Do Certain Personality Types Have a Particular Communication Style?

Richard C. Emanuel

Abstract — **This study explores the relationship between personality type and communication style. Personality type and communication style are routinely linked. But is there really a connection between the two? Assessment of one person's personality type is based on Littauer's book** *Personality Plus*. **Norton's** *Communication Style* **theory serves as the basis for self-reports of communication style. A representative sample of undergraduate students (*n*=360) at a university in the Southeast were surveyed. Findings indicate that there is no particular combination of communication style subconstructs preferred by any particular personality type. There are, however, some communication style subconstructs that are** *not* **preferred by certain personality types. These tendencies may, in some small way, lead to a better understanding of the connections between personality type and communication style.**

Index Terms — **Communication, Communication Style, Personality, Personality Type**

I. INTRODUCTION

Statements like "That's so not like her!" and "He just loves to talk" are frequently used to describe other people. Through interaction with other people, we learn about them and, in turn, they learn about us. Many argue that one person's personality emerges from and is refined through these interactions with other people. For example, see [1] and [2]. However, as [3, p.60] points out: "evidence of where the communicator style concept might be located within contemporary personality theory is lacking." This empirical study seeks to provide some "evidence" as to whether and how the communicator style concept relates to personality theory. Specifically, this study explores whether someone who has a particular personality type also has a corresponding communication style.

II. PERSONALITY TYPE

Although a single widely accepted definition of personality does not exist, personality type refers to the psychological classification of different types of individuals. It involves a pattern or global operation of mental systems. It is "the entire mental organization of a human being at any stage of his development. It embraces every phase of human character… and every attitude that has been built up in the course of one's

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life [4, p.333]." A person's personality tends to be stable throughout life, and it often grows more pronounced over time [5]. In fact, research suggests that as much as half of a person's personality is driven by their genetic makeup; it is biological. For example, see [6]-[10]. The rest is acquired through learning, and much of that learning is the result of positive reinforcement of desirable or otherwise approved behaviors and/or negative reinforcement of undesirable or disapproved behaviors.

Sometimes called temperament, the notion of personality type has been the focus of interest and study for centuries. Carl Jung's *Psychological Types* is one of the most influential theoretical works on personality type [11]. Jung posited that there are two main ways of thinking that drive the personality – how one perceives the world, and how one makes decisions. He wrote that there were two opposite personality styles for each function, that is, one either relies on their own senses or on intuition to perceive the world. One either relies on the use of logic or feelings when one makes decisions.

More recently, a person's personality type is just an Internet click away as dozens of web sites provide online survey questions and immediate feedback to analyze personality type. One of the more well-known and widely used instruments for assessing personality type is the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory® (MBTI). The premise of the MBTI is that behavior preferences involve the way people prefer to perceive things and the way they make judgments [12]. These behavior preferences are presented as dichotomies that center on two basic attitudes – extroversion versus introversion. The premise is that people tend to be more of one attitude and less of the other. Each attitude is then described in terms of three functions: sensing versus intuition, thinking versus feeling, and judgment versus perception. Thus, 16 different non-redundant personality type combinations are possible. However, despite its popularity and wide-spread use, some academic psychologists have criticized the MBTI instrument claiming that it lacks convincing validity data. For example, see [13] and [14]. Other studies have shown the statistical validity and reliability to be low. For example, see [15] and [16].

