

An Extended History of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® Instrument

By Katharine D. Myers



Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs (Myers)

Here is the story of how the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® instrument got started and the mother-daughter team that created it.

The story really began with Katharine Briggs, whose lifetime interest was the development of human potential. As a young teenager she ran a little school in the afternoon for neighborhood children observing the mothers and daughters to learn what made a good mother and what made a poor mother. That remained her lifelong passion. She became a teacher and, after she married in 1886, she continued her observation and study, reading books about education and psychology as they were published. Her husband was one of this country's most respected and beloved scientists and a scientific advisor to President Herbert Hoover and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Katharine said her husband was a scientist of the physical world; she considered herself a scientist of human behavior. She educated her only child, Isabel, at home and kept a careful record of her teaching methods and philosophy, and of Isabel's growth in a manuscript called *The Education of Suzanne*. In addition, Katharine began observing and recording different patterns in people's personalities and published several articles on her findings.

In 1923, Katharine read a book by Swiss psychiatrist, Carl G. Jung, called *Psychological Types*. She observed that Jung understood human behavior better than any psychologist or educator she had ever read, and she spent the rest of her life reading and studying his work. Katharine and her daughter, Isabel, were remarkably close and the mother shared her learning with her daughter. Together they checked out Jung's ideas against their observations of people and found them accurate and useful. They wanted to bring these valuable insights out into the world to benefit other people.

When Isabel was sixteen she began attending Swarthmore College. Soon after, she met and fell in love with Clarence Myers and brought him home to meet her parents. "Chief" as he was called, was very different from anyone in their family. The family was fascinated by the differences in the person who was to become Isabel's husband. Chief and Isabel discovered that an understanding and appreciation of differences served them well in 62 years of marriage. At the celebration of his wife's 82nd birthday, Chief asked to say a few words and concluded saying that she had lost none of her charm and youthful enthusiasm, and he still marveled at why she would have married "someone like me". Although they were of totally different types, he said, they fell in love.

“Need I tell you...that I am still in love with her”? (*Katharine and Isabel, Consulting Psychologists Press, (1991)* p.179)

I recall Isabel sharing with others how she wanted to develop a way to give individuals access to knowledge of their psychological type. World War II had begun and one day Isabel said, “While I was making the bed I thought how depressed I was at this terrible breakdown in human affairs. I realized that if I allowed myself to be depressed, the enemy would be winning. I needed to do something positive.”

Many people, both soldiers and civilians, were being assigned to tasks that didn't really suit their personality types, putting them under stress and making them less productive in their jobs. Isabel decided that if she could find a way for them to learn their type they could be placed in a job that would be more satisfying and make the most use of their skills. The increased productivity would help both the war effort and decrease their stress. This would become the, “constructive use of differences”, which Isabel hailed as her motto for the Indicator.

Isabel shared the idea with her mother, who eagerly supported her idea, and the mother-daughter team began their work. This work became Isabel's passion for the rest of her life. *She drove all over Pennsylvania persuading principals in schools, deans in medical and nursing schools, and managers in businesses to give her permission to give the questionnaire to students and employees. Based on their answers and their own assessments of their personalities, she would make changes to the questions so that the results would be more accurate. Her children recall how they would climb the stairs to their bedrooms as their mother was hunched over a table going through her index cards of questions, and when they came down in the morning she would be there again working away.*

Isabel and Chief published and distributed the MBTI® questionnaire themselves and Isabel paid young housewives and mothers to help with the scoring.

In 1956, Isabel was visited by David R. Saunders, Ph.D., a brilliant psychometrician and psychologist who worked at Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, N.J., which published college entrance exams (the SAT) and other intelligence tests. Henry Chauncey, president of ETS, had long wanted to publish a personality instrument, and he was intrigued and sent one of his top people to investigate. David was impressed and on his recommendation, Isabel was invited to present her work at ETS in Princeton and an agreement was made for ETS to become the publisher.

