

VALIDITY CONSIDERATIONS IN ACCEPTANCE OF PERSONAL PROFILE SYSTEM INTERPRETATIONS¹

MICHAEL G. AAMODT AND WILSON W. KIMBROUGH
University of Arkansas

The Personal Profile System is an extensively used self-interpreting personality measure that is supported by the publicly undocumented statement that its profile interpretations are accepted by users as being 90 percent accurate, although such declarations are ambiguous and possibly misleading from the standpoint of validity. The present study found some support for the validity of the measure after the Barnum Effect had been controlled. Subjects receiving their own profile interpretations rated them as being more accurate than did subjects who received a profile interpretation for another person. These results were discussed in terms of the use of controlled face validity as a frequently used method of psychometric support for an instrument.

THE Personal Profile System is a self-interpreting personality inventory that is rapidly growing in popularity. The inventory can be administered only by certified Performax Systems International, Inc. consultants who number almost 8,000 in the United States (Gardiner, 1981). Even with this high degree of popularity, little information has been published about the psychometric properties of the instrument.

The manual for the Personal Profile System states “. . . we can say with such confidence that 90 to 95% of the interpretation is accepted by the respondent” (Performax Systems International, Inc., 1979, p. 12). It is difficult to interpret what 90 to 95% of the

¹ Requests for reprints should be sent to Michael G. Aamodt or Wilson W. Kimbrough, Department of Psychology, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701.

interpretation being accepted means from the standpoint of validity. Although this type of acceptance, however loosely perceived, would provide an undefined intuitive form of face validity for the profile interpretations, it is not a readily defensible indicator of validity. Such an intuitive notion of validity could also be the result of factors not related to profile validity. One such factor is the use of universally valid statements which fit anyone. Meehl (1956) has labeled the acceptance of statements such as these the "Barnum Effect," and Stagner (1958) has demonstrated their existence in a study of the gullibility of personnel managers.

It was the purpose of this study to explore the validity of interpretations of the Personal Profile System as a self-interpreting personality inventory by examining the degree to which individuals accept interpretations of their own profile in relation to the extent to which they accept profiles of individuals falsely submitted as if these profiles were their own—a procedure intended to control in part for the Barnum Effect. This approach was thought to provide an evaluation of the face validity of the instrument in terms of the perception of the examinee.

Method

Fifty-eight students were administered the Personal Profile System as part of regular class procedure. Equal numbers of students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the first condition, the students were given a copy of the interpretation associated with their actual profile. In the second condition, the students were given a copy of an interpretation corresponding to a profile selected through a shuffling procedure. All subjects were asked then to rate on a twenty-point scale, the degree to which they considered the profile interpretation to be accurate of their behavior style. All subjects were completely debriefed and those who had received false interpretations were then given their correct ones.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed that students who had received their actual profile interpretation rated them as being more accurate ($M = 16.52$, $SD = 2.65$, range = 11 to 20) than did students who had received false interpretations ($M = 14.83$, $SD = 3.65$, range = 2 to 20), $t(56) = 2.08$, $p < .05$.

These results suggest that individuals do believe their profiles to be relatively accurate and that this belief is not necessarily due

solely to Barnum statements. However, even though the acceptance ratings were high, they do not appear to be so high as those implied by statements in the manual. This difference in acceptance rates of the profile interpretations can probably be attributed in part to the settings in which the ratings were taken. The figure reported in the Personal Profile System Manual was based upon observations taken at seminars and training sessions in which the individuals paid money to attend. These results are consistent with a cognitive dissonance explanation. Thus, subjects may have been more inclined to rate the interpretations as being more accurate.

Even though interpretations of true profiles were rated as being more accurate than the interpretations of false profiles, the ratings of the interpretations of false profiles were still fairly high. There are two possible reasons for this occurrence. First, the profile interpretations may engender at least some Barnum effects, i.e., they are perceived as being at least moderately accurate for everyone. Second, the students in the false interpretation group may have rated the false interpretations higher than they actually believed in an attempt to please the experimenter. Further research is necessary on these points.

The reason for the profile interpretations having been highly accepted by the individuals who were administered the Personal Profile System cannot be placed solely on the Barnum Effect. It is important to note that acceptance by the individual of the profile interpretations does not imply instrument validity. However, even though face validity of the profile does not directly reveal construct, content, or criterion validity, it does suggest that the instrument is at least minimally valid. When Barnum Effects can be ruled out, it would seem that acceptance of a profile interpretation not only demonstrates some validity for the inventory, but also would furnish some understanding of its utility. For example, if the goal of an inventory is self-awareness, then it is important that the individual believe the inventory to be accurate. For the average individual receiving a psychological test, reading pages of statistics about the psychometric properties of the instrument would not be so convincing as the realization that the behavior described in the interpretation indeed seems compatible with their own.

In summary, the results of the current study suggest that the profile interpretations of the Personal Profile System possess at least a moderate degree of face validity. These results argue against the popular practice of immediately discrediting any validity based upon acceptance of profile interpretations as long as the possibility of the Barnum Effect has been at least partially ruled out.

REFERENCES

- Gardiner, S. L. Profiling. *Network News*, 1981, 2, 6.
- Meehl, P. E. Wanted—a good cookbook. *American Psychologist*, 1956, 11, 263–272.
- Performax Systems International. *Manual for using the Personal Profile System*. Minneapolis, MN: author, 1979.
- Stagner, R. The gullibility of personnel managers. *Personnel Psychology*, 1958, 11, 347–352.