

• Vol. 1, No. 2 • 2021 • (pp. 104-122) •

www.istp-irtp.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/irtp.v1i2.128015>

The potentials of a dialogical reframing of personality testing in hiring

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Abstract

Personality testing is highly disputed, yet, widely used as a personnel selection tool. In most research, it is taken for granted that personality tests are used with the purpose of achieving a more objective assessment of job candidates. However, in Danish organizations the personality test is often framed as a 'dialogue tool'. This paper explores the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection by analyzing empirical material from an ethnographic study of the hiring processes in a Danish trade union that declaredly uses personality tests as a dialogue tool. Through an affirmative critique we identify five framings that interact during the test-based dialogue: The 'meritocratic', 'disciplinary', 'dialogical', 'pastoral', and 'con-test' framing. Our study suggests that being committed to a dialogical reframing nurtures the possibility of focusing on what we call the 'con-test': Either as exploring the meta-competences of the candidate or as co-creating embryos through joint reflections on organizational issues. We argue that the long-lasting debates in the field of selection-related personality testing should be much more interested in the question of how personality tests in hiring are used, rather than whether or not they should be used.

Keywords: Personnel selection, personality testing, hiring tool, dialogue tool, affirmative critique

Introduction

Be careful not to give the person profile authority—work with it as the dialogue tool that it really is.¹

It is quite a good dialogue tool, but... After all, it's a self-image of themselves. And, I mean, without sounding cocky in any way, but I can plot people roughly on their person profile, just by sitting and talking with them.²

For me, it's pretty important that it's the conversation that's at the center. Not the test. You should never give the manager the impression that the test is more important than the conversation.³

The prevailing logic inherent in personnel selection is that it is possible to figure out which candidates fit the job and the organization best through thorough assessment (Newton, 1994; Ployhart et al., 2017), and that hiring the right people is key to creating an engaged workforce, being competitive on the labor market, and achieving organizational success (Carless, 2009; Ployhart, 2006; Risavy & Hausdorf, 2011; Sangeetha, 2010). Given the importance ascribed to employee selection, it is no surprise that a lot of resources as well as a variety of devices are used for assessment purposes. One popular hiring tool increasingly used is the personality test (Barrick & Mount, 2012; Rothstein & Goffin, 2006; Stabile, 2001; Tett & Christiansen, 2007) that carries with it a promise of a more objective and fair assessment process (Youngman, 2017).

The predictive strength of personality tests remains highly disputed, but the ways in which personality tests are actually *used* are rarely discussed. It is generally taken for granted that personality tests are used to make objective assessments, and, in line with this, that they are used for top-down selection (see e.g., Arthur et al., 2001; Rosse et al., 1998; Youngman, 2017). Even though this might be a common practice, the three introductory quotes suggest that other ways of framing and using personality tests in hiring co-exist. In these quotes, the personality test is rearticulated as a 'dialogue tool', but this perspective is absent in extant research on personality testing in personnel selection.

This paper explores *the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection practices*. We make an *affirmative critique* of a single case from an ethnographic study of hiring processes in a Danish trade union, by analyzing how different framings, in terms of *ordering and disordering*, interact. We identify two framings prevalent in extant literature—the 'meritocratic' and the 'disciplinary' framing—and suggest that their interplay gives rise to a 'dialogical' reconceptualization of personality tests in hiring practices. We then explore the dialogical ideal in the empirical case and reframe it as 'pastoral power', but through our affirmative approach we point toward another possibility, namely, to frame the use of personality tests in hiring as a 'con-test' that carries with it the hopes and potentials of joint job crafting and organizational development.

1 Teacher on a personality test certification course, quote from fieldnotes, February 2019.

2 Headhunter about the use of personality tests in hiring, quote from expert interview, July 2018.

3 Talent Acquisition Partner about the use of personality tests in hiring, quote from expert interview, July 2018.

Affirmative critique as methodology

At the core of the affirmative approach is what can be characterized more broadly as an ‘epistemology of practice’ (Nissen, 2020); the recognition that we, as researchers, participate in creating the practices we explore. Or, in other words, that knowledge is performative (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2007; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005; Wenger, 2010) and interacts with the reality it understands (Mol, 2002, 2008). An affirmative critique discusses what is, but also affirms progressive tendencies and shows what could be (Braidotti, 2018; Christensen, 2020; Juelskjær & Staunæs, 2016; Raffnsøe, 2017; Staunæs, 2016, 2018; Staunæs & Raffnsøe, 2019). By pointing out what could be different, it gives voice to some of the excluded ways of thinking and nurtures new possible realities. It engages with the dominant ideology (of, in this case, personality testing) and, by asking ‘what if?’, it aims at a playful and hopeful openness towards untold stories that may emerge. In the words of Foucault (1997, p. 323), the point is ‘not to judge but to bring (...) an idea to life’.

