

Making sense of colour-coded personality profiles in developmental contexts within organizations

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Abstract

In many organizations colour-coded personality questionnaires impact the way people communicate with each other about themselves and others. However, there has never been much research interest in what these colour profiles mean to people who have received such a profile. We believe such research is needed, as these profiles may affect how people experience themselves and are perceived by others in the organization. In this constructionist qualitative study, 29 people were interviewed about their experiences with one of four colour-coded personality instruments, with a focus on how these profiles related to their sense of self. The idiosyncratic ways profiles were interpreted by recipients demonstrate that identification with one's profile should not be taken as an indication of fully agreeing with the interpretation according to the model. People who identify with their profile, may construct their own stories around the meaning of their profiles, in line with how they see themselves. When these instruments are part of a company initiative, processes need to be established that allow people to own the results in a way that means something to them and work with the consequences of that instead of the results of the questionnaire as such.

Keywords

colour coded personality instruments • colour tests • personality profile interpretations

This paper describes a qualitative study that explores the different ways people make sense of the personality feedback they receive in the context of a development intervention in their organization, based on a colour-coded type-based personality profiling instrument. We explored how people initially respond to this feedback, how they describe what it means to them and how they interpret the feedback in relation to their self-awareness. The research question was: How do people respond to and make meaning of the personality feedback provided to them on the basis of a self-scored colour-coded personality questionnaire?

Literature review

Using personality assessments within the context of organizational change and learning and development initiatives, has been a growing practice since the early 1990s (Harland, 2003; Jelley, 2021; Lundgren et al., 2017; Lundgren et al., 2019). Whereas before, personality assessments were mainly used in the area of personnel selection and conducted by psychologists (Zickar & Kostek, 2013), nowadays type-based and colour-coded personality instruments, used by professionals with different educational backgrounds, have gained ground (Lundgren et al., 2019). Each year millions of

people complete personality inventories within the context of professional development. For the Netherlands, where this study was located, no specific data are available. However, when the first author started using personality assessment instruments in coaching at the start of this millennium, most of the currently popular instruments did not yet exist in the Netherlands or were hardly known. Nowadays, many people have had an experience with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or one of the many colour-coded instruments that are currently on the Dutch market, such as Management Drives, Insights Discovery, DISC, Lumina Spark, RealDrives, or Profile Dynamics.

Often, these questionnaires are used within the context of a corporate or team-focused development initiative, assuming they increase awareness about the self and individual differences and thereby lead to better working relationships (Briner, 2018; Jelley, 2021; Michael, 2003). Another benefit that is often mentioned is that these personality profiles introduce a common language in the organization, as for instance mentioned on the website of Insights Discovery Benelux. However, whether and how colour-coded personality profiles increase self-awareness and how having a common language should be understood, has, according to our knowledge, never been researched. We believe this deserves serious attention as people do not fully control

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how their colour-coded profiles are perceived and may be used by others. In the context of development objectives, personality instruments are labelled as 'development tools' or just 'conversation starters' rather than 'tests' or 'assessments' (Lundgren et al., 2017). This suggests that the resulting colour-coded profiles are not meant to influence HR decisions. However, it cannot be excluded that once personality profiles exist within an organization, they influence how people are perceived by their managers and HR representatives, which may have real consequences for people, such as stigmatization. A person to whom the profile applies might also not recognize the characteristics associated with their profiles, or not agree with the language that is being used in relation to their profile. However, this may not be known by others or not taken into account. We therefore believe that a better understanding of how people experience and make sense of their own colour-coded personality profiles is needed.

Academic concerns regarding type-based personality instruments

A trait-based personality questionnaire results in a description of a person's personality in terms of their relative positions on a number of different *traits*, for instance by means of a percentile score or a number. Good examples are the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ), that consists of 31 or 32 personality dimensions (Visser & Du Toit, 2004), the Sixteen Personality Questionnaire or 16PF, that has been used for decades, and the many workplace questionnaires based on the Five Factor Model, such as the WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ (*Paradigm Personality*. www.Paradigmpersonality.Com, n.d.). Using a type-based instrument results in one specific *type*, that describes a person's personality profile, as in the well-known Myers Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI (Myers et al., 2003). Another example of a type-based instrument is the Enneagram, that identifies nine distinct personality styles by numbered labels (Wagner, 2021). A colour-coded personality instrument can have characteristics of both trait and type-based instruments, as one can have a relative position with regard to a certain colour, usually graphically represented by the size of a circle or bar, but it also happens that people are defined by their most dominant colour. An example of a colour-coded instrument that is also used in this study is Management Drives (Versnel & Koppenol, 2003).

