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One profile, five stories an autoethnography of sense-making and meaning-making of a personality profile

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Abstract

Purpose – Senior professionals and managers employed by large organizations regularly participate in leadership development interventions that include a personality inventory. This research paper aims to address how the first author and five feedback coaches make sense and meaning of the results of these inventories and interpret this process in terms of Perceptual Control Theory.

Design/methodology/approach – The first author engaged in five separate feedback sessions with five different feedback coaches based on the results of a leadership assessment instrument and kept a diary to reflect upon these sessions. Her meaning-making process is discussed in relation to the Perceptual Control Theory.

Findings – The autoethnographic reflections demonstrated that only feedback that was compatible with her sense of identity led to additional self-reflection, sometimes leading to enhanced self-awareness. It also confirmed the idiosyncrasy of sensemaking of personality profiles resulting from a personality assessment instrument and suggested that working with multiple interpretations of a personality profile comes with additional benefits.

Practical implications – We recommend that organizations using self-scored personality assessments consider the benefits of allowing multiple perspectives on personality profiles. We suggest inviting the individuals concerned to take an active role in the sensemaking and meaning-making process of their own profiles. This approach may not align with the traditional positivist interpretation of validated personality instruments. However, adopting the view that personality narratives are not fixed or self-evident, but rather co-constructed by individuals, could encourage recipients of such feedback to actively engage in creating their own story rather than passively accepting others' interpretations of who they are.

Originality/value – The topic of sense-making and meaning-making of personality inventory results has, at least to our understanding, never been approached by means of an autoethnography nor discussed in relation to Perceptual Control Theory.

Keywords Personality feedback, Leadership development assessment, Autoethnography, Perceptual control theory

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Many people who hold a senior management role in a large organization have at least once in their career received personality feedback based on a self-scored personality inventory with the objective to enhance their development as a leader (Harland, 2003; Jelley, 2021; Lundgren *et al.*, 2017). These inventories usually result in a description of the person with special attention to what they are naturally good at and what may be a development need or even a derailment risk. It is commonly assumed that feedback interventions based on these personality assessments help people develop self-awareness (Sutton *et al.*, 2015).

Psychologists from different epistemological traditions have lately started to question the individual application of the results of personality assessment instruments and what they are associated with, such as talents or behaviour. For instance, within a positivist epistemology, Möttus (2022) explained how intuitive interpretations of correlations such as “someone high in X is likely to be high in Y” are almost always incorrect when applied to an individual. From an interpretivist perspective, the value of these instruments is mostly questioned because they are based on a substance ontology (Geert and Ruiter, 2022). Within this ontology, it is assumed that non-observable stable entities, called traits, cause behaviour, which does not do any justice to the complexity of human systems. Using traits as explanations of human behaviour leads to circular reasoning as it does not *clarify* behaviour (Dehue, 2014). Also, it contradicts the notion of *personality changes*, a concept that recently gained ground in a variety of epistemologies (see for instance Allemand and Flückiger, 2022). However, these concerns are academic and, so far, have not influenced the use of these instruments in organizations.

The assumption that people develop their self-awareness by means of feedback, based on self-scored personality assessment instruments is not well researched. So far, only a few studies have been conducted in this area, mostly within a positivist epistemology and aimed at identifying factors that influenced self-awareness, such as group training based on personality assessments (Anderson, 2008; Sutton *et al.*, 2015). Other studies looked at the factors related to enhanced acceptance of and a positive attitude towards personality assessment instruments but did not provide insight into *how* personality feedback as such enhanced a better understanding of oneself. Two exceptions are a small qualitative interview study by Lundgren (2014), which looked at the types of reflection that were triggered by personality feedback, and a recent mixed-methods study by Casali *et al.* (2024) that illustrated how personality feedback elicits introspection. Except for this last study, all the other studies were conducted a while after the actual feedback experience.

We believe that more insight into the process of reflection during and directly following a personality feedback session can trigger critical discussions in organizations about the use and value of these instruments for individual development. Therefore, lived experiences of personality feedback processes and the individual responses and reflections related to these processes should be investigated. Our study aims to give insight into a person’s experiences and meaning-making process immediately following the feedback experience.

Research questions

In leadership development, the results of personality questionnaires are almost always communicated in a personal session with a certified feedback coach. With this study, our main purpose was to gain more insight into the meaning-making of people who are engaged in a personal feedback session, led by a feedback coach and based on a personality questionnaire. As the working alliance between an executive coach and a client in organizational coaching has long been assumed to be one of the key factors in executive coaching (for a recent more nuanced view on this assumption, see de Haan *et al.*, 2020), we were also interested in the influence of the feedback coach in a session. Therefore, our general research question:

“How do people who are engaged in a personality feedback session, based upon a self-scored personality questionnaire, make sense and meaning of the results of this questionnaire?” was addressed by three sub-questions:

- (1) *How does someone experience and reflect upon personality feedback, based on a self-scored questionnaire, delivered by different feedback coaches?*

This RQ is addressed in the autoethnographic part of this paper, “A personal record of five personality feedback sessions” that describes the personal experience of the first author with five different feedback sessions.