David remained an enthusiastic supporter but others were not interested in personality tests. They were scornful that Isabel was not a psychologist and did not have a doctorate in psychology or a related field. Some even called her “the little old lady in tennis shoes”. Isabel was undaunted and continued her work.

With ETS supporting the MBTI® assessment, Isabel had additional help with the research and validation. The Indicator was used largely in schools and in career counseling. *Isabel presented a paper about the instrument in 1964 in Los Angeles at the American Psychologists Association conference and continued throughout the 1960's collecting results from thousands of people, including more than 5,300 medical students and 19, 000 nurses.*

In 1968, Isabel was astonished to receive a visit from Takeshi Ohsawa, a psychologist from Japan. While on a Fellowship at ETS, Ohsawa's partner in a newly formed company, which was to provide recruiting, training, and placement services for Japanese businesses, had become acquainted with the Indicator. They wanted to translate the Indicator into Japanese and use it with their clients. A contract was signed that year. One year later Isabel received royalties on 40,000 copies. Within a decade, Ohsawa, was using 300,000 copies a year. For a number of years, Japanese royalties were greater than domestic ones.

In 1969, Isabel was called on by Mary McCaulley, PH.D., a psychology professor at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, Florida. Dr. McCaulley had happened across the MBTI® assessment and found it useful. She and Isabel formed an immediate friendship and collegial relationship, and Isabel had a partnership for the rest of her life with someone who shared her passion and commitment. In order to gather data for their joint research, they set up a scoring service in Mary's office called the Typology Lab.

In 1975, the American Medical Student Association, whose members had found the knowledge of type helpful in their selection of specialty, helped to fund an outside not-for-profit organization called the Center for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT), which distributed information for those interested in type. Today, CAPT retains its primary mission of MBTI® research, but it also publishes MBTI® and Jungian related products and materials, offers professional training programs, and houses the Isabel Briggs Myers Memorial Library (www.capt.org).

Also in 1975, the first psychological type conference was held at the University of Florida. This conference was followed by conferences at Michigan State University in 1977, and Philadelphia in 1979. The Association for Psychological Type (APT) (now The Association for Type International or APTi) was formed at the Philadelphia conference. APTi conferences continue to be held every two years (www.aptiinternational.org).

Kathleen, Isabel's granddaughter attended the conference not long after she graduated from college. She stayed up late, and when she returned to her aunt and uncle's room (with whom she was staying) she bemused, "It's so weird, all my life the only time I ever heard about the MBTI® was when I was visiting Chief and Isabel. Now there are all these people around me all talking about the Indicator. All the time, just like at my grandparents. Really weird!"

In 1975, CPP, Inc. (formerly Consulting Psychologists Press) became the publisher of the Indicator. For the first time the MBTI® tool was available through a catalog, which opened the door to the phenomenal growth in its use and application. The instrument continues to be used in education and teaching, career development, relational and developmental counseling, therapy, and spiritual development. Since that time, the Indicator's primary area of growth has been within organizational development and the relatively new field of coaching. By 2004, the Indicator had been translated into 18 languages.

Some in academic psychology have been dismissive and sometimes even hostile towards both Jungian ideas and the MBTI® assessment. A 2005 article in the Swarthmore College Bulletin quoted a University of California-Berkeley psychology professor about the Indicator; "I know it's popular, but it's not at all relevant in psychology. It's a great scam cooked up by one old lady and her daughter."

In spite of this, there are many professionals and academics that value the MBTI® tool and continue to do research and find relevant applications for the work. The MBTI® inventory has become the most widely used personality inventory in the world. Why is this? The individuals, for whom it was created, find it useful in their lives. It is a Psychology that Works™.

The story of the MBTI is the story of two brilliant and creative women who had a passionate faith in the value of their own work and in Jungian ideas, awesome focus and determination, a delight in problem solving, remarkable self-discipline, and an equally passionate desire to help individuals develop their potential and to live harmoniously with each other. Katharine and Isabel had the courage and conviction to accomplish the impossible. They have been an inspiration to many.