Importantly, the untold stories were already there, perhaps yet at an embryonic stage, as a tendency that contradicts other tendencies. We articulate such contradicting tendencies as relations of ordering and disordering (Cooper, 1986; Putnam et al., 2016), and we explore the performative potential of their interplay. We understand the relation between ordering and disordering dialectically (e.g., Højrup, 1995; Jameson, 2009; Taylor, 1975; Žižek, 2006), as mutually implicative of and enabling one another. In line with Cooper (1986), we treat disordering as a presupposing moment in ordering and organizing, both in practice and in the articulation of such practices (Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016). Since research on personality testing is dominated by ordered ideals of objectivity and rationality, the analytical focus on dis/ordering is used to pave the way for a critique that affirms the dominant order, yet still brings other tendencies into light.

The use of personality tests in hiring

The meritocratic framing of personality testing

The dominant personality testing research paradigm is psychometric and understands personality as the sum of some ‘universally present, measurable intra-individual essences’ (Danziger, 1997, p. 129). The main focus is on the ability of the tested ‘personality’ to predict job performance, which is understood as the core purpose of selection devices (Morgeson et al., 2007a). Thousands of empirical studies have been conducted finding low, or at best modest, validity of personality traits in predicting job performance (Barrick & Mount, 2005, 2012; Guion & Gottier, 1965; Morgeson et al., 2007b; Murphy, 2012; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). However, it is still intensely discussed whether the recommendation on this background should be to abandon the personality test in personnel selection (Diekmann & König, 2015; Morgeson et al., 2007a, 2007b; Ones et al., 2007; Tett & Christiansen, 2007).

We term this framing of personality testing in personnel selection ‘meritocratic’, since it is congruent with the meritocratic ideal of objective assessment and rational decision-making leading to a fair hiring process in which the best fitting candidate gets the job offer. The ‘disordered’ side of the dialectical relation is also there in the discussions, present but unwanted, since it obstructs the order of a meritocratic system. The risk of failed predictive validity, whether it is due to a weak link between personality and job performance,

deliberate response distortion, a false self-image, bias in the test instrument, too broad or narrow personality traits etc., fuels the ongoing discussions, creating a deadlock.

The meritocratic framing does not only exist in the research on personality testing, but also in the personnel selection research discourse more generally (Newton, 1994). Here, the relatively few studies that explore how hiring is actually practiced problematize this framing, arguing that hiring processes are far messier than the ideal of objectivity suggests: Decision-making processes are often based on intuition, ‘gut feeling’, or aesthetic experience, and then rationalized and legitimized afterwards by referring to ‘objective facts’ established by the use of selection devices such as personality tests (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Cohen et al., 1972; Miles & Sadler-Smith, 2014; Stjerne, 2018; Timming, 2011). Yet, while the meritocratic framing is challenged by findings suggesting that affectivity and subjectivity are prominent features of selection processes, these phenomena remain negatively characterized as disordering, rather than unfolded and reframed as a different way of ordering.

Meritocratic personality testing reframed as disciplinary

The meritocratic framing has also been challenged in a quite different way by Foucault-inspired authors, problematizing the power dynamics of personality testing: Personality tests are perhaps the ‘ultimate objectivization’ (Townley, 1994, p. 98), reducing human beings to calculable competences and traits. They are powerful ‘techniques of the self’ (Rose, 1999), since candidates necessarily take their own selves as objects of reflection and try to remake the self that neoliberal governmentality demands (Cromby & Willis, 2013). Personality tests are furthermore criticized for being rooted in assumptions about race, class, and gender, concealed by their seeming objectivity (Nadesan, 1997). The unfortunate consequence is that personality tests can systematically marginalize potential employees through individualized explanations that disguise structural power relations and discriminatory organizational practices (Nadesan, 1997).

The ideal of objective assessment is here reframed as ‘disciplinary’, as coercing candidates to subjection, while sometimes even obscuring discriminatory hiring practices. While power and subjection appear as the ideal order, the flipside of the dialectical relation, the potential for resistance (Costas & Grey, 2014; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Mumby, 2005), does not get a lot of attention in the Foucauldian tradition and is rarely studied in relation to the use of personality tests in hiring practices. The few studies that come closest explore personality testing in relation to other practices such as leadership development (e.g., Meier & Carroll, 2020) or investigate resistance in other parts of the hiring process (e.g., Bergström & Knights, 2006).