- (2) *How are these experiences and self-reflections interpreted by Perceptual Control Theory?*

This is addressed in the paragraph “Analysis”, where PCT is used as a framework to make sense of the personal reflections of the first author.

- (3) *How can the way feedback coaches contribute to the experience and meaning-making of a recipient of personality feedback, be understood from a perceptual control perspective?*

This is also addressed in “Analysis”, where the tactics, used by the feedback coaches (hereafter referred to as FCs) to influence the first author’s (hereafter referred to as M) perception of the feedback, are discussed.

Theoretical orientation and methodological considerations

Sensemaking, meaning-making and autoethnography

This paper is based on autoethnographic writings, positioned within a constructivist epistemology. Our aim is to describe and make sense of an individual’s meaning-making process based on personality feedback. Hence we focused on psychological, within-person processes as opposed to social sensemaking processes (Held, 1995; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). Our understanding of sensemaking and meaning-making is in line with Weick’s (1995) and Weick’s *et al.* (2005) conceptualization of sensemaking and meaning-making as dynamic processes, resulting in temporary interpretations. We also adopt the definitions of Dalton (2021) regarding sensemaking as the perception of pattern and order and meaning-making as the perception of the *consequences* of pattern and order as they affect us. In Dalton’s view, sensemaking precedes meaning-making (Dalton, 2021).

Autoethnography fits in with an interpretative framework (Muncey, 2010). It seeks possibilities, is self-reflexive, subjective and focuses on local knowledge. Autoethnography sits under the umbrella of qualitative science, with roots that go back to a range of epistemological orientations, and analyses the lived experience of the author, connecting researcher insights to one or more of many psychological and social themes (Paulus, 2021). According to Adams *et al.* (2021), in order to be defined as an autoethnography, a project should include all three main characteristics of this method; that is, it should include the self (auto), aspects of culture (ethno) and life writing (graphy). To ensure that interrogation of the intersections between self and social life is possible, autoethnographers have to engage in rigorous self-reflection, often referred to as reflexivity (Adams *et al.*, 2021). In addition, they need to clarify how the work contributes to existing research (Sparkes, 2021). Although these criteria suggest a consensus among scholars about what counts as a good autoethnography, the field is also divided by the theoretical paradigms adopted regarding *how* a work contributes to existing research (Anderson, 2006). In particular, the issue of representation or generalizability is approached in different ways. For Ellis *et al.* (2011), the main objectives of an autoethnography are defined in terms of its usefulness. Its aim is to help readers communicate with others different from themselves, which can refer to many aspects of life, such as experiencing a chronic illness or belonging to a specific cultural minority. It

can thus offer a way to improve the lives of these others, the readers and even the author's own. In their view, generalizability can only be achieved afterwards by the readers (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

In contrast to this view, analytic autoethnographers such as Anderson (2006) do not emphasize the emotional resonance with the reader but adopt a realist analytic perspective, focussing on factors to be determined beforehand, such as the importance of the researcher being a complete member of the social world under study and the need for a dialogue with informants beyond the self (Anderson, 2006). In the current study, we take a position that is mostly consistent with the phenomenological epistemology of evocative ethnography (Willig, 2013). We use an interpretive phenomenological approach (Willig, 2013), as we relate the autoethnography to a theory about human experience, the Perceptual Control Theory (Powers, 1973).

Perceptual control theory

In order to make sense of the individual experiences, we used a psychological theory that focuses on how people continuously construct their reality. Perceptual Control Theory (hereafter PCT) explains the behaviour of living organisms as *control of perception* (Powers, 1973). It is explicitly positioned within a constructivist epistemology (Richards and von Glasersfeld, 1979; Sigger, 2023) and offers a framework allowing one possible way to perceive the world, while remaining ontologically uncommitted to an external reality (Richards and von Glasersfeld, 1979). Within PCT, claims to knowledge of reality are perceptual organizations of the claimant (Sigger, 2023).

The theory assumes that living organisms, humans included, strive to keep certain perceptual variables (their experience) in a desired state. They do so according to the mechanisms of control systems: by continuously comparing their current experience to a reference experience, the goal or desired state. Behaviour is purposeful, driven by the need to attain perceptual goals (Powers, 2020). People's complex functioning is explained by a multilayered, interconnected hierarchical network of perceptual control systems. Higher level control systems control complex perceptions; their input is constructed from all the connected less complex lower-level systems, and their output is sent down to a multitude of lower-level systems. Reference signals at a higher level can be understood as a personal standard, a norm for how people want to perceive themselves. A consequence of understanding humans as perceptual control systems is that people's perception is built from their perceptual input and hence understanding this process is done naturally from a first-person perspective (Mansell *et al.*, 2023). This postulate sits well with the ideographic perspective of this autoethnography.

In the context of this article, it would be taking things too far to elaborate on the details of PCT, but the above-mentioned key feature of a hierarchy of control needs to be emphasized and can probably be best understood with an example. Controlling one's perceptions is organized by varying the reference signals for lower-level perceptions in order to counteract disturbances (de Hullu, 2023). If you have a habit of going for a walk with a colleague during lunchtime and the colleague leaves for another job (a disturbance to your current habit), you will find another way to serve the same purpose. Depending on this higher-level purpose, which in this case can be social or health related, you could inquire which of the other colleagues would like to go out for a walk, or decide to take a walk on your own. It is important to note that *perceptions* are being controlled, irrespective of what others may observe. Control can also be restored by changing our cognitions instead of behaviour. One could for instance change one's own view of what healthy behaviour looks like.