Through the centuries, many theorists and great thinkers have explored and attempted to describe psychological types. While the names of the types differ, almost all of them present four basic types (See Table I). In 1983, Florence Littauer wrote a best-selling book – *Personality Plus* – based on these same four personality types [17]. The four type labels she used echoed those first established by Hippocrates 2,400 years ago. The four types are the Popular Sanguine, the Perfect Melancholy, the Powerful Choleric, and the Peaceful Phlegmatic. The Popular Sanguine is the born entertainer who likes parties, people and fun. The Perfect Melancholy is a born

TABLE I
PERSONALITY TYPE EQUIVALENTS

Ezekiel 590 BC	lion	ox	man	eagle
Empedocles 450 BC	air	earth	fire	water
The Seasons	Spring	Autumn	Summer	Winter
Hippocrates 370 BC	blood	black bile	yellow bile	phlegm
Plato 340BC	artistic	sensible	intuitive	reasoning
Eric Adickes 1905 Four World Views	innovative	traditional	doctrinaire	skeptical
Eduard Spranger 1914 Four Value Attitudes	artistic	economic	religious	theoretic
Ernst Kretschmer 1920	manic	depressive	oversensitive	insensitive
Eric Fromm 1947	exploitative	hoarding	receptive	marketing
Myers 1958	perceiving	judging	feeling	thinking
McCarthy 4MAT System 1980	Innovative	Analytic	Dynamic	Common Sense
Florence Littauer *Personality Plus* 1983	**Popular Sanguine**	**Perfect Melancholy**	**Powerful Choleric**	**Peaceful Phlegmatic**
Merrill & Reid 1991	Expressive	Analytic	Driver	Amiable
Montgomery 2002 on Jung/Myers	SP - spontaneous and playful	SJ – sensible and judicious	NF - intuitive and fervent	NT - ingenious and theoretical
Keirsey/MBTI® reference	artisan/SP sensing-perceiving	guardian/SJ sensing-judging	idealist/NF intuitive-feeling	rationalist/NT intuitive-thinking
Geier D-I-S-C persolog® Personality Factor Model 2008	Influencing	Competence	Dominance	Steadiness

Adapted and modified from table in David Keirsey. (1995). *Portraits of Temperament*. 3rd. ed. Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis. pp. 6,12; and David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates. (1978). *Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types*. Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, pp. 3-4, 29-30. David Keirsey. (1998) *Please Understand Me II*. Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, pg. 26. and *Personality theories: types and tests* (2010). Available online at http://www.businessballs.com/ personalitystylesmodels.htm
Bold indicates the personality temperaments used in this study.

thinker who likes solitude and silence. The Powerful Choleric is a born leader who likes action and progress, loves work, and wants to direct and motivate other people. The Peaceful Phlegmatic is a born follower who loves to rest and relax and who thrives on harmony.

The premise of Littauer's book is that examining personality strengths and weaknesses can aid in accentuating the positives and minimizing the negatives. The ultimate goal would be to develop a personality that reflects a balance of the positive aspects of all four personality types. A secondary goal is to increase awareness of possible differences between one person's own and other people's personality type so that adaptive communication can take place. In short, knowing what personality type the other person is can aid someone in adopting a communication style with which the other person can readily identify.

Similarly, the premise of the book, *Health care communication using personality type: patients are different!* [18], is that people differ in the way they prefer to and actually give and receive information. Understanding those differences is critical to giving good health care. "As practitioners, we often communicate with patients in the way in which we ourselves prefer to receive communication [18, p.4]." Reference [18] uses the Myers-Briggs Type [Personality] Indicator (MBTI) as a framework with which to understand those communication preferences so health care professionals can adapt responses to complement patient differences.

The *MBTI Communication Style Report* portion of the MBTI assessment provides general descriptions about how individuals with the respondent's preferences tend to prefer to communicate [19]. The goal seems to be to raise self-awareness of one person's own communication style and how it may differ from that of other people. This leads to developing strategies for communicating more effectively with other people. The assumption is that there is a relationship between particular personality types and specific communication styles. And that knowing one can assist with the other. But does such a relationship exist?

III. COMMUNICATION STYLE

Not until Norton's *Communicator Style: Theory, applications, and measures* (1983) was there a theoretical foundation for the communicator style construct [2]. His presentation of the communicator style theory begins with the notion that there are communicative signals that "create expectations or provide instructions about what to do with literal meaning [2, p.20]." "A consistently recurring pattern occurs when any set of behaviors is likely to occur again within a predictable time period [2, p. 38]." The theory postulates that expectations about these patterns of behavior tend to become more stable as a function of more exposure to the communicator. These patterns are collectively termed *communicator style*.