Case and empirical material

On this general background, we present a single-case, in-depth analysis of a test-based dialogue during personnel selection, derived from an ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish trade union. But first, we introduce our case and research process.

Case: The hiring of legal consultants in United Labor

Due to both upscaling and employee turnover, United Labor (UL), our pseudonym for a Danish trade union⁴, are *primo* 2019 in the process of hiring 4-5 legal consultants for case handling in the field of employment law. UL experience a relatively high turnover rate among their legal consultants, which they attribute to their routine operational work in employment law counseling. In exit interviews, the main reason given is that the job is quite repetitive and, after a couple of years, even boring. The hiring team refer to this as the primary personnel challenge of the organization, and yet, UL have not found a way to solve it. The problem is closely related to the ‘24-hour rule’ in UL: All legal cases from the trade union members must be answered within a 24-hour deadline. To ensure this, every legal consultant has fixed periods of duty. As team manager, Hannah, responsible for the current hiring process, puts it: ‘We have put academic work in legal counseling on an assembly line’. The turnover challenge has led to a strategy where UL emphasize the routinized operations and work structure during the hiring process. The rationale behind this is partly to give the candidates an opportunity to refuse a job offer on an informed basis, and partly to ensure that new employees do not get an unpleasant surprise and resign from the job prematurely.

UL’s hiring process is structured as follows: After circulating a job advertisement and ranking the incoming job applications and CVs, they conduct two rounds of job interviews. The first is a ‘get-to-know-each-other-interview’ where the candidates meet the hiring manager and another team manager. If they decide to invite the candidate to a second job interview, he or she receives an email with links to a personality test and a cognitive test. The second interview is a dialogue structured around the test results, conducted by Sophie. Hannah passively observes the conversation between Sophie and the candidate from the corner of the room. Occasionally, she interrupts and asks a follow-up question. After the test feedback, Hannah moves to sit next to Sophie and then the three of them have a short dialogue about any remaining issues.

UL use a personality test called ‘The CompetenceProfile’ provided by Garuda AS. It is a typical trait-based test, where the test-taker takes a stand on 320 statements resulting in scores on 16 personality traits presented in a report. However, Garuda AS emphasize that the CompetenceProfile is actually not a test, but a dialogical tool aimed at supporting a job interview. Garuda AS explain that the ‘graphics and the analyses work as the base for the open and equal conversation to come’ and that the ‘CompetenceProfile makes you capable of asking purposeful and qualified questions. From these questions, you will be able to paint the nuanced picture of the way the candidate does his job’ (Garuda AS, n.d.). In other words, the CompetenceProfile is already staged as a tool for dialogue by the test provider.

Research process: Empirical material and case selection

The HR consultant, Sophie, reached out to Solgaard in October 2018 due to their common interest in hiring practices. This led to a fieldwork collaboration, where Solgaard followed UL’s hiring of 4-5 legal consultants in the first quarter of 2019. Solgaard ‘followed the practices’ (Nicolini, 2009; van Hulst et al., 2016), the activities and interactions, that led to the hiring decisions. By ‘shadowing’ (Czarniawska, 2007) the involved actors during all activities of the hiring process, the hiring activities were followed both close-up and over

4 All the following names of candidates and employees in UL are pseudonyms as well.

time, revealing micro-dynamics of processes of becoming (van Hulst et al., 2016). Besides field notes and documents (the job advertisement, CVs, cover letters, personality test results, General Mental Ability test results, Sophie's notes etc.) the empirical material consists of audio recordings from 12 job interviews, the hiring team's preparation before and evaluation after each job interview, and 10 semi-structured interviews with hiring managers, candidates, and Sophie.

From the pool of empirical material, we have selected one specific test dialogue between Sophie and Ann, one of the candidates who is subsequently hired, to explore in-depth how a reframing of the personality test as a dialogue tool can play out in practice. We selected this particular job interview because it contains some progressive tendencies; as we shall see, a new way of assigning importance to the personality-test-based dialogue emerges during this interview. Thus, it enables a closer look into the more general phenomenon of using the personality test as a dialogue tool and, at the same time, it serves as a 'prototypical'⁵ vehicle for insights into the emergence of new practices.

