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## Decision-Making Styles: A Comparison of Extension Faculty and the Public

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## Decision-Making Styles: A Comparison of Extension Faculty and the Public

### Abstract

We hypothesized that Extension faculty, both on-campus specialists and off-campus agents, have different decision-making preferences than the public. We drew upon data from a previous study and from a national sample to compare the faculty groups and the public. We found agents to be much more like the public in the judging function. We also found both groups of faculty to have a very strong orientation to the S and J preferences. This suggests faculty may be so engaged in data gathering and management that they are unaware of public interests in intuitions, feelings, and action. We posit that faculty should be sufficiently fluent with the MBTI to recognize and work with people having different preferences.

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## Introduction

When we work with one another it is common to assume that: 1) if we speak the same language we are basically the same and 2) what we do or experience has the same meaning to others. Thus, when we assess a situation or make a decision we may not realize that other people use quite different processes to analyze a situation or draw their own conclusions. When others fail to conform to our method or style of decision making, confusion can ensue. Because the nature of the difference is sometimes very subtle, we might have the tendency to inaccurately judge the other person as being ignorant or difficult (Gallagher, 2002). This attribution error, or misattribution of motive, can create fundamental conflicts that are difficult to resolve.

In a previous article (Saunders & Gallagher, 2003) we described differences in decision-making styles that occur between on- and off-campus faculty. These differences we linked to challenges in working relationships between on- and off-campus faculty described in a national Extension report (Ukaga et al., 2002). In this article, we describe how Extension faculty, both on and off campus, are different from the public in decision-making styles and how these differences can lead to communication challenges, conflict, and sometimes misinterpretation of educational needs.

## Review

To briefly review how people differ in their decision-making styles, the mother-daughter team of Myers and Briggs (Myers, 1990), building on the theory of Carl Jung (1923), developed a four-letter code to help people gain insights about themselves. Focusing on the opposites in Jung's theory, preferences can be established for:

1. "Where you get your energy." Extraverts (E) derive energy from outside themselves, whereas

introverts (I) do their best thinking alone.

2. "How you gather information." Sensors (S) collect information about the world through practical use of the senses, whereas intuitives (N) translate sensory information into possibilities and meanings.
3. "How you make decisions." Thinkers (T) make decisions that are impersonal and based on rational rules, whereas Feelers (F) make decisions based on personal values and subjective information.
4. "How you live your life." Judgers (J) prefer an ordered world full of structure, preplanning, and closure, whereas perceivers (P) prefer life to be open-ended and flexible (Kroeger, 1992; Berens & Nardi, 1999).

In a previous article (Saunders & Gallagher, 2003) we found that Extension faculty are relatively homogenous on certain problem-solving characteristics as measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Many authors suggest that people are drawn to others who are like themselves. This self sorting can lead to micro cultures whose members are similar in the MBTI sense, including businesses, organizations, trade groups, and educational entities. These micro cultures thus do not represent the MBTI diversity found in the general public (Kroeger, 1992; Keirse, 1998; Berens & Nardi, 1999). Indeed, we commonly expect people in the same profession to share certain qualities or preferences.

While "like gravitating to like" may make for friendlier or easier working conditions, we were curious about whether Extension faculty, both on-campus specialists and off-campus agents, were measurably different from the public. If so, can we then identify some challenges in communication across groups, and whether there is a problem with Extension faculty dominated by one type designing educational programs for other types? We propose that it would be beneficial for faculty to know these differences when communicating with clients and designing educational programs.

## Method

To assess decision-making preferences of Extension faculty in Utah, we used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). A more thorough description of the MBTI history and theory is provided in our previous article (Saunders & Gallagher, 2003). As described in that article, to identify faculty preferences we provided a self-administered 70-question variant of the MBTI (available from the lead author on request) to all Utah State University Extension faculty. We contacted all 49 on-campus Extension specialists and received 29 responses (55%) and all 78 off-campus Extension agents and received 55 responses (70%).

To identify the public's preferences we referred to the National Representative Sample (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998). This sample included 3,009 individuals weighted so as to approximate the 1990 U.S. census distribution by gender and ethnic groups. For this national sample the research form of the MBTI was given to randomly selected individuals by telephone.

For the study described here, we argue that it is desirable to use a national sample, instead of existing Extension clients, because Extension is mandated by the intent of the federal Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity Policy to serve all people. We compared both on-campus specialists and off-campus faculty to the public.

## Results

In our analysis we first identified the responses for each group for each of the four decision-making/problem-solving preferences: extraversion or introversion, sensing or intuiting, thinking or feeling, and judging or perceiving. Table 1 presents results for on-campus specialists and the public; Table 2 presents similar information for off-campus agents and the public.