Communication style is multifaceted. A person does not have a single communication style, but aspects of many styles. "There are as many style variables and combinations as there are attribution combinations in a language [2, p.48]." So, communication style is actually the combination of summary descriptors of that person's recurrent communicative behavior patterns. Norton's theory identifies 10 communicator style descriptors or subconstructs: Attentive, Relaxed, Friendly, Precise, Dominant, Impression Leaving, Open, Dramatic, Animated and Argumentative [2]. Each of these 10 dimensions taken together constitute communication style. While one dimension may be prominent, everyone taps into most every dimension to a greater or lesser degree. The emergent and relatively consistent pattern or combination of these dimensions characterize one person's communication style. In other words,

communication style is some combination of various communication behaviors (subconstructs) that one tends to exhibit to a greater or lesser degree. These communication behaviors are part and parcel of one person's personality, but they are not the whole picture. It could be said that communication style is to personality type as a rudder is to a boat. While a rudder has much control over the direction the boat travels, it is not the only part of the boat.

IV. LINKS BETWEEN PERSONALITY TYPE AND COMMUNICATION STYLE

The general assumption of personality type and communication style assessments is that by matching the type or style of other people, communication is made more effective. For example, see [20]-[25]. The notion is that one person's communication style is a "natural" extension and expression of their personality type and vice versa. While there is no model to link the two, communication plays an important role in "the development and maintenance of dispositional tendencies [26, p.22]."

Previous research has shown relationships between personality and communication behaviors. For example, Reference [27] found that individuals who preferred extroversion, intuition and thinking had a greater tendency to be argumentative than those who preferred introversion, sensing and feeling. Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, Reference [27] discovered that extroverts are more Dominant, Open, and Relaxed when communicating with other people; Intuitive thinkers are more likely to be Argumentative. Reference [3] gathered data from more than 1,000 college students about their personality type and communication style. He found that students reporting the extroversion personality type endorsed an expressive and supportive (talkative, conciliatory, open) "nondirective" communicator style. Those reporting a psychoticism personality type endorsed a socially callous "directive" (argumentative, nonresponsive) communication style.

Other research has shown a link between personality type and aspects of communication style such as communication apprehension [28], nonverbal immediacy or extroversion [29], and assertiveness and responsiveness [8], [30], [31]. However, these relationships have not been consistent across situations [32].

Reference [33] examined interpersonal communication and personality. Specifically, their study sought to examine the links between the personality of group members and their style of communication in task groups over a three-month period. They found that the links between personality and communication style are largely confined to the perspective (self- versus other) from which they were measured. The research suggests that other people's ratings reveal stronger connections between personality and communication style than do self-ratings.

Despite continued interest in the relationship of personality to communication, the seemingly overlooked and/or under-investigated basic research question is: Do people who have a certain personality type have a particular dominant communication style? In other words, what is the relationship between personality type and communication style?

This study provides a critical test of an important aspect of personality, namely, a person's communication style. If there is a *weak* relationship between personality type and communication style, then the two operate independently of one another since neither is a useful predictor of the other. A weak relationship may suggest that more than one communication style may be indicative of a particular personality type, or that more than one personality type may be characterized by the *same* communication style. A weak or nonexistent relationship could also call in to question the validity of the instruments used to measure either one or both.

If there is a *strong* relationship between personality type and communication style, then one is a useful predictor of the other. Such a relationship would lead to a better understanding of which communication style characterizes which personality type and vice versa.

V. METHODS

A. *Instruments/Operationalizations*

The survey instrument was a legal-sized paper printed on both sides. The instrument described the purpose of the study and it indicated to respondents that by completing the instrument they could learn more about their own communication style and personality type. The first section provided four paragraphs which described each of the four personality types. Respondents were asked to mark which paragraph best describes them. The remainder of the front side of the page consisted of the communication style instrument. The back of the page consisted of the personality instrument. The survey took about 20 minutes to complete.