PCT proposes 11 levels of perceptual control (de Hullu, 2023), but complex mental processes, such as sensemaking and meaning-making, are addressed only at Levels 9, 10 and 11. Level 9, the program level, controls choices between sequences of underlying perceptions, involving perceptions of causality and possible choices and consequences of decisions. Level 10, the principle level, controls complex perceptions like values and principles, such as honesty, health and safety. This level guides people's decisions by what is important, here and

now. Level 11, the highest level, controls system concepts: a coherent organization of principles and underlying perceptions. At this level, people control their worldview as a coherent set of perceptions, and their identity, by allowing some perceptions in (those which feel true) and others out (those that feel untrue) (de Hullu, 2023).

A personality feedback session aims to either confirm someone's known natural strengths and development needs or to provide a person with new insights into these areas. The role of the Feedback Consultant, hereafter FC, is to facilitate the meaning-making process of the person. However, according to PCT, perceptions at the highest level of system concepts, such as religious beliefs and identities, are much harder to change than perceptions at lower levels, for instance intending to adopt a healthier lifestyle. During a personality feedback session, it is therefore likely that the client will not easily give up on the personality they identify with when they do not recognize the feedback.

Methodological considerations

This study consists of two parts: the first part is the description of a sensemaking and meaning-making process of the first author, by means of an autoethnography. In the second part, we analyse the autoethnography using PCT as an interpretive framework.

Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, which is an ongoing process during a person's life (Vough *et al.*, 2020). It should be taken into account that this study is based on snapshots of sensemaking and meaning-making and therefore will never be able to capture all processes in relation to a certain personal experience. The autoethnography that forms the basis of this paper enabled us to study a meaning-making process from within, as close as possible to the experience of receiving personality feedback and based on several moments of reflection during a period of six months. Autoethnographies are best positioned to give near-direct access to deep personal reflection. In addition, in order to address our third research question, we needed someone to experience the feedback of several feedback providers using the same personality profile report. We could not ethically justify exposing people outside our research team to such an experience. The autoethnography also exposes the verbal expressions of the other party in the feedback sessions. This suggested *five possible sensemaking stories* that enabled us to question general assumptions about personality measurement and feedback.

Method and reflexivity

This study consists of an autoethnography, written in the first person by the first author, and an analysis, written in the second and third person that aims to elucidate the process of sensemaking and meaning-making using PCT. With the autoethnography, the first author describes her experiences as a recipient of personality feedback that was provided by certified feedback coaches and based on a personality inventory with a sound academic reputation, often used in leadership development programs. The questionnaire consisted of many statements that had to be answered with the extent to which one agreed with the statement, measured with a 3- or 4-point scale. The resulting report was a summary description of how the scores on each of the scales should be interpreted in terms of personal drivers and probable leadership strengths and pitfalls [1].

In order to have an as authentic as possible experience, we chose an instrument M was not certified in; she was not familiar with the questions nor with the reporting style. M contacted five experienced executive coaches through an Internet search and convenience sampling. Only one of them was someone she had never met before; the others were people she had met several times during professional meetings. The latter was unavoidable given the number of executive coaches in her professional network. The FCs and M contracted the feedback session as a regular coach/client session with the applicable hourly fee and they gave their written informed consent to use the experience in our research project. They did not know the names of the other feedback coaches. The sessions were conducted over a period of six

months. Immediately following a session, M kept a diary to note down how the feedback provider had made sense of her profile and how this affected her thoughts and feelings. In addition, M monitored her behaviour, revisited the audio tapes several times and reflected over the sessions in relation to her past and current lived experiences. By way of member check, each FC was invited to respond to a summary reflection of the feedback session with them; four out of five agreed with the summary and one FC replied we did not need to send them the summary.

The fact that four FCs already had an impression of M prior to the session was a relevant factor. Some of them were transparent about how this influenced their sense-making, which is described in the autoethnography. Another equally important aspect of this study was how the first author personally related to the topic. During the first ten years of her former professional role as an international leadership coach, her coaching sessions used to be informed by the results of such personality inventories. Hence, she was very familiar with the practice of providing personality feedback in organizations. However, over the years she developed a growing concern about these practices and stopped using psychometric instruments with her clients. These concerns were related to the value that was usually attributed to the results of personality assessment instruments and reinforced by the authority of the feedback provider, often a senior certified professional in executive coaching. This seemed at odds with the principles of many contemporary coaching styles, where coaches generally try to refrain from a directive role (de Haan and Metselaar, 2015). This reluctance regarding the use of personality inventories was on the one hand a source of bias [2] we had to be aware of. On the other hand, reluctance regarding personality profiles exists among others as well and this study aimed to explore *one possible way of meaning-making* that would not necessarily be representative of all people receiving similar personality feedback in organizations. An important factor to note is M's background in psychology, as her level of psychological knowledge would be uncommon among typical recipients of personality profiles in organizational settings.