The growing use of type-based and colour-coded personality instruments in organizations evoked a lot of negative reactions in the academic community, where the MBTI in particular received a lot of attention (Emre, 2018; Michael, 2003; Moyle & Hackston, 2018). In addition, these practices were ridiculed in the general press with titles as 'The Astrology of the Office' (Goldberg, 2019). Other articles in newspapers and

professional journals described these instruments with similar negative connotations (see also Al-Shawaf, 2021; Boström, 2021; Briner, 2018).

Most of the critique targeted at type-based and colour-coded personality profiling instruments concerns their problematic psychometric features (Reynierse, 2013). Validation studies, if published at all, are usually conducted by the test publishers themselves and not submitted for review by well-established independent institutions like the British Psychological Society. The Insights Discovery Preference Evaluator is one of the exceptions, as this has been reviewed by the British Psychological Society. However, what is shared publicly about this review by the publishers is limited to the positive aspects of the evaluation. Among qualified practitioners of personality tests, there is a growing concern that these instruments tend to become black boxes, as raw data are often not released by the test publishers in order to protect their intellectual property (British Psychological Society, 2017). On the other hand, some argue that the psychometric criteria by which these instruments are judged, should not be applied to instruments that are exclusively used in a developmental context, as these criteria were originally developed for personnel selection purposes. Their qualities should therefore be judged within the context of their use, which may shed a more positive light on the value of these instruments (Moyle & Hackston, 2018). The website of Insights Discovery for instance explicitly mentions that the instrument should not be used for selection purposes and that the preferences the instrument measures should not be associated with personal competences and qualities. The question is whether the latter is seriously taken into account in practice.

And finally, from a theoretical perspective, contemporary personality psychology is starting to let go of the concept of personality as a combination of relatively stable general traits, drivers, styles or preferences. Attention is shifting from *describing general individual differences* to *investigating personality dynamics* in a variety of ways (Rauthmann, 2021), taking into account aspects such as people's personal development, differentiation between contexts in which traits are manifested and individual variance around their average trait levels.

Problem areas regarding the use of personality instruments

However, the concerns with using psychometric profiling in developmental contexts extend beyond the issues with the basic psychometric qualities of type-based personality instruments, including colour-coded ones. A rapid evidence assessment by Jelley (2021) did not demonstrate an overall positive effect of personality feedback interventions on

development-related criteria. The relationship between personality and job performance is also not strong (Bryant-Lees & LaHuis, 2022) and correlations between assessment scores and performance criteria do not automatically translate into statements about individuals, in particular when trait levels happen to be around the average (Möttus, 2022). Moreover, the assumed personality trait consistency in time and throughout contexts is disputable (Alessandri et al., 2020) and can contribute to a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006) about capabilities and competences.

According to most personality models, the level of an individual's natural energy to develop certain competencies varies with their type, colour profile or average trait levels, and therefore one should ideally look for jobs and work environments that fit well with these natural tendencies. However, the above-mentioned problem areas suggest this is a questionable conclusion. Rigidly working with a trait or type framework within Human Resource Development (hereafter HRD) runs the risk of working with supposed talents that have never been demonstrated and overlooking talents that are not identified by the instrument. Also, factors such as individual motivation to develop a competency that is considered to be outside one's natural reach, could easily be ignored. Another important factor to be taken into account is people's fluctuations around a certain characteristic; in addition to understanding someone's average level of a certain cluster of behaviours, it is equally important to know how *variable* people are in this respect and in which specific *context* people display certain behaviour. By ignoring people's narrative identities (McAdams, 2018), one also misses out on how they view their own development. And finally, in the area of coaching, using a coachee's personality trait profile as a diagnostic instrument can be considered incompatible with the open and explorative character of most coaching approaches (Haan & Metselaar, 2015).