Personality type was measured using the instrument constructed by Littauer [17]. The instrument consists of 40 rows with four columns of words from which respondents are to choose the one word per row which most often applies to them. A page of word definitions was provided to assist respondents with any unfamiliar words. The same 40 rows with four columns of words were provided again, but this time they were ordered such that the words that are descriptive of a particular personality type were all in the same column. So, respondents circled the same word on the right side of the survey that they had previously circled on the left side of the survey. Then respondents counted all the circled words per column and recorded each score at the bottom of the page in a space provided just above each of the four personality style names. Scores could range from zero to 40, and the sum of the scores for all four personality types would not exceed 40. The column with the highest number of circled words represented their dominant personality type.

Norton's *Communicator Style* instrument was used to measure communication style. This instrument consists of 40 statements with a five point Likert-type response scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Each of the ten communicator style subconstructs is measured by summing respondent scores on the five statements that correspond with each subconstruct. Respondents were instructed as to which questions were to be summed for each of the 10 subconstructs. Their largest score represented their dominant communication style. Scores range from 5 to 20. Reliability estimates for the

communication style consistently range from a high of 0.86 for the Impression Leaving component to a low of about 0.55 for Attentiveness [34], [9] with most at 0.65 or higher. Reference [35] found an overall average reliability of the *Communication Style* instrument of 0.79.

B. *Procedures*

Following university-approved guidelines for human subjects research, surveys were completed by undergraduate students at a historically black college/university in the Southeast spring term 2012. Surveys were completed in class during regular class times. Students were not provided any extra credit or other incentive to participate beyond self-discovery of their dominant communication style and personality type.

C. *Sample*

The population from which the sample was taken consisted of approximately 4,882 undergraduate students. The sample size needed to provide results at the 95% confidence level would be at least 357 [36]. Following university approved Institutional Review Board standards for human subjects research, a random sample of 385 undergraduate students were surveyed. However, 25 (6.5%) of the respondents reported more than one personality type. Of these, 22 reported two dominant personality types, and three had three dominant personality types. Only those indicating a single dominant personality type were included in the analysis. So, the total sample size for analysis was 360.

VI. RESULTS

Overall, 56% of the respondents were female, 44% male. This is reflective of the actual gender proportion in the entire student body from which the sample was drawn. Respondents ranged in age from 18-22. Other demographic characteristics such as year in school were also comparable with the student population.

A. *Personality Type*

Nearly half (48%) of the respondents indicated they are a Powerful Choleric, followed by the Perfect Melancholy (21%), the Popular Sanguine (19%) and the Peaceful Phlegmatic (13%). Females tended to report themselves as a Powerful Choleric (40%) followed by the Popular Sanguine (26%), the Perfect Melancholy (23%) and Peaceful Phlegmatic (12%) (See Table II). Most males identified themselves as Powerful Cholerics (58%) followed by the Perfect Melancholy (17%) and Peaceful Phlegmatic (14%). Females reported themselves as Popular Sanguines in greater proportions (26%) than males (11%). However, males tended to report themselves as a Powerful Choleric in greater proportions (58%) than females (40%).

TABLE II
PERSONALITY TYPE: OVERALL AND BY GENDER

Personality Type	All	Female	Male
Powerful Choleric	48	40	58
Perfect Melancholy	21	23	17
Popular Sanguine	19	26	11
Peaceful Phlegmatic	13	11	14

All numbers in this table are percentages.

Mean scores of the personality types yielded a slightly altered order overall with Popular Sanguine rated higher ($M = 9.9; SD = 4.0$) than Perfect Melancholy ($M = 8.8; SD = 4.2$). This suggests that although more respondents reported themselves as Melancholy than Sanguine, the Sanguines identified with more of the descriptive words that comprise that type. That is, they were more "purely" Sanguine than Melancholies were "purely" Melancholies.

