

Critical Thinking and the Enneagram: The Path to Becoming a Better Teacher and User of the System

Executive coach, leadership development consultant, trainer, speaker, author, and pioneer in the theory and application of the Enneagram, Mario Sikora, Awareness to Action International, addresses the lack of clear-thinking and discernment in the Enneagram field, and how to work with this

Awareness to Action International is soon offering a video series on critical thinking skills and the Enneagram, which you can stay up to date with via www.awarenesstoaction.com

It has been my experience over nearly 30 years of working with the Enneagram and being intimately involved in the community of Enneagram practitioners, including serving as president of the International Enneagram Association and attending dozens of international Enneagram conferences, that not enough emphasis is placed on skillful thinking and discernment. This applies to both the teaching of and/or practice with, the Enneagram.

The result is that the Enneagram ends up being paired with pseudo-scientific practices and presented with pseudohistorical fairy tales, negating the credibility of the system. Due to a lack of rigor, flawed and stereotypical ideas about the types abound, impairing the accuracy of teaching. Further, the lack of understanding of, and accounting for, cognitive biases, undermines application of the system, leading to incorrect type assessment of clients, students, and, not uncommonly, teachers themselves.

If the Enneagram is going to be taken seriously in the broader community, and not end up in the dustbin of New Age fads that shined brightly for a while before fading away, greater clear-thinking skills and discernment must be applied to the theory and application of the system.

Because of this danger, clear thinking skills is one of the first things we teach in the [ATA Enneagram certification program](#), and it is my hope that other Enneagram training programs will start doing the same.

This article considers some of the key problems caused by the lack of clear-thinking skills and the practice of discernment in using the Enneagram: namely, the need for certainty, a lack of addressing cognitive biases, and the embrace of pseudoscience and pseudohistory. I'll also offer some suggestions on how to overcome these challenges.

Our innate tendency to value certainty over accuracy

Human cognition naturally gravitates toward certainty and closure rather than ambiguity and open-endedness, a tendency well-documented in psychological research (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). This 'need for cognitive closure' manifests prominently in how many approach the Enneagram, often making the drive toward certainty more powerful than the drive toward accuracy.

The system's promise of clear categorization into distinct types often triggers an almost reflexive desire to quickly identify one's 'true type' and establish certainty. One of the dangers of being a self-described 'Seeker after Truth' (a phrase used by two figures prominent in the Enneagram's history, George Gurdjieff and Claudio Naranjo, to describe their students) is that we often prematurely believe we have found it.

This quest for definitive typing presents a fundamental paradox within Enneagram practice. The system itself describes how each type becomes fixated on particular patterns of attention and behavior, yet practitioners often exhibit a similar cognitive fixation in their rigid adherence to type classifications — both about their own type and the types of people around them. This can lead not only to mistyping, but to a tendency to see ourselves and those around us only through the lens of an Enneagram type. This particular misuse of the Enneagram creates caricatures and false assumptions, leading us to miss the complexity and reality of human nature and the people in our lives.

Nothing frustrates me more than having a conversation with another Enneagram aficionado in which they continually refer to their own type, my type, or other person's types. Whilst I understand the possible motivation — the desire to be personal — our Enneagram type is the label we give our fixated and habituated patterns and, to me at least, it is literally the least interest-

ing thing about a person. I have also observed that, beyond the stage of early infatuation with the Enneagram, the tendency to continually reference one's own type can be a clue that the typing isn't accurate. If you find yourself doing this outside of a teaching or coaching environment, you are in danger of becoming trapped by the system rather than liberated by it.

Unchecked, premature certainty-seeking when it comes to typing can lock us into an incorrect assessment, and make us resistant to exploring options. 'Investment bias' drives the tendency to over-estimate the value or reality of ideas we have identified ourselves with and the perceived cost of changing our mind about something, especially publicly. If I am heavily identified with 'being an Eight', for example, the cost of changing my assessment may feel too high. I have had various Enneagram teachers confide that they suspect they may be mistyped, but are unable to admit it publicly due to the fear that it will undermine their credibility as a teacher. Whilst I obviously have some sympathy for this, it is not the kind of behavior a true 'Seeker After Truth' and person with intellectual integrity should ideally model.

Cognitive biases in Enneagram practice

The next challenge I want to address is that specific cognitive biases may reinforce our false certainty, and systematically distort how we engage with the Enneagram. Understanding these biases provides a foundation for a more discerning practice. We'll take a look at a few here.

Confirmation bias: One of the ways our need for certainty is satisfied is through confirmation bias. This bias — our tendency to search for, interpret, and recall information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs and be unable to see evidence that contradicts it — powerfully shapes Enneagram practice. Once someone tentatively identifies with a particular type, they typically begin filtering information that reinforces this identification, while discounting contradictory evidence.

For instance, a person who initially identifies as a Type Three might readily recognize their achievement orientation while dismissing their equally strong security concerns (characteristic of Type Six) as 'stress behaviors'. This selective attention creates a self-reinforcing loop that makes initial type identifications remarkably persistent, even when alternative typings might better explain the full range of one's experiences and behaviors.