In short, the concept of personality as it is generally understood within HRD by means of personality models, and operationalized through personality assessment instruments, can be considered problematic from a theoretical as well as from a professional practitioner's perspective. Some of these concerns are known to HRD professionals and lead to different user strategies (Lundgren et al., 2019). However, the general assumption continues to be that people who participate in a personality assessment benefit from this by gaining a deeper insight into themselves, which legitimizes the use of these assessments in HRD. Surprisingly, how people experience and respond to a personality assessment for developmental purposes has not yet been well researched (Fluckinger & Snell, 2016; Jelley, 2021; Lundgren et al., 2019; Nicolaides, 2019). One exception is a small qualitative study by Lundgren et al. (2019), who investigated test takers' reactions to personality testing in management development.

Yet, in order to be able to support people in their personal and professional development, it is key to know more about the way they understand their personality profiles, the elements they recognize and reject, what they learn about themselves and how that informs them about their development needs and professional goals. Knowing more about this would contribute to understanding whether different perspectives on personality and personality assessments are needed than are currently provided by the commonly used personality assessment models and instruments in organizations.

Method

Participants, recruitment and ethical procedures

From April 2019 to April 2023, twenty-nine semi-structured interviews of 45 to 60 minutes each were held with a nonprobability sample of mostly managers and some senior professionals, who were based in the Netherlands, and who had filled in a colour-coded personality questionnaire at work. The people interviewed worked in different industries, such as transport, construction, entertainment, and banking, in higher education, and in governmental or municipal organizations. All had taken part in either an organization wide default development programme or a departmental development initiative, which included filling in the personality questionnaire that formed part of this. Participation was not on a voluntary basis, but taken for granted. People were recruited directly and indirectly through the professional network of the first author. Except for two interviews, that were done by phone, all the interviews were done face to face in a private office. The phone interviews were slightly shorter, but of a similar quality. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Psychology of the University of Groningen (PSY-1920-S-0367). Voluntary participation was confirmed at the start of the interview, when people mentioned that they had been looking forward to the interview, were curious, or interested in the topic, and eager to talk about their experiences. In order to establish trust between the researcher and the interviewer, people were provided with a detailed description of the processing and storage of their data, and were encouraged to leave out names of people, departments, and organizations, during the interview. If this would happen by accident, these names would be erased during the transcriptions. Also, in accordance with current GDPR regulations, no biographical or job-related data was recorded. Everyone was informed in writing about the research and their right to withdraw from the study, and asked for consent. Also, the interviewer had not received the participant's personality profiles and no-one was asked to share these during the interview.

26 people had received the feedback in a session with colleagues. For three people this had been different: one

person had had individual feedback, one person in a very small team setting and the third one had only received the report because they had been ill during the session. For 11 people the colour-coded instrument was Insights Discovery (The Insights Group Ltd, 2018), for 13 people Management Drives (Versnel & Koppenol, 2003), 4 people had received a profile based on DISC (*Discprofile*. www.Discprofile.Com, n.d.), and one person a Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® profile (*HBDI (Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument)® Assessment | Herrmann*, n.d.).

Although there were differences between the type of organizations, feedback contexts, instruments, and interview setting, we did not consider how these differences may have influenced the findings, as our objective was to explore different ways people made meaning of the results of their profiles, irrespective of the factors that may have influenced this.

Interview process

All interviews evolved organically around the main questions “How did you experience filling in the questionnaire?”, “What was your first reaction regarding the results?”, and “What were your thoughts or feelings when you saw your profile?”, while being fully responsive to the participant’s account (Braun & Clarke 2013, p. 79). The answers were paraphrased and follow-up questions were formulated to get more clarification about what the profile meant to the participant, like “you said it was like a mirror ... Could you tell me some more about this ...? What do you exactly mean by ...? What does that mean to you?”. Depending on how the interview unfolded, relevant follow-up questions were asked. All interviews except for one were conducted in Dutch.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted in line with the recursive six steps analysis according to the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019; Terry et al., 2017) within a constructionist paradigm. This approach bears the mark of the researcher and is not compatible with the concept of intercoder reliability. Therefore, no additional coders were used. The way the themes were conceptualized could be best described by ‘narrative thinking’ (Freeman, 2017). Coding was inductive and a combination of semantic and latent coding was applied. Themes were constructed that captured several codes shared by more people.