Respondents' predicted personality type modestly correlated ($r = 0.60$) with their personality type as measured by the personality instrument. The correlation was strongest ($r = 0.64$) with the Popular Sanguine, followed by the Peaceful Phlegmatic Choleric ($r = 0.62$), the Powerful Choleric ($r = 0.62$) and the Perfect Melancholy ($r = 0.50$).

B. *Communication Style*

A clear majority (57%) of respondents had only one dominant communication style. Among the other respondents, most (89%) had only two or three dominant communication styles. Only three subjects indicated as many as five equally dominant communication styles. Males account for only 42% of the respondents who have more than one dominant communication style. In other words, females indicated a more complex communication style with more equally prominent components than did males.

A plurality (42%) of respondents indicated that Impression Leaving was their primary communication style followed by Friendly (22%) and Attentive (18%). Least prevalent were the Relaxed (9%), Open (8%), and Dominant styles (8%).This is inconsistent with findings by Reference [35] who found that Relaxed and Friendly were consistently ranked highest while Dominant, Dramatic, and Argumentative were consistently ranked lowest. Impression Leaving was also rated higher than any other style component ($M = 16.2; SD = 2.8$). The Open style component was rated lower than any other ($M = 12.2; SD = 3.7$). Traditionally, females report higher Attentive and Friendly scores and lower Relaxed scores than males [37]. However, this was not the case here. Most (41%) females indicated Impression Leaving as their most dominant style followed by Argumentative (21%) and Attentive (20%). Least prominent were the Relaxed and Dominant style components (7% each). Most (43%) males indicated Impression Leaving as their most dominant communication style followed by the Friendly style (26%). Least prominent were the Animated (8%) and Open (3%) styles. The largest gender gaps (8% to 9%) are found on the Open, Animated, and Argumentative styles where a greater proportion of females identify with those style elements. A slightly larger proportion of males (7% more) than females identify with the Friendly style.

C. *Personality Type and Communication Style*

Table III shows the percent of respondents by personality type and dominant communication style. The largest proportion of Cholerics, Melancholies, and Sanguines identified Impression Leaving as their dominant communication style.

The Phlegmatics reported Friendly as their dominant style. The smallest proportion of Cholerics are Dramatic. The smallest proportion of Melancholies are Dominant and Relaxed. The least preferred communication style for Sanguines was Relaxed. Finally, Phlegmatics least preferred the Open communication style. It is important to remember that this table includes respondents with more than one dominant communication style.

TABLE III
PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS BY PERSONALITY TYPE AND DOMINANT COMMUNICATION STYLE

	n	Animated	Argumentative	Attentive	Dominant	Dramatic
Powerful Choleric	*172*	9	23	19	9	**6**
Perfect Melancholy	*74*	18	16	28	**1**	15
Popular Sanguine	*69*	10	13	12	14	20
Peaceful Phlegmatic	*45*	18	9	27	4	9

	Friendly	Impression Leaving	Open	Precise	Relaxed
Powerful Choleric	19	**49**	10	10	13
Perfect Melancholy	22	**38**	4	9	**1**
Popular Sanguine	22	**38**	12	13	**7**
Peaceful Phlegmatic	**31**	27	**2**	16	7

Note: Other than N size, all numbers in this table are percentages. Bold indicates the largest and smallest proportion for each personality type. The sum of percentages for the communication style components exceeds 100 percent since respondents could (and often did) have more than one dominant communication style component.

