Primary Instinct

You have hundreds, perhaps even thousands of Instincts. Each is targeted at ensuring Genetic Survival. Your Instincts cluster into three broad groups, which underlie Instinctual Subtype, a concept envisioned differently by various Enneagram Teachers\(^1\). When these Teachers attempt to identify your Instinctual Subtype, they are trying to define your **Primary Instinct**: the most prominent of the three Instinct [groups].

You don't even realize you have the three Instincts; they are generally unconscious. But they are important! Your Primary Instinct literally governs *what* you do with your life. The three Instincts:

1. **To preserve** [life].

   If Preservation is strong in you, it likely has you be very conscious of your environment. For example, you might be very aware if it is cold in the room, or very alert to possible germs on a toilet handle. Or, you might be concerned about pollution and its effect on the world. Or you may be alarmed about global warming.

   You might also be concerned for people close to you, about ways in which their environment might not be healthy. If you have children, you will likely keep a close watch on their health, e.g. ensuring they have properly fitting shoes and that they visit the doctor and dentist regularly. “Nesting and nurturing” both inhabit the Preservation group of instincts.

   You may be prompted to exercise, eat right and save your money. You probably prefer durable and practical resources to non-material resources, wanting to purchase items that will last and can be passed to the next generation.

   You may also want to preserve memories, artifacts and traditions. You tend to be a protector of the things that can be passed from one generation to another, such as pictures, heirlooms and religious or family rituals.

2. **To navigate**.

   If Navigation is strong in you, you might be very good at finding your way with maps, e.g. driving in a new town or country. Most commonly, you would be someone who had a keen sense of who the "power people" are – say in a group or in a company. You might be able to readily schmooze your way into their favor. The point is to "navigate" a power hierarchy (e.g. establishing your place in a pecking order) to get what you want or need.

   Navigation includes awareness and ability to navigate group process. It incorporates creating trust (e.g. through reciprocity) to create alignment with those who can protect you. It also incorporates strategies and tactics for being accepted in a group (e.g. through adherence to group boundaries, requirements and standards).

   Navigation is also about monitoring the behavior of others and establishing group norms and mores. It includes a strong role for *evaluation*, deciding which people and which ideas deserve to be promoted. It also incorporates *marketing*, namely presenting valued people and ideas in the best possible light to have them “pass the test” of social acceptance.

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\(^1\) “Instinctual Subtype” appears to have arisen from the work of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1872-1949). However, Primary Instinct is the new, clearer concept of Mario Sikora. While this article introduces a few key differences, it owes its substance to Mario’s theory, which he presented to the Coach University Enneagram SIG May 2, 2007.
3. To transmit.

If the Transmission instinct is strong in you, you have a strong desire to "pass something on." It could be your genes (wanting children and grandchildren) or your traditions, or your culture or ideas or worldview. In some way, it would be important for you to leave a legacy that would go on after you yourself were no more.

You would feel a desire to spread something of yourself beyond yourself. This might actually be whatever has come to mean a lot for you, such as your family or your culture – something that is or has become part of you.

You may also feel a push to get closer to other individuals, seeking the kind of deep connection that makes it easier to transmit. This urge also enhances your chances of sexual reproduction.

The genius of creativity lies in this domain – the act of generating something new and projecting it out into the world. Transmission also includes the drive to attract attention to your creations, your ideas and yourself. You may feel compelled, now and then, to “get on your soapbox.”

Comparison with the Animal Kingdom

Mario Sikora, an innovator in the Primary Instinct concept, draws a comparison between the three Instincts and a typical television documentary about an animal. For example, consider the peacock. A study of the peacock will roughly divide into three segments. The first segment will cover what the peacock eats, how it builds its nest, and how it feeds and nurtures its young. This “nesting and nurturing” correlates with the Preservation Instinct. The second segment of study will be peacock society: the ‘tribe’ with its “pecking order,” including how a peacock becomes the ‘top peacock.’ You will also find out how peacocks establish their territory and their migratory habits. This part of the study correlates with the Navigating Instinct. The third segment of study will focus on mating. It will typically begin with viewing a peacock getting the attention of a peahen by displaying its colorful feathers. You will see the peacock’s “mating dance” seduce the peahen. Whether or not the peacock is monogamous, polygamous or polyandrous will also be revealed. This final segment of study correlates with the Transmission Instinct.