A personal record of five personality feedback sessions

The following paragraph addresses subquestion 1, "How does someone experience and reflect upon personality feedback, based on a self-scored questionnaire, delivered by different feedback coaches?" by means of an autoethnography of the first author, M.

The report

The report sent to me beforehand in order to prepare for the feedback session was a computer-generated summary of the results of the personality inventory, in graphs as well as in text. Before receiving the report, I try to anticipate the content. In particular, I wonder whether what I consider to be something that defines me to a large degree will be acknowledged, as I certainly have tried to answer the questions sincerely. This concerns my ruminating nature, worrying and feeling guilty about what I perceive as serious mistakes and anticipating future ones.

When I receive my report, I start to read it according to the instructions sent to me by the FC whom I will be meeting in a few days. I look for descriptions that resonate with me and descriptions that I do not recognize. I am aware that I am more sensitive to the latter. I find myself not being affected by what I recognize as a fair description of me, irrespective of whether it concerns a characteristic I am happy with (such as being flexible, unpretentious, good at building and maintaining relationships, understanding others' feelings, an independent thinker) or characteristics I do not particularly like about myself but have come to live with or which I am still trying to improve (slow decision maker, talkative, more a follower than a leader, frets over own mistakes, not always a good listener, not good at attending to details). However, when I read something that seems to describe a completely different person, I feel strongly irritated. This is the case with characteristics as reserved, difficult to approach,

suspicious, hard-nosed, pushy leader, practical and business-like and entertaining. The report contains a disclaimer by suggesting that I should first check what relates to me and what doesn't and then discuss my insights with people around me. However, this does not soften my irritation, as the descriptions are almost the opposite of the feedback that I tended to receive during the many years I held leadership positions and what I am often told by colleagues or friends in other professional or private contexts. Another source of irritation are the contradictions in the text. For instance, on one page, I seem to prefer working alone, and on another page, I mostly seek interaction with others. With regard to leadership positions, I am more of a low-profile follower on one page, while on another page I enjoy being in charge and getting attention. For me, the strongest contradiction concerns how I relate to others: reserved, bold and aloof on one page and outgoing, friendly and kind on another. Overall, by reading the report I do not learn anything new about myself and my prior scepticism seems to be confirmed. However, based on my positive impressions regarding the professional competence of all five executive coaches, I expect the sessions with the FCs to be far more interesting.

Session with A

In the first session, I bring up the contradictions I perceive in the report. A confirms that some things may seem contradictory, but that these contradictions are part of who we are. They add it is important to be aware of how this might come across, as people prefer consistency and predictability in others. On the one hand, I am happy that they recognize that different situations might evoke different and maybe even contradictory parts of our personality, as this is consistent with how I view personality. On the other hand, A has mentioned that the report would describe my personality throughout different contexts. Whereas my natural inclination is to discuss what I experience as a logical inconsistency, I am now here to learn something about myself and not to debate the instrument. During the remainder of the feedback session, my discomfort disappears as A's descriptions of my personal drivers and – present or lacking – characteristics regarding leadership potential fit quite well with how I tend to see myself and how I believe I come across. With regard to altruism and selflessness, my score is slightly below average, which I had expected to be somewhat higher, but with A's descriptions of people who score high in this respect, I agree that is not me. Apparently, I had misunderstood the meaning of this trait or may have overestimated myself in this respect, which is something I also need to consider. Going forward we touch upon some apparently typical characteristics of me that I only recognize to a small degree or in specific contexts, such as a preference for innovation, a tendency towards intuitive decision-making and an argumentative communication style. I respond to this by referring to situations where I might manifest behaviour in line with these characteristics while emphasizing that I do not recognize these as a key part of my personality. To A, my response confirms their hypothesis. I am now clearly demonstrating a questioning and argumentative habit by responding with "it depends", instead of accepting this could be a real characteristic of me. A adds that "someone with a higher score than you on this dimension would never do this because for them, the relation is more important". I find this conclusion rather exaggerated, and it also feels a bit like being silenced. But in order not to jeopardize the relationship I keep quiet. Interestingly, when I explain why I think I am generally more compliant than the report suggests, A relates this to *not wanting to risk relationships*. So now I was characterized as someone for whom relationships are important! Also, compliant behaviour apparently is *not* related to my lower scores on compliance. However, at that moment I just go with their interpretations as they seem to make sense in a way. I am also asked whether I recognize being somewhat passive aggressive, which A explains as "not agreeing with someone, but not wanting to confront them and going my own way nevertheless". I recognize this and give them an example. They conclude that I might benefit from being more assertive, as preserving social harmony seems to be too important to me.