Theoretical assumptions and reflexivity

This qualitative study was conducted from the ontological stance that personality types do not exist in reality but are human constructions. The colour-coded profiles bring into existence a kind of people (blue, yellow, red, etc.) that did not exist before and will probably one day disappear again

(Hacking, 1998; 2007). Therefore, our study is about how people construct meaning from their colour-coded personality profiles, without any statements about what these profiles do or should represent. In line with this ontology, we do not make any assumptions about the reliability and validity of colour-coded personality questionnaires. However, we described the current academic debates around these issues because they influence how people perceive these instruments.

Weick (1995) described sensemaking as moments in a process instead of the result of a process. In line with this, we believe that what is shared with us in the interviews will evolve further once the interviewer leaves the room, influenced by what has been evoked by the interview by sharing one’s thoughts with another person. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, which is an ongoing process during a person’s life (Vough et al., 2020). With this study, we aim to shed some light on what happens for someone, triggered by an intervention that is meant to enhance self-awareness.

We can never assume that our position as researchers does not influence what someone shares with us in an interview and how they share it. It should therefore be mentioned that the first author, who also conducted the interviews, had used a wide range of personality instruments in her professional practice before, but had refrained from this many years ago because of a presumed incompatibility of coaching as an open and explorative process with using psychometric instruments as a diagnostic funnel (Haan & Metselaar, 2015). Also, the above mentioned academic and popular debates had led us to expect people to respond with varying degrees of acceptance and scepticism regarding their colour-coded personality profiles. However, our main interest was to better understand how people made meaning of their profiles and we believe the only way to achieve this is to approach the topic with an as open as possible perspective and bracket any assumptions one might have.

Results

As expected, according to the interviewees the purpose of these sessions was to increase self-awareness, learn about and appreciate similarities and differences between people and apply this knowledge to improve collaboration. The way the sessions were described closely resembled the Personality Feedback Intervention as defined by Jelley (2021). Generally, the personality model and the concepts were explained during a session with a certified facilitator who guided the participants through the meaning of the colours and the profiles. After that, questions could be asked, including questions about one’s own profile, and participants briefly discussed their profiles with each other. Exercises that

clarified the differences and similarities between colour codes could be part of the feedback intervention.

Three main themes were constructed that are described below. Except for one, all quotes were translated from Dutch; names have been substituted by pseudonyms and the gender neutral 'they' form is used for all interviewees.

Theme A: This is me, despite what's not right

Contrary to our expectation, when asked what they thought and felt about their colour profile, *all* interviewees responded that the profile was mostly a good representation of how they saw themselves: "... well, it was recognizable so to speak, making you think, yes, ok, that is correct" (Maddison). "... for me it was mostly recognition, like, all this is actually right. In other words, a confirmation, a recognition of what I see when I look at myself" (Stone). This was often illustrated with an example, such as "Well, that was written in the report. If I'm going for something, I am going for it! So, this fits very well with my character and my person" (Irvin). Some mentioned they had initially been sceptical about these types of instruments, which was sometimes fuelled by having had difficulties answering the questions from the questionnaire and a sense of having filled this in arbitrarily. However, after having learned about their profile, the same people would describe the reports very positively, such as "a solid report", "provides insights", "clarifying", "a beautiful method".

Despite the fact that everyone generally agreed with their profile descriptions, some people explicitly mentioned something in their profile that did *not* resonate with them at all. Most comments related to noticing that an important personal characteristic was not captured by their profile, as the colour representing this characteristic was very small in size, indicating a limited preference or no preference for the behaviours associated with this characteristic. However, this was often not true for people, as it concerned behaviour they truly enjoyed, valued, and were appreciated for. For instance, Irvin described themselves as someone with a well-structured approach to work, something that really characterized them. They would therefore have expected a clear colour blue in their profile, but this had not shown up, to their own surprise as well as that of their colleagues. Armstrong and Reynolds described themselves as very people oriented, which had not been confirmed by a prominent green colour in their profile. Richardson had missed a more prominent colour red, because they knew themselves as a business-oriented professional who could be quite directive, and they did not agree with the amount of green in their profile. In addition, some people did not agree with behavioural statements that were linked to their profile. For instance, Stevens did not recognize themselves in being somewhat frivolous and unrealistic. Jacklin did not recognize that it was difficult for them to draw a line and protect their personal boundaries.

