ESFJ) has strong family ties and traditions. Her introverted Sensing also provides her with an eidetic memory for details and memories of people helping each other in the day-to-day practicalities.. However, unlike Maree, Jo's dominant function is extraverted feeling and this forms the focus for her response to the photo.

Maureen (ENFP) looks for possibilities of travel with her family in order to become involved with people in another country. Her dominant extraverted intuition makes connections with events occurring in her outer world environment at the time of viewing the photo. Decisions about the photo are made through using her introverted feeling function to reflect on what may be going on in the minds of the people she sees. She wants to be part of the lives of the people which is a different perspective from Scott's desire to enjoy the challenge of making objective sense of his surrounds when he visits a new environment.

### **Where to from here?**

Each person viewing a visual image will have travelled a personal pathway and their odyssey will reflect life interests and decisions made along their journey. These themes will be approached through application of preferred strategies for gathering information and making decisions.

The examples given in this paper provide a framework from which to explore responses to a photograph and to reflect on how innate preferences for gathering information and making decisions on how to respond might reflect personal life themes or interests.

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator provides a useful framework for understanding why one individual experiences the same visual in quite a different way from another individual.

My next challenge is to look at responses to a photograph with the non-writing 'inferior' hand to

explore the possibility that these responses may reflect MBTI inferior functions.

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