**Table 1.**  
MBTI Preferences for On-Campus Specialists and the Public

| Preferences              | n* | Specialists | Public | Significance |
|--------------------------|----|-------------|--------|--------------|
| <b>Relation to world</b> |    |             |        |              |
| Extraversion (E)         | 19 | 37%         | 46%    | ns           |
| Introversion (I)         | 10 | 63%         | 54%    | ns           |

| <b>Perceiving</b>              |    |     |     |      |
|--------------------------------|----|-----|-----|------|
| Sensing (S)                    | 27 | 93% | 72% | .001 |
| Intuiting (N)                  | 2  | 7%  | 28% | .001 |
| <b>Judging</b>                 |    |     |     |      |
| Thinking (T)                   | 21 | 72% | 40% | .01  |
| Feeling (F)                    | 8  | 28% | 60% | .01  |
| <b>Dominance</b>               |    |     |     |      |
| Judging (J)                    | 28 | 97% | 54% | .001 |
| Perceiving (P)                 | 1  | 3%  | 46% | .001 |
| *n = Number in original sample |    |     |     |      |

**Table 2.**  
MBTI Preferences for Off-Campus Agents and the Public

| <b>Preferences</b>       | <b>n*</b> | <b>Agents</b> | <b>Public</b> | <b>Significance</b> |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|
| <b>Relation to world</b> |           |               |               |                     |
| Extraversion (E)         | 25        | 45%           | 46%           | ns                  |
| Introversion (I)         | 30        | 55%           | 54%           | ns                  |
| <b>Perceiving</b>        |           |               |               |                     |
| Sensing (S)              | 51        | 93%           | 72%           | .01                 |
| Intuiting (N)            | 4         | 7%            | 28%           | .01                 |
| <b>Judging</b>           |           |               |               |                     |
| Thinking (T)             | 22        | 40%           | 40%           | ns                  |
| Feeling (F)              | 33        | 60%           | 60%           | ns                  |
| <b>Dominance</b>         |           |               |               |                     |
| Judging (J)              | 51        | 93%           | 54%           | .001                |
|                          |           |               |               |                     |

|                                |   |    |     |      |
|--------------------------------|---|----|-----|------|
| Perceiving (P)                 | 4 | 7% | 46% | .001 |
| *n = Number in original sample |   |    |     |      |

## Discussion

### On-Campus Specialists and the Public

On-campus specialists are slightly more introverted (I) than the public. Although the results are not significant, there may be a tendency for those members of the public who are energized by group interaction to be more engaged in public discourse about a decision than some on-campus specialists, who would prefer more one-on-one or small-group interaction.

Specialists are significantly (at the .001 level) more sensing (S) in information-gathering style (93%) than the public (72%). While specialists as a whole are more likely to be sensors, the public is more diverse, with 28% preferring an intuiting (N) style. Thus, where specialists are comfortable making decisions based on facts, the public may be more interested in meanings and relationships, which can be the bigger issues surrounding the data.

When actually making decisions, significant differences (at the .01 level) are also found for thinking and feeling. While 72% of specialists make decisions based on thinking criteria, 60% of the public makes decisions based on feeling criteria. Thus, while specialists strive to be rational, the public may be more concerned about who is affected and how.

Also significant (at the .001 level) are differences in judging and perceiving. Almost all (97%) specialists prefer the judging function and the related focus on process and closure. However, only 54% of the public share the judging function and far more are perceivers, who are less concerned about time frames and feel comfortable leaving things open ended. In review, on-campus specialists are much more likely to prefer sensing (S), thinking (T), and judging (J) than the public.

### Off-Campus Agents and the Public

Off-campus agents are much more like the public in terms of the extroversion/introversion scale; both are about 45% extroverted. However, agents are much more like on-campus specialists in their orientation to the sensing method of gathering information, 93% compared to the public's 72% (significant at the .01 level).

Off-campus agents and the public score the same on the thinking/feeling preference (40% thinking), a score far below that of the specialists (72%), which is a significant difference we identified in our earlier article (Saunders & Gallagher, 2003). Thus, agents in the field are more like their clients than they are like on-campus specialists in terms of using the feeling function in making decisions.

### Specialists, Agents, and the Public

Off-campus agents and on-campus specialists differ significantly (at the .001 level) from the public for the judging/perceiving preference. Almost all Extension faculty, both on and off campus, prefer the judging function (93%), while the public is much more focused on perceiving (46%). In review, off-campus agents share the sensing (S) and judging (J) preference with their on-campus specialists, but are like the public in their thinking/feeling (T/F) dimension.

## Sources of Conflict

The qualities of the specialists described above (strong S, T, and J) can be interpreted as hallmarks of the professional: data oriented, rational, and focused on closure. No doubt universities strive to develop these qualities in their graduates, and Extension selects for these qualities in hiring and promotion. However, these same qualities could be liabilities in working with those outside of Extension. This might be particularly true given the very high percentage (over 90%) of S's and J's among Extension faculty. The lack of diversity suggests the potential for "group think," where voices for the intuiting (N) and perceiving (P) styles are dismissed, or worse, ridiculed. As Kroeger (1992) notes, "Your strength maximized becomes your liability."