Order of the Instincts

One of your instincts is Primary: it tends to dominate your attention. Another is secondary and the third has almost no influence on you. However, your instincts are so unconscious that more clarification is essential to a good understanding of how they work.

Your dominant instinct runs most of the show, but much of the time it functions as an invisible puppeteer behind the scenes. For you it occurs like the air you breathe or like water occurs to a fish; but it “runs you” and impacts almost everything you do. You are so immersed in it that you tend not to even notice it, just as a swimming fish takes for granted water and “the fact that I must swim.” If the fulfillment of your primary instinct is put in jeopardy, you will feel distressed. You will not be able to rest until you have restored its order in your life. However, you are probably “so good at it” that this rarely happens. When fulfilling this instinct is not threatened, you will tend to operate unconsciously, i.e. with it on autopilot.
Primary Instinct

Your second instinct tends to be an area of some tension. It compels and draws you in some ways, but in other ways it causes you concern. You feel a "tug" there, the moreso as you age and develop. But especially in early life, you may feel resistant and insecure dealing in its domain. As you grow older, it will likely become a “growing edge.” While your secondary instinct will remain in service to your Primary, it will become a natural way for you to extend yourself. At times when your energy is in retreat, you are likely to withdraw expression of your secondary instinct. You may use awareness of this to monitor your energy level.

Your third instinct tends to be underdeveloped and to remain that way the longest. You tend to overlook the lessons to be learned in this domain. Nonetheless, it rarely concerns you except when you notice other people “overusing” or “misusing” it. At such times you may find yourself quickly judging them or their behavior.

Here is an example of how the three Instincts might “show themselves” in someone’s life:

Example 1: Instinct Order. Note that Louise is a fictional character. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Louise spends most of her time at home where she has put a lot of energy into creating a nourishing and stimulating environment. She loves art and to surround herself with refinement. She has a collection of old books as well as a house done in stunning décor. Louise is astute at saving money and careful not to overspend. “On the side,” she gives back to the community by helping wayward youth.

Louise is also a professional gambler. Adept at poker, she “reads” the currents in the room well and readily discerns who has the strongest hand at the table. However, playing poker is also a source of some tension for her, as she seems largely unaware of her impact on others in a group of players. If her behavior in the group is critiqued, she is immediately defensive.

When it comes to “Transmitting” behaviors, particularly attention-gathering, Louise is uncomfortable. Her skill is the reverse: staying “under the radar” helps her avoid the unwanted “attention” that many casinos award to consistent winners. However, she goes a step further, being quick to condemn “attention grabbing.” Louise has little tolerance for what she terms “blustering egotism.”

Louise’ strongest instinct is Preservation (e.g. time and energy put into her environment, saving money, her hobby of “nurturing” youth). Her secondary instinct is Navigation (e.g. “reading currents” at the poker table). Transmission runs a distant third (e.g. her aversion to gathering attention).
Identifying Your Primary Instinct

Look again at these summary descriptions of the three Instinct groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Instinct</th>
<th>Summary Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Preservation** | • focus on “nesting and nurturing”  
                    • concern that an environment “feels” healthy  
                    • desire to be “well stocked” with reserves  
                    • desire to own durable and practical resources  
                    • preserver of pictures, heirlooms and family traditions |
| **Navigation**   | • good at map-reading and finding your way  
                    • good at “reading” a group to identify the power people  
                    • high awareness of group mores; good at trust-building  
                    • traffic in information, good at “spreading the word”  
                    • natural status-seeker and promoter |
| **Transmission** | • high desire for children and grandchildren  
                    • drawn to intense, intimate relationships  
                    • attract with charm and charisma  
                    • creative and draw attention to your creations  
                    • may have a strong drive to leave a legacy |

Does one of these resonate with you more than the other two?