Analysis

Part 1: From meritocracy and discipline to dialogue

Sophie, the HR consultant, is aware that the validity of personality tests and their ability to make objective assessments are questionable. She is certified in the CompetenceProfile by Garuda AS and is familiar with the dialogical framing of the use of tests. Accordingly, she explains that she does not see the test-generated person profile as a 'complete conclusion' about the candidate, but rather as a 'dialogue tool' that helps her get 'a little more in depth'. Sophie aims for transparency as she introduces UL's way of using tests to Ann in the beginning of the second job interview, seeking to recruit Ann into this common account:

Sophie: In our company, we use this test. It is really a way to get to know you better. So, we use it as kind of a dialogue tool, and not to knock you on the head. So, it's also to explain to you that you really can't answer any of the questions wrong or right. It is simply so individual how they turn out, these person profiles. And Hannah, she doesn't sit and note every time you should answer differently or something. So that's just the way it is. So, it's actually just to dig deeper than the first conversation.

Sophie is clearly aware that test-takers, especially job applicants, are in a vulnerable position, and that the alleged objectivity of the test can become disciplinary. She underscores that UL do not want to contribute to the disciplinary power of the test, but, in line with Garuda AS, that the test instead should be seen as a basis for an in-depth dialogue through which UL can get to know Ann. She stages the dialogical use of the test as a way of overcoming the potential lack of validity as well as the oppressive power of the test.

⁵ A *prototype* is a singular practice modeled for a wider relevance, yet retaining rather than effacing its situated reference and emergence (see Nissen, 2009; Nissen & Mørck, 2019).

Part 2: Caught in the ‘objectivity’ of the test

However, the test design carries with it some disciplinary aspects that turn out to be difficult to avoid:

Sophie: The next trait we are going to look at is what they call holistic orientation (...) On the one side, you can be detail-oriented. On the other side, holistic oriented. Well, compared to the norm, you are placed towards detail-oriented. You have answered in that direction twelve times, and only one time in the other direction (...) And that may also mean - and I don't know, it's something I need to find out with you - that it can be difficult for you, maybe, if there are several tasks at the same time. That it can put you a little bit under pressure regarding, argh, then you don't have time to dive into the details that you really would like to fix.

Ann: No, I'm actually used to having a lot of different tasks, and also to tasks coming in on an ongoing basis. But it's probably true that I... So, I want to make sure it's correct. So, I like to dive into detai... In that way, I am detail-oriented. But I typically have a lot of different tasks in one day (...)

Sophie: Yes. Yes, but I think, you know, in relation to deadlines...

Ann: I am good at that.

Sophie: Yes, but... Do you get a stomach-ache if you...

Ann: No.

Sophie: Are you the type who would rather deliver on time and then half-done, or would you rather exceed the deadline and then be absolutely sure that it is honed?

Ann: (A short pause, thinking) I think it depends a lot on what it is, you know (...) If it's something that, well, sometimes it can't wait, and there is a deadline, and then I am fine with handing it in. Then that's just the givens. No, I don't... It doesn't give me a stomach-ache.

Even though there is a clear lack of correspondence between the test result and Ann's self-image, both Ann and Sophie struggle to change the portrayal of Ann by the means of dialogue. Despite the intention to use the test only as a dialogue tool, it still becomes a carrier of the 'truth' about who Ann is and how she will behave and feel about, in this case, a constructed scenario of an approaching deadline. In the onboarding guidelines that Sophie later writes to Hannah, Ann's preference for details is still emphasized as the first of five personality traits that need special attention from Hannah. The Foucault-inspired tradition would probably argue that we witness the coercive power of numbers and categories that stems from the 'scientific' quality of the instrument that legitimizes certain understandings, questions, or even hiring decisions. Although Sophie and Ann can object to these connotations, they seem to be still caught in 'objectivity', disordering the ideal of joint narrative construction.

Part 3: Dialogue—from disciplinary to pastoral power

As we saw, the dialogical framing seems to reflect an awareness about both the disputed scientific quality and disciplinary power of personality tests. It could be analyzed as an expression of recruiters' resistance towards Townley's 'ultimate objectivization' and a step

towards creating more equality and room for diversity. Through our dialogues with recruiters and hiring managers, we have learned that it is a common assumption among those who have a dialogical approach to personality testing that candidates should have the final word if they disagree with test results. As we have seen in the second part of the analysis, it is nevertheless easy to get caught in the seemingly objective test results. One could suspect that the dialogical discourse is merely a positive reformulation that conceals the disciplinary aspects of the test. It obscures the coercive power relations to render resistance more difficult or unlikely, because the candidate is disarmed by its innocent framing as just ‘a way to get to know you better’.