The main result of this feedback session is that I become sensitive towards a potential blind spot around my level of altruism. I start noticing when I help others spontaneously and where I prioritize my own agenda, and I count the charities I support financially. Whereas this supports my assessment of being somewhat altruistic, I also become aware of what I do *not* engage in, such as devoting time to charity or community activities. The result of this is that I broaden my definition of altruism and admit that according to that definition and the description of A I am less altruistic than according to my prior understanding of the concept. It has not changed how I view myself, but it has enhanced my awareness of the opportunities to become a better person. I do not pay any further attention to other potential blind spots such as being obstinate and argumentative as I do not identify with these characteristics at all. A's notion of the risk of confusing others by manifesting contrasting behaviours keeps occupying my mind for a while. I don't know whether this is the case and intend to check this with the people around me, but up until now, I haven't done this yet.

Session with B

In the second session, I also mention the contradictions in the report. B responds that there may be some minor contradictions in the text, but that we should not pay too much attention to this, as the score patterns are more interesting. B shares what they have noticed, such as a sense of guilt, going my own way and being indifferent to other people's needs. I recognize the guilt and to some extent the "going my own way", but I certainly disagree with being indifferent. They agree that this is quite surprising, based on their prior impression of me. Whereas I am strongly emotionally affected by the suggestion of being hard-hearted, I am also somewhat relieved that they had perceived me differently. However, what the report suggests appears to be more important to B than their impression of me. I feel a need to defend myself by providing real-life examples and behavioural feedback received earlier to illustrate my disagreement, but B perceives this as a confirmation of my stubbornness. B suggests reflecting upon the difference between what I think I am like and how I actually behave towards others. When discussing the other behavioural tendencies B regards as my development needs, such as being a bit of a competitive know-it-all, I respond with not recognizing this in myself nor in prior feedback. B then concludes that I am in denial and that questioning this is a defensive response that comes from having a different self-image, which they refer to as non-relevant with regard to how others experience me. With regard to some of these development areas, B again comments they would not have associated these characteristics with me beforehand, but the report clearly suggests that this is the case. Certainly, I do not like to be seen in the way they describe me, but I am also offended that my own experiences and the feedback I tend to get from others are considered irrelevant. Even their own prior impression of me does not count, which I take as an indication that they perceive me as inauthentic. In fact, I am so astonished by what I sense as a very weird situation and a completely outrageous description of me, that I literally do not know what to say anymore. They also keep silent and we both stare at the table for a short while. Going forward B points at other scores and outlines psychological patterns that explain my response, such as that I am trying to conceal my insecurity by dominating and intimidating people. Also, my high score on passive aggression, again something "they certainly would not have expected of me, but what they also experience now" is an "ugly thing". I now understand my silence is not perceived as astonishment but as repressed aggression. I am invited to consider the risks these blind spots can have for my future career if I do not attend to them.

During the following days, I keep pondering what happened in this session. Revisiting the audio recordings, I note that some positive things about my personality were mentioned as well, but they have not received much attention. Some positive aspects are even negatively framed, such as that being tactful is put in the perspective of being hard and careless inside, but interacting and communicating tactfully with the outside world, as in "firing someone with a friendly smile". Some time goes by before I start to understand what has happened and how I

may have contributed to this. I try to imagine how some of my behaviour during the session may have come across in a way that confirmed their hypotheses about my development needs. To a certain degree, I can see that my questioning behaviour can have been interpreted as resistant or being in denial, and that persisting in this behaviour can have been viewed as dominant and intimidating. This implies that at least I am capable of behaving in a way that someone can interpret as aggressive or intimidating, and I should probably be alert to signals of such situations since during my career I have mostly been called a “soft-hearted” manager. This is an interesting new perspective. However, it does not change my conviction that this will only happen in exceptional situations with certain people. It certainly does not make me a dominant or intimidating person.

Session with C

C points at the first pattern they notice and explain that people with this pattern usually do not seek the spotlight, have an independent mind and do not need much recognition of others because they are able to motivate themselves. They ask me if I recognize this. I respond by saying that I believe this to be a good description of me, except the not needing recognition. I give some examples to illustrate this. They add that not needing much recognition for accomplishments relates to not being competitive, but knowing what you want and don't want and not being afraid to draw the line. I agree with the first but doubt the latter, as I do not think I am that assertive. I usually wait a long time before I speak up when I fear this can lead to a conflict. When something really bothers me, however, I will eventually assert my point. We do not really go into this issue, and they continue with the next description, which is about a desire to work with others, and being afraid to disappoint others. Again, they ask whether I recognize this, which I do. Similar to A and B, C refers to my higher scores on passive aggression and asks if I recognize any of this. I give an example of a situation where someone higher in the company hierarchy pushed me to do something I completely disagreed with as it was based on an obvious lie, which I initially confronted them with. However, in the end, I did not want to further escalate the situation and kept quiet, while staying angry for quite a while. I realise this was a situation I had thought about when filling in the questions related to this characteristic. C concludes that if I feel manipulated, I may become resentful instead of confronting the person involved. This feels spot on for me. Further in the conversation C notices a discrepancy in the scores related to the dimension of practicality. One score would suggest I prefer creativity over practicality, but another score emphasizes my practical side. I respond by mentioning the situations where I am more interested in creative than in practical solutions and situations where I prefer practicality. They continue with describing some other potential characteristics of me such as “a tendency to doubt” and an “eagerness to receive feedback”, “not competitive” and “independent”. We discuss whether this means I am not ambitious, and C listens to my story and adds that based on what they perceive, I am probably quite ambitious. We also touch upon my potential tendency to overfocus on my own mistakes and limitations. C mentions that I may find it difficult to forgive myself and can easily feel guilty about things. Also, that people might not notice this of me, as I probably come across as calm and composed. As this issue addresses one of my key problem areas, I am glad it came up during this session. When C explains that my scores also suggest a tendency to withdraw from others, I ask them how that relates to the earlier mentioned desire to be and work with others, which is something I can identify with much easier. They admit this is somewhat contradictory and add that I do not have to take everything literally and that it is better to concentrate on what I recognize and what makes sense to me. The next part of the conversation is spent on how I tend to work, where the results do not clearly point out whether I am an organized long-term planner or more impulsive and a bit disorganized. I recognize the disorganized aspect to some degree and respond by giving them examples of situations that would illustrate this. C brings up my curiosity about new things as a potential factor that could constrain my ability to follow up on detailed plans. We end the session by discussing my development needs. Regarding the dimension that