I experienced this myself early in my Enneagram studies. I became convinced I was a 'self-preservation Eight', and could rattle off a list of behaviors that justified that assumption. In a quick conversation with Don Riso at an Enneagram Institute training in the mid-1990s, he pointed out that he saw me as a different subtype, the 'social' Eight. His observation helped open my eyes to something I hadn't ever considered, and I quickly began to see that, whilst I did indeed behave in the ways I had observed, my apparent self-preservation behaviors were, in reality, far outweighed by behaviors and attitudes better explained by being a social subtype. Those behaviors he saw were there all along, but I simply never saw them. They were such a habitual part of me that I was blind to them. Confirmation bias primes us to see what we believe and be blind to what we don't.

Anchoring bias: First impressions exert disproportionate influence on subsequent judgments — a phenomenon known as anchoring bias. In Enneagram practice, our initial exposure to type descriptions often anchors all future understanding.

If someone first encounters the Enneagram through a workshop that presents Type Five as 'the Thinker' rather than 'striving to feel detached' (my preferred terminology, as explained in my article 'Making the Enneagram as Simple as Possible, but no Simpler', Volume 1, Issue 2), they will be prone to assume that all introverted and thoughtful people are Fives, or that all Fives are introverted and thoughtful. This initial framing can disproportionately influence how they conceptualize this type.

I encounter this frequently when people who have trained at different Enneagram schools attend our certification program. Since our teaching is different — especially related to the instinctual biases — many people have a difficult time digesting it, because they keep trying to put it into the context of what they already learned. My clients in the corporate world, however, have no such anchors and understand the concepts immediately.

Availability bias: Availability bias leads us to overweigh information that comes readily to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). In Enneagram practice, this often manifests as believing that all people of a given type have the same characteristics of one's spouse, coworker, or friend who happens to be that same type. People who experienced an abusive relationship with an Eight can fall into assuming that all Eights are abusive. If they know a strictly religious Type One, they may assume all Ones are strictly religious. If they know a Type Three who turns out to be a con artist or fraud, they assume all Threes are liars.

Another version of this is assuming that a characteristic common in one subtype is common of all of them. For example, I recently heard an Enneagram teacher say that Ones are 'neat-freaks'. This is more likely to be true of the preserving and transmitting subtypes (see my previous article, 'The Three Instinctual Biases and Operating your Enneagram— Services Business', Volume 1, Issue 1), but not necessarily of the navigating subtype. Thus, people jump to the conclusion that someone who is a navigating One must be focused on order in their surroundings, and when confronted with evidence to the contrary, assume the disorderly person must not be a One.

I taught a workshop where a beginner to the Enneagram had just divorced someone she thought was a Seven and who she saw as deeply narcissistic. She kept bringing up narcissism and actually told the Sevens in the workshop that they were "narcissists, whether you realize it or not" — a

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claim that I strenuously rebutted.

Fundamental attribution error: The fundamental attribution error — our tendency to overestimate the influence of personality and underestimate situational factors when explaining others' behavior (Ross, 1977) — particularly undermines Enneagram practice. This bias leads practitioners to attribute behaviors primarily to type-based personality patterns, while neglecting contextual factors.

For example, when a colleague becomes confrontational during a high-stakes meeting, an Enneagram enthusiast might immediately attribute this to 'Eight energy', rather than recognizing how situational pressures might elicit similar behaviors from various types. This overapplication of type-based explanations diminishes the Enneagram's nuance and perpetuates stereotypical thinking.

There are numerous cognitive biases that impact the way we teach the Enneagram — 'automation bias' makes people believe that a test must be more accurate than their self-perception; 'selective memory' can make us think, for example, "well, I'm a Type Nine now, but when I was younger I was a Three"; the 'Halo Effect' can make us assume it is 'better' to be some types than others, etc. Studying cognitive biases will make you a better Enneagram practitioner.

Pseudoscience and historical claims

Beyond individual cognitive biases, the Enneagram field in general is rife with systemic issues that warrant critical examination. Chief among these are questionable historical claims and the embrace of pseudoscience, often by people who claim to be 'academics'.

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as Neoplatonic essentialism and various teachings on models of 'vices' or 'deadly sins'), this does not mean that the Enneagram of personality is an-

cient. The Enneagram of personality originated with Ichazo.

Unfortunately, Ichazo's student, Claudio Naranjo, made up the story that the Enneagram came 'from the Sufis' — a fact which he admitted a few years prior to his death in footage that is available on YouTube under the title '[The Origin of the Enneagram](#)'. In the video, he states that he made up this lie in order to get more people to accept the Enneagram, citing Oscar Wilde's quip that if you want someone to believe what you say, tell them someone important said it. It is disappointing that someone who called himself and his followers 'Seekers after Truth' felt the need to mislead people and diminish the credibility of the very system whose wisdom he worked so hard to share.

Fantastical claims as to historical origins: You would never know from how frequently they are misrepresented, but the origins of the Enneagram of personality are pretty clear.

