

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Psychological Testing

As a missionary, especially if you are a missionary candidate, you may wonder about psychological testing. When asked to take such tests, you may ask some of the following: Why do I have to take these tests? Isn't a call enough? What tests will I have to take? What will I learn from them? What will happen to me as a result of taking them? What if I refuse? Let us consider some of these questions.

## Why psychological tests?

Psychological tests may be used with missionaries for many purposes. Some tests may be used in the selection process to screen out people from being missionaries. Others are used to help place people in the positions where they will be most effective. Others are used to give missionaries insights into their own personality traits and the traits of others with whom they work so that they can better work together. Still others may be used to evaluate difficulties children are having with their work in school. Thus mission agencies use psychological tests for a wide variety of purposes.

## Isn't a call enough?

If God has called a person to a missionary task, are psychological tests made by humans necessary? If the call is really from God, such tests may not be necessary, but "calls" may come from a variety of sources. Some people label as a call their

desire for travel; others interpret their search for adventure and excitement as a "call;" still others interpret encouragement from family or friends as indicating a call.

Although most "calls" are what they seem to be, some may be delusions. It is important to determine this. Milton Rokeach wrote *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, a book about three people in a state hospital who all believed they were Jesus Christ. Likewise, some mentally ill people believe they are called to missions. Certainly no one should be kept from missions because of performance on one psychological test, but if suspected pathology is supported by other tests and interviews, such people should not become missionaries at least during times of active illness.

Today's individualistic missionary "calls" seem to be quite different from the call to a worshiping, fasting church in Acts 13:1-3. To this church the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." After further prayer and fasting by the church, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned and sent on their mission. The call was to the church as well as to the individuals.

## What tests will be used?

A wide variety of tests may be used depending on the purpose of the assessment. The best way to find out about which tests will be given and why they will be given is to ask your agency. The tests used should be reliable, valid, and standardized.

- Reliable tests are those that consistently give the same results. A good test will not say that you are a strong extrovert one day and say that you are an introvert the next.

- Valid tests are those which measure what they say they are measuring. For example, if a test claims to measure intelligence, it should be related to academic performance.
- Standardized tests are those given to everyone under the same conditions so that your results can be compared to results of others who have taken the test. For example, a score on a depression scale of a test might indicate that a person checked more of the items indicating depression than 90% of the general population.

Agencies request many different types of tests. They may want to know about a person's cognitive ability, most commonly in the form of some intelligence test. Aptitude tests give some indication of a person's potential to learn something, such as another language. Achievement tests measure what has been learned.

To help place people in positions where they will be happiest and most effective, agencies may request tests of interests, personality characteristics, abilities, skills, and work values.

To learn what people are like, agencies may request personality tests. These are the tests that seem to produce the most anxiety among missionaries.

- MBTI: The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was developed from Carl Jung's personality theory and is widely given within mission agencies. Someone with minimal training can administer it. Its goal is to help people understand themselves and others along four dimensions, such as introversion-extraversion.

- 16PF: The Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire was developed by a sophisticated statistical procedure which groups information into categories, in this case 16 categories of personality traits such as warmth, dominance, and tension. Persons interpreting the 16PF need more training than is necessary with the MBTI.
- MMPI: The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory was developed to diagnose psychological disorders, so some of its scales were originally labeled with terms such as Depression and Paranoia. However, it has been further revised and standardized on normal populations from which hundreds of normal personality scales have been developed. It is very widely used, gives a broad range of information ranging from disorders to normal personality traits. Only someone with extensive training should interpret it, especially as it relates to people in ministry.

The MBTI, 16PF, and MMPI are each more than half a century old, and each has been the subject of thousands of research studies. When interpreted by someone familiar with people in ministry, these tests and others like them can be a good source of information to help facilitate your personal growth. They may also help prevent your being placed in situations where you are likely to have difficulty.

## What will I learn from the tests?

What you learn depends on the purpose of the testing, the tests used, what kind of professional administers the tests, and what agreement you made before taking them.

When psychologists administer tests, their ethical standards require that “an explanation of the results is provided using language that is reasonably understandable to the person assessed or to another legally authorized person (such as a parent of a child) on behalf of the client.” That is, you are entitled to an explanation of the results in terms you can understand. Of course, educators, counselors, social workers, etc. also give tests, and what they tell you depends on their own ethical codes.

If the mission agency has hired a professional to give the tests, the agency may ask that the results be given only to itself, and not to you. If you have agreed to that, you will not receive any of the results directly. In such a case what you do learn from the tests will depend on what the agency wants to share with you.

## What will happen to me?

What happens depends on the purpose of the tests and the tests given. Nothing should happen on the basis of one test alone. However, if several reliable, valid tests and follow-up interviews indicate reason for concern, several things may happen.

- Rejection. One fear candidates may have is that they will be rejected by the agency. That seldom happens, but it may. A person having delusions and hallucinations should not be a missionary, at least not at that time. The person may recover in the future and then serve God in missions, but not everyone recovers from such disorders.
- Delay. Another fear candidates may have is that a problem will be discovered that will have to be solved before they become missionaries. For example,

people with poor interpersonal skills may need to learn more about relating to others. Rather than being feared, this should be seen as an opportunity to improve one’s effectiveness in missions.

- Placement. The results of the tests may result in your being placed in particular places or positions. For example, a depressed person may become suicidal when put under the additional stress caused by living in another culture. A person with a personality disorder may seriously disrupt an entire team on the field. Such individuals may be given a home assignment.
- Growth. Many personality, cognitive, or vocational interest tests lead to insight into your own traits, abilities, and interests. They can help you develop your potential in missions to its greatest extent.

## What if I refuse?

If you refuse to take the tests, what happens depends on the policy of your mission agency. Probably the most important question to ask yourself is why you would want to refuse. If you are trying to hide something, it is probably better to get it out into the open and discuss it with someone in the mission. If you are afraid of what you might find out about yourself, you may be better off learning about it—and discovering that you had nothing to fear or that it can be changed.

Psychological tests are not given to harm people, but to help them. Gaining insight into yourself and being placed in the right position in the organization lead to personal growth and to more effective work in the kingdom.

Ronald Koteskey is  
Member Care Consultant  
New Hope International Ministries

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Ronald Koteskey  
122 Lowry Lane  
Wilmore, KY 40390

Phone: (859) 858-3436

e-mail: [ron@missionarycare.com](mailto:ron@missionarycare.com)

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