

# Guess who's coming to dinner?



## *An ethical Myers-Briggs dinner party*

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Ruth is investigating the relationship between individual differences in cognitive processing amongst doctors and how they might influence clinical practice. The MBTI is one of the instruments being used in her studies.

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### **The host: Ruth (ENTJ)**

I qualified as an MBTI practitioner in 2005. My key reason for undertaking the accreditation was to utilise the MBTI as part of a research study in my PhD program. The research ultimately involved over 150 one-on-one feedback sessions with doctors and students, and was due to commence shortly after I finished the course.

There was a problem, though: I had no experience explaining, administering, scoring and reporting the MBTI, and my anxiety was mounting. I felt the need to develop both competence and confidence in using the MBTI.

Ever the rationalist, who also loves entertaining and dinner parties, I decided that some of my friends might enjoy knowing their types. I, in turn, could then consolidate my training. So I invited twelve friends to a dinner party with a twist. I sent them each an email explaining the MBTI and my need to practise, and invited them to a group MBTI session, followed by the meal.

I explained that it was important to me that I still upheld the ethical considerations, so if they wanted to keep their results private, they could just stay until after the meal. However, if they wanted to have some fun, they could stay afterwards for some group activities ... but if they did so, it would be assumed they were happy to share their type.

Guests arrived at 4pm, and my sunroom was converted into a mini training room. After an introduction, they completed the questionnaires. I then led them through a self-typing process. We then broke for dinner—which I had the foresight to ask them to bring! I supplied the pasta and bread, and they brought the selection of

saucers. Whilst I retired to my bedroom to score their forms in silence, they prepared the food and started dinner. So actually I escaped without any cooking, and emerged in time to eat—a first for a dinner party in my own house.

After dinner I provided results individually on a feedback form, and we discussed the MBTI further. We then undertook a couple of group activities to highlight different preferences.

One of these was quite memorable, relating to the S-N preference. I asked two people to be involved. Both had high preference clarity scores on this dimension, but John preferred S, and Fiona preferred N. They removed themselves from the room, and I invited them back, one at a time. I asked them both to tell us about my kitchen.

John was first. Without hesitation he said:

*Well, there are exposed beams on the ceiling and the room is painted blue. On the southern side, about half way down, there are brown cupboards about shoulder height. And to the right hand side when you walk in the room there is Fisher & Paykel upside-down fridge ...*

... and he continued to report a wealth of specific detail about my kitchen.

Then Fiona came back into the room, and I asked her the same question. She paused, and in about 60 seconds she expressed only four words, with long pauses in between: 'big, light, clean ... friendly'. I could not have planned a better illustration of differences on these preferences, even if I had scripted it myself. Everyone in the group could see clear differences between John and Fiona. Several have since reflected on it further with me, clearly recalling what it showed.

I thought this was going to be a fun way to analyse friends' endearing quirks



**Raechel Damarell BA, Grad Dip Info Stud (ENFP)** is a friend of Ruth Sladek. She is currently on 12 months maternity leave from her position as librarian at Flinders University.

Matthew has a very clear preference for N and his wife a very clear preference for S. When I asked Matthew to give directions from Rundle Mall to the Adelaide Central Market, he said something like this: 'Well you head down the Mall for a little bit, and then head towards the Law Courts down past the Town Hall. Then the Market is just across the Square'. His wife commented, 'No wonder I always get lost when you give directions!' Another good example of the differences between S and N.

Several aspects of my dinner party worked well, and several didn't. I have no doubt that this dinner party helped me. I practised introducing, scoring, reporting and discussing the MBTI. When my research program subsequently started, I felt more confident in reporting results to participants than I would have otherwise.

On a personal level, I have had many delightful conversations about type with my friends since then, and the opportunity to explore type with significant others has been enlightening and enjoyable. I think an enjoyable evening was had by all.

I was concerned that in jest, friends might make stereotypical or negative comments about types different from their own, so I was quite clear in emphasising the ground rules before the evening started. Namely, I stressed that because we were friends, it was even more important to be careful not to do this, and that whilst they might think a comment would be funny, I would be offended and they would be asked to leave! I had some success—there were only a few odd comments, and others in the group soon chastised the culprits.

On the down side, it is harder to control friends than strangers! Especially in such a social setting, the extraverted types in particular were quite happy to be vocal. Several of the introverted types commented to me afterwards that it was frustrating, because those who finished the forms before them were *so* noisy.

I fear bottles of good wine before dinner contributed to this also. If I had the opportunity again, I would uncork the wine in a different room and usher those who finished first into that room, leaving the remaining participants in peace and quiet.