The Enneagram diagram first appears in the work of G. I. Gurdjieff in the early part of the 20th century, and although Gurdjieff attributed it to a secretive society called the Sarmoungh Brotherhood, there is no evidence of the existence of this sect, and Gurdjieff was a known con man and grifter (Storr, 1997). No examples of the nine-pointed diagram have been found prior to Gurdjieff as of this writing, and claims of the diagram going back into antiquity are without merit.

The Enneagram of personality was cobbled together by Oscar Ichazo in the 1960s. While he took older ideas from other thinkers — some of whom were 'ancient' — that show up in many places (such

More recent Enneagram teachers have been peddling ancient origin stories as well. I've heard one well-known Enneagram teacher at numerous conferences asserting that the Enneagram may well be 30,000 years old and part of a consistent and intact 'secret' tradition. In doing so, she admitted that she couldn't prove her case, but the 'evidence' — while not meeting any standard criteria for acceptance — was apparently enough for her to share her highly speculative claims.

Such pronouncements, and the credulous embrace and retelling of them by Enneagram practitioners, profoundly undermines the credibility of the Enneagram. In serious academic circles, it is understood that the tendency to claim ancient provenance — a common pattern in pseudoscientific fields — creates an aura of historical legitimacy that discourages critical examination. As psychologist James Alcock notes (see 'Belief: What it means to believe and why our convictions are so compelling', 2018), "Appeals to antiquity often substitute for empirical validation in pseudoscientific domains".

In addition to pseudohistory, the Enneagram is often paired with all manner of pseudoscientific healing modalities and questionable metaphysics.

While these are too many to address

within the scope of this article, a good rule of thumb is that if someone starts talking about untestable healing 'energies', or quantum physics related to anything other than, well, quantum physics, hold on to your wallet and walk quickly toward the door.

Balancing appreciation with critical examination

Despite these substantial concerns, clearly I think that dismissing the Enneagram entirely would be premature. I have been working with the Enneagram for over 30 years and using it in my work for over 25. There is tremendous value in it when one uses it responsibly, rigorously, and humbly.

Like many frameworks that emerged outside academic psychology, the Enneagram offers valuable insights that can greatly benefit us, but the system should be used with justified skepticism and caution.

What follows are some suggestions for applying principles of rigorous, clear thinking and practicing discernment when using the Enneagram.

Embrace skepticism and falsification: Skepticism is a mental attitude of being open-minded to almost anything, whilst expecting the evidence to support the claim being made. The more extraordinary one's claim is, the more iron-clad the evidence needs to be. It is also operating in the understanding that we must be humble in our claims because, we never know when we will encounter new evidence that disproves our existing beliefs.

Falsification is the attempt to disprove our theories rather than to continue to find more and more evidence to support them. In science, it is understood that thousand experiments can't prove our hypothesis 'true', they can only increase the level of confidence in the hypothesis. However, one experiment can indeed disprove or falsify our hypothesis. Good thinkers understand that attempts to falsify get us closer to the truth much more effectively than trying to prove ourselves 'right'.

Beware of confirmation bias regarding type assessment:

- Actively seek disconfirming evidence for your type identification or a client you are trying to assess;
- Regularly revisit alternative type possibilities, even after settling on an identification;
- Ask trusted others whether your self-typing aligns with their observations;
- Always be open to new evidence and willing to change your mind; and
- When working with clients, don't feel like changing your mind about them will make you look less skilled — it will actually add to your credibility and help to establish that you are interested in the truth.

Approach Enneagram literature

with healthy skepticism: The internet is awash with pop-up Enneagram gurus, and self-publishing books is all too easy. A few tips in this regard:

- Be highly skeptical of people teaching the Enneagram — find out their background and experience; how and when they learned about and studied the Enneagram; what school of Enneagram thought they follow; how open they are to different points of view and changing their minds; and, perhaps most importantly, what and how much experience they have working with the Enneagram in the real world, rather than just writing internet memes, making videos, or conducting workshops;
- Prioritize resources that acknowledge limitations and uncertainties in the system;
- Be wary of extravagant claims about the Enneagram's origins or effectiveness;
- Distinguish between empirical claims (which require evidence) and phenomenological descriptions (which are more subjective); and
- Remember that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evi-

dence, especially about the history of the Enneagram.

Develop your debunking skills:

Misinformation abounds in our world. Therefore, you should learn how to recognize logical fallacies and cognitive biases. Learn the fundamentals of science, and to recognize the indicators of pseudoscience and pseudohistory. Understand how science works and recognize the difference between fact claims, subjective experience, and opinions, treating each accordingly.

Conclusion

The Enneagram is not science and that is ok, because not everything that is useful is scientific (philosophy is not science, either, for example). This does not mean that we should not think critically about the Enneagram and apply good critical thinking skills to our use of it.

Applying caution about our claims and recognizing when we make unsupported assumptions will actually make us better in our use of the Enneagram. Recognizing its limitations and being honest about its history will bring it more credibility. It is imperative for Enneagram teachers to exercise rigor when using the system — it is a profoundly powerful tool, capable of doing much good when used well, and doing great damage when used irresponsibly.

I invite you into a path of responsible use of the Enneagram, starting with applying the tools and tips offered in this article.

For a clear thinking checklist (free download), visit the Awareness to Action [online platform](https://www.awarenesstoaction.com).

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