suggests I would be dominant and intimidating, C concludes that they found this score a bit strange and do not think it actually applies to me.

In this session, the conclusions with regard to my characteristics and development needs feel as if we constructed them together. C probes, provides hypotheses based on the available descriptions of my scores and combinations of scores and checks with me whether I recognize this, and I respond with examples illustrative of the degree to which I agree with the description. We do not spend time on things that do not resonate with me, and in some cases, C comments that this does not apply to me on the basis of their prior impressions of me. During the next days, I notice my focus is not on what I agree or do not agree with but on the potential solutions to some of my current professional challenges discussed in the light of my characteristics.

Session with D

In contrast to the other FCs until now, D starts by asking me what is currently going on for me and explores how this may relate to my profile. This triggers a long monologue from me while they listen patiently and ask questions that stimulate me to elaborate or explore. Later in the session, my examples are connected to my scores. When asked what stood out for me in the report, I ask about the scores suggesting my development needs. These scores had provoked A to call me argumentative and B to call me intimidating. However, D now relates these scores to mostly positive or at least neutral connotations: using sound arguments to support my point of view, being talkative, someone with outgoing energy who is lively and has an independent perspective. The only thing I should be aware of is that I may become too talkative when excited about something, which can dominate a conversation. That sounds familiar! D also identifies a score pattern suggesting a high level of humility and self-criticism and hypothesizes that I might have been overly modest when filling in the questions related to positive behaviours and overly self-critical when answering questions about behaviour with somewhat more negative connotations, resulting in more extreme scores than would actually apply to me. This would imply that a positive interpretation of my developmental scores probably does more justice to me than a focus on the behavioural risks, which they believe to be low anyway as none of these scores were in the high category and I generally seem to consciously monitor my behaviour. The essence of my development needs based on the scores eventually leads to D's advice to reflect on the type of situations that might provoke a negative manifestation of certain traits. D's hypothesis is that these situations may generally be characterized by feeling unappreciated or sensing a negative approach by others towards me, as a good connection with others is important to me.

Whereas A and C have been quite neutral and B predominantly negative, D's descriptions of me are very positive; they even mentioned altruism as one of my characteristics! What sticks with me is that D has spotted a vulnerability that A has touched upon in opposing ways, and B and C have not mentioned at all: my fear of jeopardizing relationships. This is not really new to me, but it is good that it is brought into awareness again as this can lead to unwanted behaviour. Even if these unwanted behaviours are in other areas than the development areas discussed in the sessions, they are important to pay attention to. I know I can become overly cautious in my communication and therefore less honest and authentic, thereby paradoxically putting relationships at risk in the long term. As the topic of being a modest person contrasts with the characteristics that B suggested, I also start to reflect upon the apparent contrast between being modest and being overconfident, which refers to the contrasting manifestations of behaviour mentioned by A.

Session with E

When discussing my values and drivers, E regularly points at facet scores that explain high or low scores I initially do not recognize, making it easier to understand how such a general description came about. Most of the time, I identify more with the facet score descriptions than

with the main score descriptions. In this session, E also pays attention to the extent to which rationality versus intuition and science versus art apply to me. Their clarification is mostly contextual as they refer to situations where rationality is more important to me and when I prefer to use my intuition. With regards to science and art, E explains which facets of scientific thinking appeal to me in a way that speaks to me.

E also notices a score pattern that suggests a tendency to ruminate, feel guilty about my mistakes and having trouble forgiving myself. This resembles being overly self-critical as mentioned by D and again addresses one of my familiar problem areas. They ask me what could be driving this fear and make a link with some of my other scores regarding relationships with other people. E hypothesizes that my fear of not being able to repair an adverse relationship, such as with people who are less close to me or in relationships that are still a bit fragile, could possibly be at the heart of my vulnerability. According to E, my tendency of working hard in order not to make mistakes and to do things the best way I can would help me to prevent relational damage. If I link this to what has also been touched upon by D, one of my themes could be “working hard to prevent being in trouble”. My emotional stability might also depend on the quality of my social relations. When discussing my development needs, E mentions that when someone crosses an important boundary with me, I become upset without showing it. If my boundaries keep being pushed, this might turn into passive aggressiveness. In relation to my higher dominance score, they mentioned that they had not paid any attention to this in their preparation, as to them it was not high enough to be an issue. They then add that if I become bored or when I am overconfident, I might dominate a conversation by focusing too much attention on a certain topic. I recognize the overconfidence, and the situations where I talk too much, but not the boredom.