Jenkins mentioned that the feedback provider had made blunt statements about people with a similar profile as theirs, in which they did not recognize themselves at all and they had been insulted that this had not been open for discussion. Apart from these apparent discrepancies, many people mentioned that what was not right did not change their identification with a colour:

"I am yellow, except for that aspect of yellow, that is not me" (Richardson).

Theme B: One colour, many meanings

When explaining how a colour in their profile related to them, people interpreted the colours in various ways. For many people a dominant colour represented a preference as well as actual work behaviour, whereas non-dominant colours meant they neither liked nor showed the behaviour that was associated with that colour:

"Yes, I always kind of knew it, but in prior jobs I had taken up some planning tasks. Well, you need a fair amount of concentration to do that well and then I understood I regularly lost my concentration and did not really see any challenge in it. But this made it very clear, this is not my strongest colour" (Ellis).

However, for several people a non-dominant colour meant something different. For Smith, their tiny blue showed them that due to current job and life circumstances, they were not able to structure their work the way they used to in the past, and to them it most of all represented their actual, but *not* their preferred work behaviour. For Stevens, a tiny blue in their profile referred to this not being their *preference*, although deep inside they felt they were very structured. They did not clarify the difference between a preference and 'something deep inside', but to them this distinction meant something:

"The only thing I saw [that I did not recognize] was that I am not very structured, whereas deep inside I am, only this is not my preference" (Stevens).

Irvin's blue was also unexpectedly small, although they identified with being the most organized and structured member of the team, which had also been confirmed by their colleagues during the session. For them, the tiny blue was *not* in line with their current work behaviour. They clarified this apparent discrepancy as:

"Then it turned out that this was not part of my character, but my survival behaviour. This was also written in the report."

For Clarke, their prominent colour red proved to them what they had always felt inside but had never been able to express well:

"Very specifically I was like, see, I am also red, and people always think of me as the overly friendly ... and that is also who I am, that is also a part of me, but there is also a lot of power, and in one way or another, I'm like ... that I can express this, show more of it."

Whereas for many people a colour represented their general preference, irrespective of the context, for some there was a clear distinction between their work preferences and their private preferences. And, although the word preference is generally presented as something relatively stable, this was not always experienced as such. Edwards, who reported a change in their colour profile from a few years ago when they worked in a different role and company culture, said:

"I actually liked noticing that such a profile can really change over the years, that your preferences, depending on your job and the company you work for, change."

Even though a dominant colour would indicate natural, effortless behaviour, this was not always experienced as such. Anderson, who clearly identified with the high level of red in their profile, also mentioned that being red also *cost them a lot of energy*. And whereas for some people their profile corresponded with their behaviour, for others it clearly did not. Miller's profile confirmed to them who they were and always had been, but it did not necessarily correspond with their behaviour:

"... my behaviour has certainly changed, but my profile hasn't, because I am who I am and that's fine."

Apparently, the concepts that were central to the instrument's models, being *drivers*, *preferences*, *thinking styles* or *behavioural patterns*, seemed to be ambiguous concepts that meant different things to different people. People related these concepts in idiosyncratic ways according to how they experienced themselves. In these personal stories, different notions were assumed, in particular of the extent to which preferences were stable or context dependent, or mostly referred to overt behaviour or inner states, and these notions were not always aligned with what they were supposed to mean according to the model theory. Overall, people related the colours in their profile to something that was an important part of how they experienced themselves, but exactly *how* they related this to *what aspect of themselves* was a very personal meaning-making process.

Theme C: A catalyst for reflecting on my theories of me

Although many people mentioned that the profile had not revealed anything new about their personalities, many also felt that the profiles had given them more insight into themselves. A lot of these insights boiled down to now understanding *why* things were as they were, such as why they behaved in a certain way or had certain preferences or aversions – sometimes referred to as *allergies* – why they could get along with someone so well or, on the contrary, had a difficult relationship with someone. In other words, the colour-coded profile was not only seen as a description of themselves, but also as an *explanation or clarification* of their behaviour, attitudes, or feelings.

Being able to relate the daily experiences at work to an aspect of their profile helped people to make meaning of these experiences, which they called an insight or an awareness. As one person said in relation to their Mindset, a Management Drives concept that represents which drivers and behaviours keep one's mind engaged, resulting in what determines how one acts under stress:

"... why I always become very active and direct when under stress. And now I could explain this from my profile, because it came out of my profile, that I act that way" (Wagner).