To solidify your choice, look at what you would most like to do with your life. If you could do only one, would you rather:

1. Make an environment that is safe and comfortable; make people (perhaps yourself) healthier?
2. Gain a secure position of status in the community?
3. Leave a legacy; something that will outlive you, to benefit those you leave behind?

Still not sure? Try this: If there were just one that you had to give up, which would it be?
Primary Instinct

How Does Knowledge of Your Primary Instinct Help?

You cannot “change” your Primary Instinct. What you can do is manage it, to correct some of the ways you go off course. When you know your behavior is ineffective, you can begin to understand that the discomfort you feel is connected to ways in which you either overuse or misuse your Primary Instinct. Here are some examples of how each Instinct may be overused or misused:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Instinct</th>
<th>Overuse</th>
<th>Misuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>• over-protectiveness</td>
<td>• hypochondria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• overeating</td>
<td>• anorexia, bulimia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>• all “schmooze” no substance</td>
<td>• Machiavellianism (hyper-manipulative political scheming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• being hypercritical</td>
<td>• “doom saying”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td>• monopolizing conversations</td>
<td>• narcissism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• excessive flamboyance</td>
<td>• seduction as conquest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You may also spot ways in which you underuse the Instinct that is least important to you. For example, with a low Transmitting instinct you may find attention-gathering unnatural and uncomfortable. To encourage more use of less natural behaviors, look for ways to frame them as “in service” to your Primary Instinct. For example, suppose your Primary Instinct is Preservation, and you own a furniture business. While drawing attention may feel unnatural, consider how creating a “brand” with a flamboyant image might draw attention to your firm and help preserve it.

Your new-found knowledge will also increase your awareness of others. Watch for ways that differing Instincts cause conflicts. For example, in the arena of the Instinct that is “least important” to you, it is normal and human to “tune out.” You may fail to give others, for whom that Instinct is Primary, their due. Or, when others overuse or misuse that Instinct, you may have a strong negative reaction. In the extreme, you might even find yourself condemning them or their behavior.

Another benefit of being aware of your Primary Instinct is that you can manage composite instincts that naturally conflict. For example, within the Preservation Instinct is the desire for fats and sweets. At one time during human history this drive helped ensure your ancestors had enough protein and calories. In today’s world of plenty, this drive can instead do you in, by prompting overeating. Ironically, you may find ‘Preserving’ your life threatened by an instinct meant to enhance Preservation! Awareness of the dangers of being overweight might then trigger your instinctual drive to maintain optimal health, another Preservation instinct. The two instincts could “duke it out,” creating internal conflict. Being aware of these natural contradictions can help you “give yourself and others a break,” rather than judge. You may thereby come up with creative rather than punitive solutions.
Primary Instinct

Within every Instinct you will find conflicting urges. If Navigation is Primary for you, you likely enjoy circulating in a group, but you may be conflicted about opening up too much lest you inadvertently reveal something that exposes you to a mistrustful interpretation. Similarly, if you prefer Transmission, you may feel a drive to be intimate and committed in a relationship, while having to suppress a contradictory urge to make yourself attractive to everyone of the opposite sex.

Leadership Applications

Instinctual drives can be critical to the behavior and performance of executives. Here are some of the typical strengths and weaknesses of leaders with each Primary Instinct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Instinct</th>
<th>Typical Strengths</th>
<th>Typical Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>• administration</td>
<td>• lack of charisma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• operations</td>
<td>• lack of inspiring vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• processing data</td>
<td>• minimal people orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• financial acumen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• procedures and systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• conserving resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>• cultural awareness</td>
<td>• inattention to “nuts and bolts”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• political acumen</td>
<td>• weak at process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• comparing and contrasting</td>
<td>• lacking at execution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• consensus-building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• team-building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• strategic thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td>• presenting with sizzle</td>
<td>• little team-building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• charisma</td>
<td>• poor at receiving (reading currents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• networking</td>
<td>• narcissism – may “burn hot and bright” but then undermine their careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• strategic allegiances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sales</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• inspiring employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Primary Instinct

Relationship to Enneatype

Instinct and Soul Energy (Sikora uses the term “preferred strategy” when discussing the core of Ennea-type) appear to be “independent variables.” That is, among all the people of any Soul Energy, there seem to be roughly equal numbers with each Primary Instinct.