Thus, from the dialogical reframing another type of power might appear, a ‘pastoral’ power that ‘cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 783). Its objective is to ensure ‘salvation’ in this world (Foucault, 1982, p. 784), which in the case of personnel selection means ensuring the candidates opportunity to flourish through a good match between candidate and job/organization. In the light of pastoral power, the dialogical framing demands introspection, honesty, self-confession, and, ultimately, self-regulation. But the parameters of success and the power differential remain the same. The dialogical framing is just a more delicate way of exercising power that makes resistance more difficult by concealing (rather than resisting) the oppressive power. Thus, resistance must be performed in ever more refined and creative ways.

Part 4: The performance of subtle resistance

As we saw, Ann objects and tries to reconfigure the depiction of her as too detail-oriented to handle deadlines or multiple tasks at the same time. Ann actually performs some sort of resistance throughout the whole test feedback session. For example, when Sophie presents Ann’s score on the trait concerning ‘competitiveness’ (she scores slightly under the mean), Sophie asks Ann what competition means to her:

Ann: Well, I was just thinking that some of these questions... Maybe these are some of those [questions] where I thought, nah, maybe I don’t really think any of those [possible answers] (Ann laughs). Hmm, but I think, maybe it’s also about, where you are in your life. Because many of the questions were like: Would you wish you had been a leader? And that’s not something I go around and think I must be right now, or that this is a goal right now. But, well, if I got the same question some years from now, it might well be that I answered differently, so, hmm (...) I think that this is a thing that may change a bit over time. At least, that was what I thought with some of those questions (...) I try to live a little in the moment and then it may be... Then maybe it changes a bit along the way.

The personality test portrays the candidate as having the same personality, and a preference for certain ways of behaving, over time and regardless of the specific situation. This version of personality is not immediately compatible with Ann’s ideas about ‘living in the moment’ nor about herself and her dreams as changing and developing over time. By referring to test items that do not match her lived experience, Ann finds a sophisticated way to challenge the test profile. Throughout the job interview she objects to the idea of a static personality. Sometimes she creates a more dynamic self-presentation by providing examples from her current work with context-specific information showing how she behaves differently depending on circumstances, and at other points she uses meta-reflections:

Ann: It depends on the situation (...) I don't think I see myself as, you know, only one... Well, one... That I have one constant personality trait. I think it depends a bit on the situation. So, actually, I would say both [introverted and extroverted].

At another point, she legitimizes her stance by referring to an earlier test situation:

Ann: I have tried to take some different tests; how you are in a team, well, what type you are. And there I have noticed that I turn out as the one who is a little bit of everything. Well, I actually think that's quite accurate. I think, to some degree, that I take on the role that I think is missing in the team.

Overall, Ann manages to create other narratives than those intuitively 'springing' from the test results. Not by rejecting the test paradigm as such—here, she openly argues within the frame of the test paradigm by referring to another test situation—and this provides a ground for her to challenge the person profile. She succeeds repeatedly in finding or creating 'cracks' from where alternative interpretations can emerge.

Part 5: Emergence of the con-test framing—subtle resistance acknowledged as meta-competence

During the ensuing evaluation of Ann's second job interview, it becomes clear that her subtle resistance is appreciated as something beyond resistance, as an attractive meta-competence:

Sophie: Well, just the fact that she is the first to challenge all this about testing and that she seems so reflective, it's just a huge plus in my book.

Hannah: Yeah, she is really reflective.

Sophie: Yeah, she doesn't want to be put into a box. Well, that's just...

Hannah: Yeah, it's cool.

Sophie: I really like that.

Sophie and Hannah emphasize Ann's *handling* of the test dialogue and what it tells about Ann rather than what the *content* of the person profile and dialogue tells about her. We interpret this by turning to pragmatist and ethnomethodological studies (Bowker & Star, 2000; Garfinkel, 1967; Hanson, 1993), which teach us that a test is always more than what it claims to be. There is always also what we might frame as a con-test, i.e., you are tested in your general ability to 'play the game' given by the context. On that account, the specifics of the con-test depends on the contextual framing. When the personality test is used as a dialogue tool, the con-test becomes a game in which all values and realities are elements in a situated negotiation. Here, the con-test requires a meta-competence of performing capabilities more specific than those depicted in the test profile, yet also different from and more general than those unfolded in past and future jobs. The emerging significance of the meta-competence in this case, could be seen as resulting from Sophie's awareness of the problems with the meritocratic framing as oppressive, which is not completely solved by

the dialogical framing that makes the power relations even more delicate and subtle. In light of this, the con-test framing emerges as an opportune alternative; to assess meta-competences related to the candidate's handling of the test frame itself.