For Sullivan the insight was an enhanced awareness:

"... then you realize that maybe I'm not so open as I want to be. It helped me see things clearer."

Some people found it *clarifying* that certain tasks cost them more energy, and one person even mentioned that the profile had made them aware of what they had always been missing in their job.

The personal stories that were shared in relation to who they felt they were and why they behaved in accordance with or not according to their dominant colours, sometimes directly referred to the explanation given by the feedback provider, but more often resulted from their own personal reflection during or following the feedback session. Occasionally, reflecting on one's profile was done during the interview and led to an insight at that moment. I call these personal stories "my theories of me", because they were not predetermined by a report or provided by the feedback provider but constructed by the people themselves on the basis of their personal interpretation of the colour model. For many people, the model served as a useful framework to understand themselves better, which is illustrated by the following quotes:

"That it provides another way to think about yourself and actually a sort of 'coat rack' for your thoughts" (Smith).

"I try to use it as a 'coat rack' to think about 'hey, what's going on here?'" (Ellis, when reflecting upon a situation in certain meetings where they do not feel motivated).

This was similar for people who relativized the importance of colour models in general and who emphasized that the model most of all provided a direction. Ways to express this were:

"It's just a model. Assumptions have been made, and in the end, I decide what applies to me, not the model" (Reynolds). "It gives a direction, something to talk about" (Palmer). "I started super critical and read the report with a tunnel vision that confirmed my ideas, but eventually I decided to read this differently Suppose this tells me the truth, when does it apply then and when not? And I have to admit it triggered me and I thought: here it tells me something I have to work on. So, this is my journey" (Jacklin).

Discussion

The general recognition of a colour-coded personality profile encountered in this study was not expected given earlier research on the acceptance of personality test results, as mentioned in Lundgren et al.'s study (2019). In their study, the authors looked at factors that impacted personality test reactions in a developmental setting with test takers and found varying degrees of acceptance, including rejection (Lundgren, et al., 2019). This was consistent with earlier research in high stakes contexts. One of the factors investigated by them included "perceived measurement quality", based upon earlier studies within high stakes contexts. These studies had demonstrated that the extent to which test takers believe that the test will generate results that accurately reflect them, highly correlate with personality test acceptance. However, this effect was not established in the Lundgren et al. study and the authors hypothesized that the relevance of perceived measurement quality might be different in developmental settings (Lundgren et al., 2019). In our current study a low perceived measurement quality also did not coincide with a low acceptance of one's profile for any of the interviewees; it seemed rather that it worked the other way around, as people with an initially sceptical attitude towards these kinds of instruments were more positive about the questionnaire after having received and recognized their profile. Although the overall acceptance of the feedback process, including one's profile, seems remarkable, we attribute this to the mostly positive intervention experience that people referred to during the interviews and the seeming absence of distrust in the process. Only one person had reported a negative feedback

experience. This supports Lundgren et al.'s (2019) finding that the interaction between test-taker and HRD professional influences the test-takers' reaction to a larger extent than the tool itself. In particular, the authors emphasized the importance of addressing the purpose of the instrument, discussing its utility, and treating test takers in a civil and polite way, as factors that contributed to a positive reaction.

As we were also interested in what people did *not* accept or agree with, when anything popped up that even vaguely indicated non-acceptance, a follow-up question was asked to explore this, and, as the results demonstrate, people openly shared their non-agreement when applicable. However, sharing something one did not agree with, did not affect the overall acceptance of the instrument and one's profile. We therefore believe that it seems sufficient for someone to be able to link key elements of their profile to how they understand themselves in order to accept one's personality profile. This is consistent with one of Forer's early conclusions based on a classroom experiment, that a minimum degree of correspondence between a written profile and a self-description appears to engender an attitude of uncritical acceptance of the written profile (Forer, 1949). Since this experiment, the tendency to accept false feedback about one's personal characteristics when it is thought to be derived from personality measures, has been called the Forer effect; up until today this is also referred to as the Barnum effect (Jackson, 1978; Jackson & Murray, 1985; Kirichek, 2017; Meehl, 1956). Throughout the last decennia, varying degrees of this phenomenon have been demonstrated (Agudo & Matute, 2021; Guastello & Rieke 1990; Jackson & Murray, 1985; Kirichek, 2017; Snyder, 1974)) and the factors contributing to it were investigated (Johnson et al., 1985; MacDonald & Standing, 2002; Poškus, 2015). For instance, positive feedback enhances the acceptability of personality descriptions if this is based on what is believed to be a personality test (MacDonald & Standing, 2002). Clearly the personality profile descriptions resulting from the colour-coded instruments used in this study are predominantly positively framed, which could have contributed to the easy identification. An illustration of this positive framing is that when a dominant colour was not recognized in someone's behaviour, this was seen as a 'missing talent, yet to be developed'. This could have been a reason for people to *miss* a colour, but never *dismiss* a colour in their profiles. An element that also supports the idea of a Barnum effect is the regular use of "universally valid statements" (Forer, 1949), such as *"She may find it painful to acknowledge that people she deeply cares for encounter serious problems"* (Quote from the first author's own Insights Discovery report). In addition to this, the broad scope of personality characteristics that are associated with a colour code, like the colour red in MD representing *acting impulsively* as well as *wanting to be treated with respect*, or the colour