Even though I had a select set of MBTI books available on the night, in hindsight it was somewhat limiting, and perhaps frustrating, for my friends to not have their own *Introduction to Type* or *You've Got Personality* booklet. I could have had enough copies available for them to purchase from me. Further reading helps to bring clarity about both one's own type and others', and the best timing for this was probably directly after the evening.

### **The guest: Raechel (ENFP)**

On receiving an invitation to the dinner party, I excitedly thought that this was going to be a fun way for friends to lightheartedly analyse each other's endearing quirks and idiosyncratic viewpoints (perhaps in much the same way as you would discuss star signs in the staff tea room?). What I failed to appreciate in advance was just how powerful the MBTI tool was going to be in helping me understand why I often felt less successful in communicating with certain friends in my circle than others.

On arriving, I was a little anxious that the night was to be a bit more serious than anticipated, as Ruth explained the need for participants to be ethical and respectful in discussing each other's type. The impulse to gently tease or good-naturedly stereotype someone you *assume* you know well can be irresistible.

The actual administration of the questionnaire was also a little angst-ridden, as some of those who finished quickly were quite happy to fill the room with chatter, while those still thinking deeply about the questions were clearly irritated by this. It was interesting to learn later that the 'chatterers' were invariably extraverted types, while the 'mutterers' were largely introverted. As one guilty of disruptive behaviour, I must confess to having felt (at the time) a little disappointed by such a reaction. This was a party, after all!

However, things swiftly improved. Once working out our type and discussing what each element meant, we took part in group activities designed to highlight the differences. These were excellent, and served their purpose well (especially the S-N comparison described above).

I was particularly struck by the explanation of the extravert and introvert types. I'm sure many of us came to the party confident we could pick the extraverts amongst us, so it came as some shock to learn that those who laughed loudest or made us laugh the hardest weren't necessarily extraverted.

Furthermore, I didn't expect *all* the Es to raise their hand along with the Is when the question was asked, 'Who feels shy?' The introverts seemed quite taken aback by this, too, and by the extraverts' explanation that the difference is merely how one chooses to act on this shyness.

In all, I am grateful that this unforgettable night afforded me the opportunity to gain a deeper respect and affection for those who never seemed to 'get me' fully (and vice-versa). There have even been occasions since where I have consciously and successfully modified my message to suit the listener (usually my husband—a strong ST to my NF type).

### **The reflective colleague: Anne (INFP)**

What a great idea to have friends over in order to become more comfortable introducing type, and to help understand how preferences are experienced. This environment provides an atmosphere where each person can represent their 'natural' self. They do not need to demonstrate their work abilities or present a false persona. Shyness will not influence extraverts to talk too much, nor introverts to hibernate. We ask individuals to do the MBTI with a 'shoes off' mindset. A gathering of people who know each other well provides an environment relatively free of interpersonal constraints, with the freedom to mentally 'take off their shoes'.

People often ask me to 'tell them their type'. While it is not appropriate or ethical to tell them what their preferences are, it is also not possible to know the motivation behind certain behaviour or articulated conversation. No function preference stands in isolation and, alongside societal, contextual and environmental factors, the unique combination of an individual's functions may influence a response.

Rich understanding and value comes from exploring what is *behind* each comment. A classic example occurred when I heard a secretary say she liked to help people fix their computer problems. I immediately assumed she was talking from a preference for feeling, from wanting to support her colleagues. 'No', she said, 'I help them so they can *get the task done*'.

Her preference for thinking, focussed on logical and efficient organisation of a task, was the motivation behind her comment. My interpretation came from my innate feeling preference: the words that I heard might well not have been the precise words she spoke!

Assumptions behind comments can be explored in the safe environment of dinner with friends.

Responses are likely to be naturally aligned with more than one preference. John's description of Ruth's kitchen may represent sensing combined with a judging orientation, supported by the logic of a thinking preference. And Fiona's intuitive response might represent the brainstorming aspect of a perceiving orientation, and also a consideration of how the ambience works for her feeling preference.

In asking questions related to preferences, key words are 'tell me about' and 'why?'. The verb 'describe' may elicit a sensing response, whereas 'tell me about' enables the responder to use their most comfortable response format. The open-ended nature of the question allows the responder to answer according to their personal mindset.

While the J-P orientation and E-I attitude provide a description of energy direction and dominance for each function, it is the function preferences in their energy attitudes which are the essence of the Myers-Briggs instrument.

We tend to develop our dominant function in our preferred attitude during our primary school years, so I ask if people can recall what they enjoyed doing during those years. If the response is descriptive, I follow up with a 'why?' to try to find an underlying motivation or passion.

