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INsights



YOUR TRUE NATURE IS...

WHY DO UNRELIABLE PERSONALITY QUIZZES SPEAK TO US?

WHILE MANY TESTS promise to reveal your core self, the ones that go viral online and take root in the business world often lack a scientific basis. These surveys can make you *feel* as though they've unlocked something deep in your psyche—that compassion is your “dominant personality trait” (as one BuzzFeed quiz might tell you) or that you’re more of a “thinker” than a “feeler.” But the appearance of depth may stem, in part, from something more superficial and deceptive: the difficulty of the questions.

“There seems to be a widely shared belief that our true selves are hidden,” says Rebecca Schlegel, a psychologist at Texas A&M who researches self-concepts. “A straightforward question doesn’t suggest you are going to get something hidden.”

In recent experiments by Randy Stein and Alexander Swan, participants sampled a variety of personality tests. Among them were a scientifically validated assessment of five major traits (the Big Five)—which plainly asks how much a person agrees with state-

ments like “I am the life of the party” and “I am always prepared”—and the more dubious Keirsey Temperament Sorter, a cousin of the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The latter two tests feature “a lot of things that you’re not supposed to include when designing assessments,” such as ambiguous language and false dichotomies, says Stein, a psychologist at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. One Temperament Sorter item, for example, asks whether the test-taker thinks it’s worse to “Have your head

in the clouds” or “Be in a rut.” The researchers rightly suspected that such questions would be more difficult than the simpler Big Five items, producing more reflection and less certainty.

Participants also rated each item on such measures as how much it seemed to access something deep, subconscious, or hidden in them. While they seemed skeptical, on average, about how probing any of the surveys were, higher difficulty ratings were correlated with greater perceptions of depth.

The fact that a test is challenging, of course, does not mean that its results are any more enlightening. A “type indicator” test may assign you to a different personality category each time you take it. Big Five tests reflect the reality that traits like agreeableness and extraversion come in degrees—rather than trying to fit personalities into neat boxes—and the consistency of their scores upon retesting, along with other qualities, signifies that they can convey something meaningful. —Matt Huston