blue in ID being associated with *conscientiousness* as well as *being objective*, increases the options for identification with one aspect without necessarily identifying with another aspect of that colour. Obviously, to what extent the Barnum effect can account for the recognition of colour-coded profiles cannot be determined with this study and could be explored further.

From a psychometric perspective, it could be argued that item responses could have been influenced by a motivation to present oneself positively, hence accepting one's resulting personality profile could be expected. Although this might certainly have been the case, since this can happen in any other personality questionnaire, the instruments were positioned in a low stakes' context and questions were phrased neutrally or positively. More importantly however, with this study we do not aim to make any assumptions about the validity of the instruments involved.

With regard to our concern regarding potential stigmatization on the basis of one's colour profile, some people shared their general concerns that this could happen and should be avoided, but follow-on questions regarding this topic only twice led to mentioning personal experiences of feeling stigmatized by a colleague's remark. However, the way people talked about their profiles also showed that for some, colours were associated with talents and competencies, which adds to our concern regarding the impact of these profiles. Whereas preferences may be a neutral concept, talents or competencies are not. Therefore, some colours could easily be favoured over other colours in specific contexts. We therefore strongly recommend further research into the organizational use of these instruments.

The idiosyncratic ways people described themselves in relation to their colour profiles, how they clarified apparent discrepancies between aspects of the profile and how they experience themselves, relates to the concept of *narrative identity*, that refers to "the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to provide his or her life with unity, purpose and meaning" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). A perhaps provocative suggestion could be that the scientific quality of the feedback that is provided on the basis of a personality instrument might be less important for constructing a narrative identity than other, yet to be identified instrument qualities. Further research could explore what qualities people find helpful when trying to find meaning in personality feedback.

The colour profiles made sense to people because they *clarified* for them why they experienced themselves the way they did. The phenomenon that classifying, putting a label on behaviour, leads to perceiving that label as the cause of that behaviour, has been observed before (Dehue, 2011). The label has become a thing in itself instead of a concept constructed by people, a phenomenon also known as reification. Within the medical and behavioural sciences, in particular psychiatry,

this is common practice. Labels are initially constructed to identify categories that share certain characteristics, but then are used to explain these characteristics as well (Dehue, 2014). Notwithstanding the fact that most people understand the idea of personality labels being human constructions, these labels often help people to make sense of experiences. A label like HSP, a term coined by Aron referring to sensitivity to sensory processing, enables people to make sense of puzzling experiences like emotional fatigue (Aron, 2014). Adults diagnosed with ADHD later in life, report that suddenly many difficulties they struggled with are now given a reason (Young et al., 2019). The colour-coded personality labels may function in a similar way as many other personality labels, in the sense that they frequently lead to the experience of 'things falling into place'.

In addition to using the colour profile to *describe* themselves or *explain* things about themselves, the profiles also helped people to *learn* something about themselves by serving as a catalyst to reflect upon their professional developments or their current jobs or company culture. However, the question is whether the latter would have been the case when interpretation and sensemaking of one's profile would have been fully predetermined by a report or a feedback provider. In several ways, people in this study were facilitated to construct their own meaning of their colour profile, for instance through instructions to "select what applies to you and ignore what doesn't".