For specialists, a primary challenge is to recognize when their preferred style of decision making (dominated by S, T, and J) is different from that of much of the public. Specialists should anticipate that they will encounter N's who want to go beyond the facts to the "larger picture" and to examine possibilities that are "less than scientific." Specialists should also anticipate that their "J-ness" can look like too much structure and too many rules, where P's in the general public want to learn through action and don't want to limit opportunities.

Most important, specialists can anticipate that their rational-decision making style will be off-putting to a large portion of the public that cares more about who is affected. To feelers, the thinkers can appear "cold blooded" and indifferent to less tangible or less measurable concerns. Where the specialist uses the developed thinking function to assess risk inherent in decisions, some of the public will use a developed feeling function to assess risk. The two assessments,

thinking/feeling, of the risk in a decision--the human, economic, social, or environmental values--can be very far apart. Thus, a specialist's thinking (T) point of view when measuring the value of a stand of trees may be hotly debated by those whose feeling (F) preference measures the value of trees in more subjective ways.

It is appropriate that agents, who are more feeling oriented, act as intermediaries in decision processes involving the public. Agents share much with specialists, but in the critical function of making decisions they are much more like the public in considering who is affected. In some situations, however, specialists are engaged with the public very directly, e.g., in conducting a study of the Klamath Basin water issue, where over a dozen specialists engaged with the public in a series of community meetings (Cartwright, Case, Gallagher, & Hathaway, 2002).

In these situations specialists need to remind themselves that some members of the public don't agree with the process specialists use to draw their conclusions, although they may agree with the overall outcome. In the worst-case scenario, the specialist, not recognizing the nature of the citizen's concern, aggravates the situation by adding more facts, more rationale, and more process.

It is not our intent to suggest that specialists abdicate this style. It is, of course, what specialists are supposed to do, and it is valuable to society. However, the larger debate about the decision is better served if specialists don't misunderstand the nature of the debate and particularly if specialists don't misattribute motive to the public. As noted in the introduction, one of the possible outcomes of misattribution is that the "other" is considered ignorant or difficult. The more defensible argument is that the public is simply using a different decision-making style.

Both specialists and agents need to recognize their strong bias toward sensing and judging. This shared preference could lead both on- and off-campus faculty, as a group, to a tacit agreement on "one right way" of thinking. For those members of the public who are strong N's and strong P's, such agreement can be very challenging, making Extension appear to be the group that is ignorant and difficult.

Extension's strong orientation toward structure can lead to the design of programs that are challenging to other temperaments. Highly structured programs--requiring regular attendance, extensive rules, frequent reporting--are likely to be a "turn off" to those who don't share the SJ style. If only SJ-style programs are available, it is likely that a segment of the population is not being served. Further, because SJ's comprise only about 40% of the population, it may be difficult to serve all of the public or grow a program when the program designers take a different view of decision making than over half of the population.

## Conclusion

It is not possible in this short article to address the many issues related to communication between Extension faculty and the public. As we noted in our earlier article (Saunders & Gallagher, 2003), we see the prescription as more long term, and we see it as necessary to be adapted to each faculty group and community/client situation. We see the information provided here as giving impetus to faculty, individually or in groups, to anticipate differences so that they might improve their communication among themselves and with the public. Several authors (McKenna & Martin, 1992; Barrett & Horner, 1989; Earnest, 1994) have recognized the value of determining MBTI preferences among Extension faculty and using that knowledge to improve communication and programming.

So, if these results are true for Utah Extension, how can one be certain these same results will hold true in other states? While we have no direct evidence that the MBTI scores in this study can be generalized to other states, the work of many studies (Berens & Nardi, 1999; Barrett & Torner, 1989; Gallagher, 2002; Earnest, 1994; Jung, 1923; Keirse, 1987; Keirse & Bates, 1978; Keirse, 1998; Kroeger, 1992; McKenna & Martin, 1992; Meyers et al., 1998; Meyers, 1990; Ukaga et al. 2002) dealing with "type begets type" suggest that, when people can control their circumstances, they will choose to associate with similar personality types. Hence, the results of this study could, in theory, be similar to results found in similar studies conducted in other states.

We propose that Extension faculty become sufficiently familiar with the MBTI to informally assess the type of those with whom they are communicating and that they have the knowledge, skills, experience, and motivation to shape their communication and programs to be more effective. We see this training as a fundamental part of what Extension must do to adapt to the challenges and changes the Cooperative Extension System now faces as it strives to remain relevant in a changing world. Extension has a strong culture, and one effect of that culture is that it selects those who fit. And, when people don't fit, the strength of the culture encourages them to leave. The result is that Extension truly needs to examine the present culture and note how it is its own "worst enemy" in terms of future success.

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