Consequently, the con-test framing supersedes, i.e., overcomes yet includes, the other framings. For instance, part of the con-test is to use the test as a starting point to create a joint narrative construction of who the candidate is and how the candidate and job/organization match each other. As we have seen, the 'objectivity' of the test repeatedly seduces the dialogue between Sophie and Ann away from the joint narrative construction and into the test jargon (e.g., 'you are high on independency'). Still, Ann manages, supported by Sophie's questions, to ground and nuance those abstractions. She uses the con-test to perform originality and a surplus of mental resources and with this, she succeeds in displaying herself as a colleague who adapts to situations, team members, and organizational requirements. One who is able to become whatever is needed professionally, rather than being something constant in and of herself. In the disciplinary framing, this looks like resistance to the personality theory embedded in the test, but in the con-test framing this adaptability and flexibility is rather a manifestation of Ann's way of playing the game, where she produces her conception of the 'ideal candidate' through her handling of the test dialogue situation.

Part 6: The con-test as embryonic source

Summing up briefly, it was through the dialogical framing that the significance of the con-test framing evolved. When personality testing is ordered around the performance of meta-competences, some of the issues we have pointed out in the other framings are overcome. However, this could still be articulated as a pastoral supplement to the disciplinary framing that stresses self-regulation and the performance of an idealized self. Indeed. But here, our methodological approach reminds us not to judge, but instead to ask 'what if': What if Ann is not only using the test to perform her meta-competences? What if she is crafting early, embryonic versions of new ideas that have the potential to stick and grow? To explore this, we will take a look at how Sophie uses the test as a starting point for a dialogue about the organizational issue of the routinized, assembly-line-like work practices, which UL see as the main reason for the high turn-over rates among their legal consultants. Sophie presents Ann's results on the trait regarding concrete/abstract thinking and follows up by asking:

Sophie: Yeah, great. How do you perceive it if you have to work with very routine tasks?

Ann: Hmm... There will always be some routine, so well, I'm fine with that. As long as I am also challenged once in a while, of course (...) But there is always some routine and I like that too, and it isn't because I feel like: Nah, now I just think it's really boring if I get two similar cases. I mean, this can also challenge you, and you can maybe even become better at it, right?

Sophie: Yeah, yeah. I also think that there probably always are new nuances even though the cases are a bit similar. (...) But how important is it to you that there are these very complex tasks where you can really get into depth and...

Ann: I think I like both. I mean, I also like that there is something challenging where you maybe immerse yourself in something. I like those too. But it's not like I object and refuse to be doing anything routine, because, you know, it's just part of it. And the thing about getting one type of case several times, I am also used to that from previous work. It just makes you super proficient

at that type, doesn't it, because you see it several times. So, I think, all in all, actually a combination, yeah.

Sophie: A combination, yes. I don't think we can avoid, at least here, some repetitions. It may well be that the details are slightly different, you know, but well. That's just the way it is.

By asking Ann how she feels about routine tasks and making it clear that they are unavoidable in UL, Sophie makes a 'realistic job preview' (Wanous, 1992) to ensure alignment with Ann's aspirations. Even though this is a core organizational issue, they do not delve further into the problem and how it more specifically materializes in UL. But what if they did?

Even from this brief and rather shallow conversation about an important organizational issue, new perspectives emerge; Ann confirms the alignment, but she does not accept the idea that the routine work practices in UL is exceptional, and she adds that repetition can also be challenging and improve your skills—and Sophie agrees. This could potentially be something more substantial than Ann playing the con-test game of performing her reflective meta-competences, which make us wonder: What if Sophie and Ann actually engaged in unfolding this embryonic narrative? Could it be the beginning of an account that reconfigures the boundaries and distributions between, in this case, routine and development, day-to-day operations and immersion, repetition and freedom? An embryonic source for joint job crafting and, through that, potentially, an improvement that helps overcome the organizational issue? If UL obliged themselves to this approach and cultivated it as a new standard for the use of personality tests in the organization, what new possibilities could it create for the employees and organization? If the con-test was the primary 'test' and UL sought and nurtured curiosity, reflectivity, and critique among their legal consultants, and recognized routine case work as part and parcel of these qualities, as Ann subtly suggests?