TABLE IV
PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS BY PERSONALITY TYPE WHO HAVE ONLY *ONE* DOMINANT COMMUNICATION STYLE

	n	Animated	Argumentative	Attentive	Dominant
Powerful Choleric	*92*	7	19	11	4
Perfect Melancholy	*45*	9	13	20	**0**
Popular Sanguine	*42*	**0**	10	10	7
Peaceful Phlegmatic	*27*	11	7	**22**	4

	Dramatic	Friendly	Impression Leaving	Open	Precise	Relaxed
Powerful Choleric	**2**	12	**34**	5	3	3
Perfect Melancholy	11	9	**27**	2	7	2
Popular Sanguine	14	17	**26**	10	**0**	7
Peaceful Phlegmatic	4	**22**	19	**0**	11	**0**

Note: Other than N size, all numbers in this table are percentages.
Bold indicates the largest and smallest proportion for each personality type.

Sixty-one percent of Popular Sanguines, Perfect Melancholies, and Peaceful Phlegmatics and 53% of Powerful Cholerics had only *one* dominant communication style. Table IV shows the percent of respondents by personality type who reported having only *one* dominant communication style. What becomes clear is that it is easier to say which communication style components are *not* typical of each personality type than those that *are*. For example, the Popular Sanguine tends *not* to be Animated or Precise. The Powerful Choleric tends *not* to be very Dramatic, Precise or Relaxed. The Perfect Melancholy tends *not* to be Dominant; neither the Melancholy nor the Phlegmatic tend to be Open or Relaxed.

VII. DISCUSSION

Respondents' predicted personality type modestly correlated with their actual personality type as measured by the *Personality Plus* instrument. This raises questions about the predictive validity of the personality instrument. However, similar questions have been raised about the MBTI, one of the most popular personality assessment instruments in use today [15]. Nearly half of the respondents indicated they are a Powerful Choleric. There is no clear explanation for this. More research would need to be conducted to determine whether this is typical of any particular age group, race or geographic area.

A majority of respondents had only one dominant communication style. The fact that respondents had the potential to equally rate all 10 communication style subconstructs suggests that people generally identify themselves with only one or two primary style components. A plurality of respondents indicated that Impression Leaving was their primary communication style. The least prevalent communication styles were Relaxed, Open, and Dominant each with less than 10% of respondents identifying themselves thus.

Cholerics, and to a lesser degree Melancholies and Sanguines, are people who leave an impression on those with whom they choose to communicate. Interestingly, the items which comprise the Impression Leaving style do not indicate whether the impression being left is positive or negative. In short, powerful people impress. Phlegmatics reported Friendly as their dominant style.

In terms of the research question, the data suggest that it is easier to say which communication style components are *not* typical of certain personality types than those that *are*. Powerful Cholerics tend *not* to be Dramatic. Perfect Melancholies tends *not* to be Dominant. Popular Sanguines tend *not* to be Animated or Precise. Peaceful Phlegmatics tend *not* to be Open or Relaxed. Beyond these *non*-relationships, there were generally weak relationships between personality type and communication style.

This suggests that a given personality type is likely to exhibit a *lack* of certain communication style behaviors. For example, a Powerful Choleric personality type is likely not to be very dramatic in their communication style. This kind of "relationship of omission" may, in some small way, lead to a better understanding of the connections between personality type and communication style. The weak relationships shown here may also suggest that more than one communication style may be indicative of a particular personality type, or that more

than one personality type may be characterized by the *same* communication style.

Finally, the very nature of what is being studied here – personality type and communication style – is a highly individualistic phenomenon. No matter how valid and reliable the assessment instrument or how sophisticated the statistical analysis, trying to make generalized statements from what is a highly individualistic and idiosyncratic set of behaviors is problematic at best. Insights and conclusions are more about trends and tendencies than about definitive individual differences.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

This is an area in which popular application has far exceeded credible research. Despite the fact that personality types have been discussed for centuries and personality self-tests abound, the relationship between personality type and communication style remains a relatively underexplored area. The merits and impact of matching another's communication style are uncertain at best. Statistically rigorous assessment instruments need to be developed for both personality type and communication style. In short, more research needs to be done to better understand whether or not and how certain personality types have a particular communication style.

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