Reflecting on this session, I notice the overlap with the topic of passive aggressiveness briefly mentioned by A and C, who both emphasized the “passive” side of this and a potential development need to become more assertive. B on the other hand had emphasized the “aggressive” side of it. D had not made any mentioning of this topic. To me, it initially meant something quite neutral, that is, that I tend to hide my disapproval and disagreement in conversations as I generally do not like conflicts. However, after having had the session with D and E, I connect this to my fear of jeopardizing relationships that I do not trust or still consider to be vulnerable. Again, whereas this is not new to me, this brings me to a deeper reflection on past and current situations, on what I might be avoiding in these relations and why.

Integrating the five sessions in follow-up reflection: meaning-making of multiple perspectives

Every session provided me with additional perspectives to reflect on, and I found myself comparing or combining the different interpretations. Initially, most of my attention was drawn to presumed aspects of my personality I did not agree with, but which B had insisted applied to me. This had affected me emotionally, as I felt they did not take my arguments seriously. Although this felt very unpleasant and led to ruminating thoughts about that session, it never led to a new insight into aspects of my personality.

Some of the feedback though, even if I had not fully agreed with it initially, had led to enhanced awareness, by monitoring my behaviour in the subsequent weeks. This was for instance the case with my lower-than-expected level of altruism, as discussed with A, where I found out that I sometimes showed altruistic behaviour in some situations, but also sometimes clearly prioritized my own agenda above helping others.

My most important theme to further reflect upon were related to behavioural patterns suggested by A, C, D and E, which made me more aware of what could generate behaviour I was not really happy with. Although all three had emphasized different patterns, *combining* them gave me a deeper insight into how my fear to jeopardize relationships I perceive as fragile or unsafe, may elicit unassertive and perfectionist behaviour.

Whereas in every session there had been something that was potentially worth reflecting upon, I found myself only paying additional attention to feedback related to something I at least recognized to a certain degree, whether from my own experience or other's feedback. The different feedback sessions did not reinforce each other but provided multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives, enabling me to select what resonated with me and combine their ideas and suggestions.

Analysis

In order to answer the subquestions 2 and 3, we (CM, EdH, MD) identified the moments when M initially responded to the feedback with different degrees of agreement and looked at the FCs' responses to this. We then interpreted M's responses in terms of control of perceptions at what PCT indicates as the level of system concepts (things that someone holds as true of themselves, what they identify with and what they strongly believe in) and at the level of principles (a person's values and principles, what "feels right"). Subsequently, we looked at M's reflection on all the sessions and related this to PCT as well.

Subquestion 2, *How are these experiences and self-reflections interpreted by Perceptual Control Theory?* can be addressed as follows. When the feedback concerned things M could generally agree with, positive or not-so-positive, her control of perception at the level of system concepts was not disrupted and there was no further sensemaking process. Sometimes M added some confirmative examples, and the conversation went on to the next topic. However, when M did not entirely or not at all agree with the feedback, her control at the system concept level was affected: she could not agree with a certain description of her. Meaning-making then took the form of trying to keep this feedback out of her system, by responding with real-life examples that demonstrated the opposite. These examples referred to behaviour in certain situations or prior feedback from people she had worked with.

Subquestion 3, *How can the way feedback coaches contribute to the experience and meaning-making of a recipient of personality feedback, be understood from a perceptual control perspective?* can be addressed as follows. In most cases, the FC responded to M's initial reactions with additional comments. We noted the following FC responses: soliciting other examples of situations where the feedback could be applicable, subtly changing the definition of a presumed trait, adding positive connotations to an initially negatively positioned trait, emphasizing some and dismissing other aspects, noticing score patterns, proposing psychological explanations and relating the feedback to how they perceived M's behaviour in another context or to how she acted in the moment. SQ2 can be addressed again, by indicating how this affected M's meaning-making. FC's responses often enabled M to reframe the feedback, integrate it with her sense of identity, thereby restoring the disruption of her control at the system concept level. The opposite also happened, when the FC agreed with M that this description did not apply to her, as it did not correspond to how they perceived her. This enabled M to dismiss the earlier feedback and keep it out of her system. FCs clearly differed in how they interpreted M's scores and how they responded to her disagreement, which illustrated how they influenced M's ways to keep feedback out of her system or (partly) integrate the feedback.