Of course, we do not know the answers to such questions. Part of doing an affirmative critique is to ask, 'what if', and thus to affirm already existing tendencies by engaging with them in new ways. To use the personality test not only for a dialogue about who the candidate is or for assessing the candidate's meta-competences, but even for creating embryos in terms of joint reflections on organizational issues, could perhaps over time help UL overcome issues such as high turn-over rates. During the hiring process, such embryos would appear as disordering. Partly because they invite an unpredictable openness and playfulness from the involved actors, and partly because they are incomplete in the sense that they are emerging ideas. They still have not materialized or even found their form, they may change direction or content, and they may or may not unfold in the aftermath. In this imagined scenario, the 'realistic job preview' would not only facilitate alignment through selection or subjection, but also by inviting candidates to find new solutions to organizational issues: First by producing embryos together with the hiring team, and later together with their team and team managers through their engagement in the routinized work practices. Through immersing themselves into the routinized work practices, the legal consultants could perhaps use their reflectivity to monitor, scrutinize, and potentially transform the work structures to a more efficient, interesting, and meaningful setup.

Table 1: Framings of personality testing in personnel selection

Framing	Ordering	Disordering
<i>Meritocratic</i>	Objective assessment Rational decision-making	Failed predictive validity Affective decision-making
<i>Disciplinary</i>	Subjection	Resistance
<i>Dialogical</i>	Joint narrative construction	Caught in 'objectivity'
<i>Pastoral</i>	Self-confession and -regulation	Subtle resistance
<i>Con-test</i>	Meta-competences	Co-creating embryos

Discussion

We have articulated five interacting framings: The meritocratic framing expresses the ideal of objectivity and rational decision-making processes, with the underlying promise of a fair and valid assessment that makes it possible to find the best candidate to the job. With the concomitant threat of lack of validity, or subjective or affective decision-making processes, leading to costly failed hires, the debates on the usefulness of personality testing in hiring prevail. The flipside to the meritocratic ideal is the disciplinary power inherent in the personality test, disguised by exactly the claimed objectivity and scientific status of the test, leading to subjection but potentially also resistance.

From the co-existence of these two framings, the dialogical framing emerges as an alternative that focuses on joint narrative construction of who the candidate is and how this relates to the organization and the requirements of the job, rather than an objective assessment that risks being disciplinary. Yet, the meritocratic and disciplinary framings are still present in the test-based dialogue, when the involved actors get caught in the objectivity, and resistance is performed in return. The dialogical ideal can also be reframed as pastoral power that supplements and confirms the disciplinary framing. The pastoral framing rearticulates the ideal of joint narrative construction as a requirement of self-confession and -regulation. It suspects that the dialogical approach is merely a positive reformulation that conceals the disciplinary power of the personality test and makes resistance more unlikely, or at least requires a similarly subtle and refined performance of resistance.