The debate about the psychometric properties of popular type-based and by the same token colour-based personality instruments is relevant and important, but does not address another important question. That question is whether the interpretation of any individual personality profile can be predetermined at all. For obvious factors beyond this paper, a personality instrument based upon the well-established Five Factor Model or any other well-constructed and validated trait-based personality instrument should generally be favoured over an instrument which psychometric qualities are low or unknown. However, given the ambiguous nature of personality traits (Eronen, 2024), one might wonder whether the context of personal and professional development requires a process that gives more weight to personal meaning-making instead of predetermined sensemaking. Cervone (2021) for instance uses bottom-up approaches to identify *how people experience themselves* instead of putting a trait framework upon their sense of self. As Cervone (2022) argues, "processes of meaning construction are central to individuality and individual differences" (p. 321). Such processes allow space for individual interpretation of traits and seeming inconsistencies that in one way or another mean something for people. This is also more in line with contemporary thinking about the use of traits for understanding personality. It is currently thought that human

personality cannot adequately be understood in terms of general traits, since traits “do not provide a full account of how individual differences in traits are manifest in behaviours” (Jayawickreme et al., 2019, p. 3). In order to understand manifestations of differences between people, attention needs to be paid to individual idiosyncrasies, such as internal contradictions in a person’s behavioural repertoire. Fifteen years ago Orom and Cervone (2009) found that people sometimes describe themselves using terms related to opposite poles of a factor, such as “organized” as well as “messy”, or “kind and naïve” as well as “cynical and selfish” (Orom & Cervone, 2009). This assumes a personal sense of logic instead of an imposed logic, and relates to what Weick (1995, p.29) identified as an important goal of sensemaking: the *feeling* of order, clarity, and rationality [emphasis in original].

Conclusions

This study showed that recognizing one’s colour-coded personality profile, based on a self-scored questionnaire, can mean many things to people, not necessarily in line with what is suggested by the instrument. It demonstrates that when enabled to do so, people construct their own stories of what their colour profile means, by selectively accepting information provided to them and relating this to their own experiences. Whereas a sense of ‘a common language’ can be established by the use of colour-coded personality profiles, the way people speak about the meaning of a colour can be quite varied. This finding contributes to the literature regarding acceptance of personality profiles by questioning what acceptance means to people as well as what ‘speaking a common language’ entails.

Our study also clarified what can be understood by enhanced self-awareness and learning something new about oneself. It shows that learning something new does not equal bringing newly discovered personal characteristics into awareness. It rather pertains to relating new concepts to familiar experiences by constructing a highly personal story that clarifies or explains these experiences. This process requires self-reflection and may lead to an enhanced awareness of things that need more attention. As such, this can be considered a developmental process.

We also demonstrated that people may often experience the intervention process around colour-coded personality profiles as pleasant and insightful, while being well aware of the potentially stigmatizing effects of these profiles. However, we would strongly suggest further research into the prevalence of stigmatization and effective strategies to prevent this from happening. In particular, the consequences of associating colour profiles with the assumed presence or absence of

specific competencies and talents needs further investigation, as this may strongly impact people’s careers.

Practical implications

On the basis of this study, we strongly recommend using colour-coded personality instruments in a way that takes into account how people make meaning of these instruments, instead of relying on the instrument’s written report or a certified facilitator. In practice this implies that the theory behind the personality model should be explained, but presented as a theory, and nothing more. Characteristics or talents associated with a profile should be presented as tentative hypotheses to be reflected upon, tested, and challenged. Instead of the suggestion to “select what applies to you and ignore what doesn’t”, guiding questions should then be more thought provoking, like one of the participants in this study asked themselves: “What if this applied to me, when and how would this manifest?”

Any assumptions about presumed behavioural patterns or untapped talents associated with a profile, even if people can identify with these profiles, should be avoided. Instead, a process needs to be established that enables people to explore in depth *in what way* one does or does not recognize their profile and work with the resulting reflection process in order to create meaningful development objectives.

Limitations of this study

This study focused on colour-coded personality instruments, but some of the findings were also presented in the light of personality theories, models, and instruments in general. It could be argued that the use of other types of instruments could not have led to some of these findings, because of better psychometric qualities. Whether this is the case would need to be investigated in further studies. Another limitation is the fact that in this population mostly positive experiences were recorded. How people experience and respond to colour-coded personality profiles they do not recognize, is therefore not known.

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