In the rare cases that an FC responded by ignoring M's counter-examples and insisting upon their prior negative and non-recognized descriptions of her, the only way M could keep the feedback out of her system was to dismiss it. However, whereas it was relatively easy to dismiss the report, it was more difficult to dismiss the person agreeing with the report. When the FC did not pay any attention to her counter-examples or called them irrelevant, M felt insulted, not being taken seriously and treated disrespectfully. This strongly violated M's values and principles regarding feedback coaching settings and led to a very uncomfortable feeling about her working relationship with the FC. At this point, her control at the level of principles was strongly disrupted. As a consequence, M reflected most of all on the unpleasant communication and the irritation she had felt during these moments, not on the content of the

feedback and the messages the FC had been trying to convey. This demonstrated that FCs can also influence meaning-making by the way they connect with the recipient of the feedback. It took M a while before she was able to reflect upon how she could have contributed to the worsening of the relationship with B, and think about ways this could have been prevented from happening. This then enabled her to restore control at the level of principles.

M's reflections suggest that for her, enhanced awareness and learning something about herself could only happen when she experienced control over her perceptions at the level of principles and system concepts.

Discussion

Personality feedback sessions, meant to change or at least adjust someone's perception of themselves, might often not have the intended effect. This is in line with PCT, which argues that perceptions at the system concept level, which controls the perception of one's sense of identity, do not change overnight (de Hullu, 2023). It is also consistent with Lundgren's finding that personality feedback in a workplace setting does not lead to a change in perspective over a fundamental belief (Lundgren, 2014). A qualitative study of 29 people who had received personality feedback at work, by Metselaar and Derksen (2024), also showed that people did not experience personality feedback as "new" information about themselves.

Enhanced self-awareness did not occur immediately but was only experienced after having processed several feedback sessions in different ways: through discussions with friends, family and colleagues, monitoring own behaviour and reflective writing. As Lundgren also observed, in order to achieve higher levels of reflection, an accumulation of reflection in combination with individual experience and dialogue is needed (Lundgren, 2014). However, what has never been considered is the potential added value of allowing multiple interpretations of the same personality data.

Although M was in many respects different from people who receive developmental personality feedback in an organizational setting, during the feedback sessions M experienced being completely immersed in the sessions, without the researcher distance that could have been expected of her. Thus, in an organizational context, the experience of a participant with a suspicious attitude regarding personality assessment instruments might be similar to M's experience in several ways.

Conclusions, further research and practical implications

The overall research question "*How do people who are engaged in a personality feedback session, based upon a self-scored personality questionnaire, make sense and meaning of the results of this questionnaire?*" was addressed by means of three subquestions. With regard to SQ1 "*How does someone experience and reflect upon personality feedback, based on a self-scored questionnaire, delivered by different feedback coaches?*" we concluded that people may selectively combine personality feedback received in a feedback session with other sources of prior feedback, newly solicited feedback and behavioural self-observations, to continuously reflect upon oneself and experience enhanced self-awareness. Contradictory feedback may even stimulate self-reflection, as this motivates a person to select what resonates best.

With regard to SQ2 "*How are these experiences and self-reflections interpreted by Perceptual Control Theory?*" we concluded that Perceptual Control Theory helps to understand why people would be receptive to feedback that does not disrupt their sense of self(s) too much and is delivered in a way that does not offend their values and principles and dismiss feedback that strongly disrupts their sense of self(s) or violates their values and principles.

With regard to SQ3 "*How can the way feedback coaches contribute to the experience and meaning-making of a recipient of personality feedback, be understood from a perceptual control perspective?*" we concluded that feedback coaches influence the meaning-making of

the recipient by idiosyncratically interpreting the scores and manipulating the framing of the feedback.

This study was not suited to illustrate how meanings were negotiated during the sessions, as the autoethnography only focused on the experiences of the recipient. We recommend further study of the sensemaking processes of feedback coaches prior to the sessions, and the co-construction of interpretations during the sessions by observing real-life feedback sessions. In addition, in order to get a better understanding of the meaning-making of personality profiles over a longer timeframe, subsequent meetings or follow-up coaching could be studied in combination with diary studies. However, we realize the practical issues that come with such a study, such as access to highly private feedback sessions where the interests of different parties may be protected.

Secondly, it suggests that sense-making of the results of a personality inventory by Feedback Consultants is a dynamic idiosyncratic process that may lead to different interpretations.

We recommend that organizations using self-scored personality assessments consider the benefits of allowing multiple perspectives on personality profiles. We suggest inviting the individuals concerned to take an active role in the sensemaking and meaning-making process of their own profiles. This approach may not align with the traditional positivist interpretation of validated personality instruments. However, adopting the view that personality narratives are not fixed or self-evident, but rather co-constructed by individuals, could encourage recipients of such feedback to actively engage in creating their own story rather than passively accepting others' interpretations of who they are.

Limitations of this study

Apart from the obvious limitations regarding generalization linked to autoethnographic studies, some specific limitations of this study need to be mentioned. Having had five subsequent feedback sessions implied that every feedback session influenced M's experience of the following sessions. Also, four FCs already knew M, which influenced the way they made sense of the inventory results. We have tried to clarify the way this influenced their sense-making processes in distinct ways throughout this study.

Notes

1. We deliberately choose not to describe the instrument in more detail since we do not want the instrument to be identified. Revealing its name would unavoidably lead to debates about its characteristics and validity claims in the positivist-oriented literature, which is beyond our objective and not relevant to this article.
2. We believe bias is a natural component of all research. As researchers, we can only try to be transparent about how we relate to a topic and how this may influence our research.

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