Figure 1: Personality testing as a dialogue tool—the interacting framings

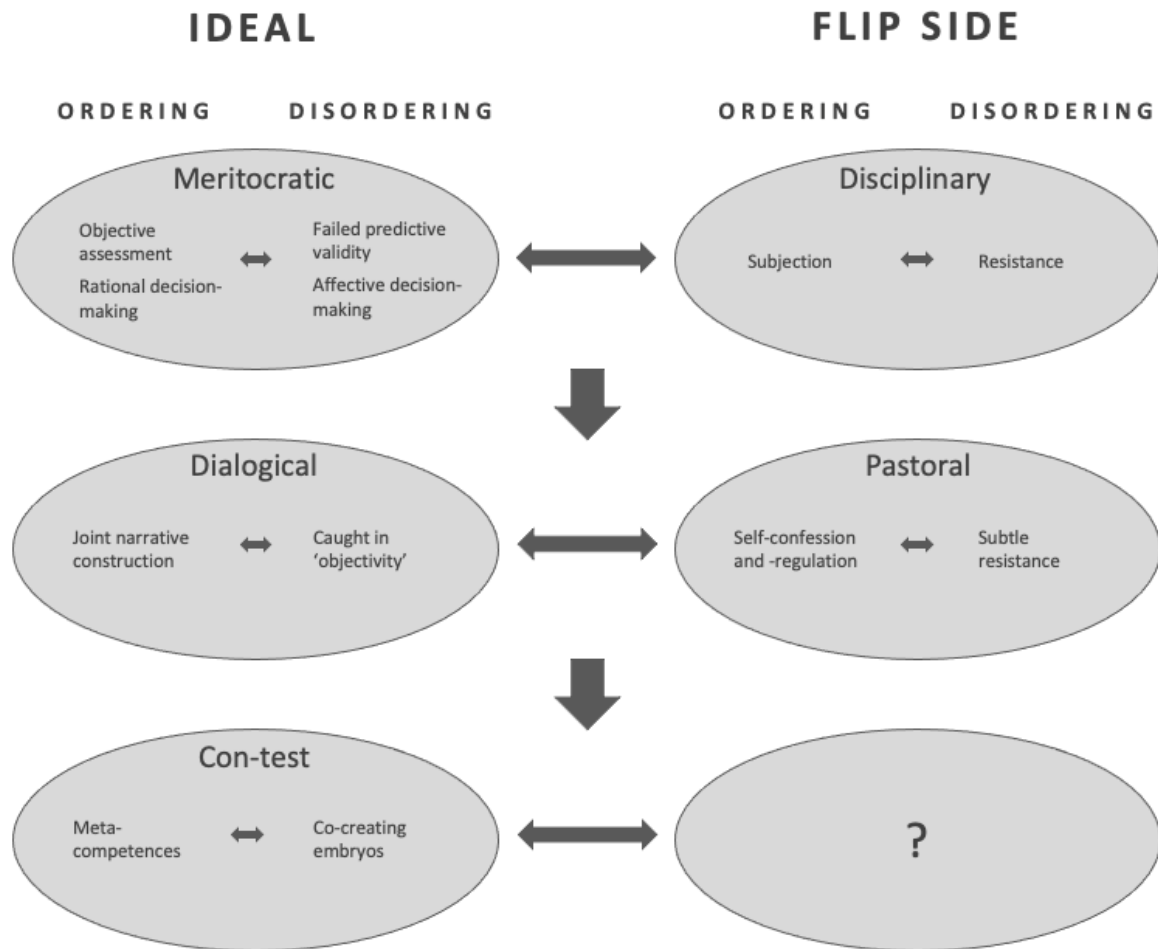


Figure 1: The model displays the interacting framings of ordering and disordering in hiring-related personality testing and points to the performativity immanent in their relations.

But our analysis also points toward another possibility, namely, to frame the use of personality tests in hiring as a con-test. The dialogical framing gives rise to the performance of a delicate resistance, which can be acknowledged as a valuable meta-competence of critical reflection. We suggest that this even can be cultivated as an embryonic source that carries with it the hopes and potentials for job crafting and new solutions to organizational issues. This way, the overall problem of personnel selection—who is the best candidate for the job?—can be solved not only through applicant selection or subjection, but additionally through joint job crafting. Obviously, however, affirmative critique does not mean taking off into a dreamland of unrealistic solutions to problems that persist in reality. For instance, it may be difficult for newcomers to come up with ideas that are actually meaningful or useful to the organization. And in the case of UL, it depends on specific conditions largely unknown to us to what extent and how they can in fact move toward a reconfiguration of their organizational issue, or what the more ordered materialization of the embryonic disordering could look like. Ideally, the unfolding relevance of this prototype would teach us about its constraints and limitations.

Overall, our study suggests that being committed to a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection nurtures three potentials: First, it becomes possible to object to test results and make more nuanced performances of ‘personality’ that take, for instance, the specific context and temporality into account. Second, the test becomes a dialogue-structuring platform that invites other conversations, questions, and responses than what the dialogue during a regular job interview allows for. It sets the stage for new creative performances of your fitness as a candidate. Third, it becomes possible to supersede the meritocratic and disciplinary issues by focusing on the con-test; either as exploring the meta-competences of the candidate or as co-creating embryos in terms of joint reflections on, and potentially solutions to, organizational issues that may or may not unfold in the aftermath.

Conclusion

Personality testing is highly disputed, yet widely used, as a hiring tool. To date the dispute mostly concerns what we have conceptualized as the ‘meritocratic’ and ‘disciplinary’ framings that refer to issues regarding the scientific quality, or issues of power related to the scientific quality, of personality tests. This paper adds some more practice-based perspectives to this debate and probes the usefulness of personality tests in hiring beyond their ability to predict job performance. Through a study of a Danish trade union that claims to use personality testing as a ‘dialogue tool’, three additional framings emerged: The ‘dialogical’, ‘pastoral’, and ‘con-test’ framing. More specifically, our study suggests that being committed to a dialogical reframing nurtures the possibility of focusing on the con-test: Either as exploring the meta-competences of the candidate or as co-creating embryos in terms of joint reflections on organizational issues. Such embryos could be first steps in what later turns out as job crafting, an improvement of inconvenient work structures, and new solutions to organizational issues. Overall, our study suggests that research on personality testing should be more curious about how practitioners actually implement and use personality tests. It may push forward the long-lasting disputes in the field of selection-related personality testing toward expanding the criteria by which the usefulness of the test is evaluated.

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Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank ‘United Labor’ for their participation in the research project. Special thanks to the three persons who made this study possible—the candidate, hiring manager, and HR consultant who we met in the case.

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