However, sometimes a particular Soul Energy sends an Instinct into overdrive or inhibits it. For example, Nine Soul Energy may inhibit the Transmitting instinct, while Eight energy may send a Preservation instinct into hyperdrive.

Other times a particular Instinct may make it difficult to correctly identify the right Soul Energy. This may help explain why even some Enneagram Teachers, who have been professing the Enneagram for ten or fifteen years, suddenly realize they have mistyped themselves. For example:

- a Transmitting Three may look a lot like an Eight
- a Preserving Nine may look a lot like a Five
- a Transmitting Five may look a lot like a Four

Instinct “Stacking”

For unknown reasons the Primary Instinct also determines which instinct is secondary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Instinct</th>
<th>Secondary Instinct</th>
<th>Tertiary Instinct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>• Navigation</td>
<td>• Transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>• Transmission</td>
<td>• Preservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td>• Preservation</td>
<td>• Navigation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationship to Gender

Based on referenced sources of “typical” masculine and feminine “patterns,” I believe the most common Primary Instinct

- among women … is Preserving (source of maternal instinct, and “nesting and nurturing”)
- among men … is Navigating (source of drive for power and status)

The Transmitting instinct likely splits equally between men and women. However, since more men prefer Navigating, there are more men than women for whom Transmitting is secondary rather than tertiary.
Primary Instinct

Closing Summary

Your Primary Instinct determines, in a deep sense, what you do with your life. If you would like to know more, I recommend you look first to Mario Sikora. Mr. Sikora is currently the foremost authority on Primary Instinct. Mario offers insight into the three Instincts in articles that have appeared recently in the IEA's Enneagram Monthly. Take particular note of his article titled "The Instincts: Taking a Broader View" in the Enneagram Monthly, March 2007 Issue 135 (this article can also be found at www.mariosikora.com/instinctsspiarticle.html). Mario has also authored a slew of other good articles, available from his web site at http://www.mariosikora.com.

Furthermore, Mr. Sikora has produced the only scientifically-validated Enneagram test that includes the Instinctual Subtypes. Click here to take the test. Mario’s SikoraSPI(TM) test results comprise about 49 pages and they cover Primary Instinct in depth. At Mario’s web site, you can also find out the dates and locations for any workshops he may be offering.

As footnoted at the beginning of this article, my understanding of the Instincts differs in some key ways from both Mario Sikora’s theory and prior explanations of Instinctual Subtype by earlier Enneagram Teachers. The key differences are summarized below:

1. **Primary Relationship governs the focus of Primary Instinct.** Most prior thinking associates:
   a. **Preservation** … with **self** (e.g. self-preservation)
   b. **Navigation** … with **groups** or the **world** at large (e.g. social)
   c. **Transmission** … with important **others** (e.g. sexual)

   However, I contend that Primary Instinct and Primary Relationship are separate and distinct. For example, the *maternal instinct* that is so strong in many women represents the **Preservation** Instinct focused on **important others**. I believe that for you, each of your three Instincts could be focused on any one of the three types of Primary Relationship.

2. **Gender Bias.** This has been discussed earlier in this article under “Relationship to Gender.” To the best of my knowledge, prior Enneagram Teachers have been silent on this matter.

3. **Growing Edge.** I hold a new notion – the idea that the secondary instinct is a “growing edge,” becoming increasingly important with development.

4. **Life Energy Origin.** The Instincts are part of the Genetic Survival **Major Aspect** of your Life Energy. This Major Aspect emerges from, and is dominated by, your Security Life Energy Center. Genetic Survival is just **one** of your **six** Major Aspects. All six are covered in detail in “Life Energy Playground” © 2009 by Michael G Peterson and Melodye A. Peterson. For more information, contact Michael at triunity@bellsouth.net.

Michael Peterson