In this environment of friends, each person can present their 'natural' self



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Here are two contrasting memories of primary school years which address the dominant judging functions:

**Taya** (INFP): *Active sport, running around during lunch and recess.*

WHY? *Confidence building, loved being outdoors, the boys and girls mixed well.*

**Phil** (INTP): *Learning about the history and geography of other countries.*

WHY? *The appeal lay in the realisation that other places and times are knowable: that the gaps in my knowledge can be filled in with names of people and places, dates, sequences of events, etc. Beyond that, a fascination with the exotic, with places unknown.*

While Taya's clear memory is associated with interpersonal interactions aligned with her preference for feeling, Phil's response is clearly aligned with a thinking preference directed to learning about events and phenomena. Their responses also offer evidence for support in recognising temperaments. In the essence of confidence building and growth of character for individuals, Taya displays the *Idealist* (NF) temperament, while Phil's *Rational* (NT) temperament is represented by value placed on learning to gain new knowledge.

**Bruce's** *Artisan* (SP) response was:

*Art classes – making things. Pottery, squidgy bottles that farted when empty, dyeing shirts. I guess you could use it there and then.*

Bruce's ISTP preferences are evident in his focus on producing something immediately 'useful'. Again, the focus is not on relationships, even though the outcomes will be directed towards people.

With her recall of a camping trip, **Ainsley** (ISFJ) reports the rich visual memory and need for security of a *Guardian* (SJ) temperament:

*I can vividly remember a beautiful morning walk we went on at Binna Burra in the Gold Coast hinterland. The adventure activities also pushed me out of my safety zone and gave me extra confidence in my abilities.*

Teenage memories may elicit recognition of the development of the auxiliary function in its preferred attitude. I often discover introverts who had a wider social group in high school, or extraverts with memories of a couple of close friends. These reflect the balance between the extraverted and introverted attitudes of the dominant and auxiliary functions. During my own (INFP) pre-teen years I did not have a wide social group, whereas in high school my social circle was much wider.

Another question which can help a person to recognise innate preferences is: *What would be an ideal job for you?* Bruce's (ISTP) ideal job is:

*Owning and running a film-making company with unlimited budget. Imagine the gadgets to be played with and stories to be told!*

Here the focus is on organisation, tasks, fun and 'gadgets'. Organisational analysis and tasks are also relevant for **Rhea**, who has preferences for ESFJ. Her ideal job is *'the one I have now: executive assistant doing administration and logistics'*. In her response to the 'why' part of the question, it is apparent that she relates what she does to interpersonal benefits and relationships:

*I have respect, autonomy, and am valued by my colleagues.*

Asking questions of friends with different and similar preferences provides powerful insights, especially when individuals hear what comes out of their mouths and recognise for themselves how their responses are similar or different. Recognising and understanding each person's beliefs and perspectives is a key to celebrating different functional preferences.

I wonder if each guest *did* guess whom they had brought to dinner, and found new understanding of the unexpected individual within! Some gained new understanding of spouses and friends. After such a congenial gathering, friends invariably recognise personal strengths and idiosyncrasies. Best of all, in future interactions they will talk the talk, using their insights into type preferences to respect and celebrate differences.

Knowledge of MBTI concepts can raise awareness of personal differences, offering new understandings for family and work relationships. This dinner party introduction offers opportunities for further exploration, and is a relevant strategy for facilitators to practice introducing MBTI, valuable for building a store of stories or examples to illustrate the dichotomies.

Each facilitator, with a differing personality, will bring a unique approach to conducting their dinner party. Some will adhere to rules for presenting the MBTI and may be structured and organised. Others will ask leading questions, enabling participants to share understandings and stories that provide examples of different preferences. Guests' conversations may meander, as some become excited and search for more MBTI information, while others are sidetracked to more typical dinner party conversations. All conversations, even the deviations, can later be commented on, as they reflect specific type differences.

People who are introduced positively to Myers-Briggs concepts by an ethical facilitator will find a rich, well-researched tool to help them understand themselves and the people with whom they come in contact. ❖

## References

- Myers, Isabel Briggs 1998, *Introduction to Type: A guide to understanding your results on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (6th edn), Melbourne: CPP / ACER Press.
- McGuinness, Mary 2004, *You've got personality: An introduction to the personality types described by Carl Jung and Isabel Myers*, Epping NSW: MaryMac.

Anne invites *your* suggestions of questions for exploring type preferences with friends over dinner. Your questions and sample responses will be published in this *Review*.

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