VALIDITY CONSIDERATIONS IN ACCEPTANCE OF PERSONAL PROFILE SYSTEM INTERPRETATIONS

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 \( (M = 16.52, SD = 2.65, \text{range} = 11 \text{ to } 20) \) than did students who had received false interpretations \( (M = 14.83, SD = 3.65, \text{range} = 2 \text{ to } 20) \), \( t (56) = 2.08, p < .05 \).

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 in-
clined 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 interpr-
etations 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 convinc-
ing as the realization that the behavior described in the interpreta-
tion 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