



Human Resource Management: Scientific Theory Versus Pseudo-Scientific Practice in the Seminal Work by Belgian Sceptic Patrick Vermeren



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Mini Review

As a scholar in the field of Human Resource Management for many years, I have often noticed the clash between researchers in Human Resources and HR consultants from companies with no or little connection to universities. Regrettably, the latter often have a greater impact on HR practices in firms and other organizations. Consultants have one clear advantage: they can sell easily adapted, easily bought and easily understandable theories, while researchers must handle such theories with care according to reliable scientific methods.

This brief essay will highlight a new book that will help HR researchers to understand why some obviously bad theories still get so much attention. The book is a seminal work by Belgian sceptic Patrick Vermeren, *A Sceptic's Dictionary – The Good, the Bad and the Partially True* [1]. The book covers 55 theories employed in HR practice and it took Vermeren some 15 years to scrutinize all of them. His work is very thorough; hence the book is almost 1,200 pages thick, in other words a “brick novel” for HR researchers and practitioners. Regarding “The Good, the Bad and the Partially True” the association with Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood is pretty obvious. No need to comment on that. It is however a way for Vermeren to organize his book.

As the title hints, Vermeren groups the theories in three main categories: good theories, partially good theories and theories that are not useful at all, that is, pseudoscience. Of the 55 studied theories, 25 are considered as pseudoscience, or “myths.” Vermeren is not particularly subtle in his critique of these theories. They are covered in Part III of the book under the heading: “Debunking myths, urban legends, fads and sheer nonsense.” The saying burning bridges comes to mind; Vermeren will not make many new friends among HR consultants, but at least he is honest with his opinion.

Two examples of pseudo theories

So, what is a pseudoscientific HR theory? An easy answer would be that it is a theory that is no better in characterizing important features at individual or group level than just common sense – which does not cost anything – or astrology.

Yet, two illuminating examples are the DISC theory and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), both aiming to create well-working groups by personality tests of the presumptive team members, either when hiring new staff or when forming new teams of already present personnel. As most readers of this journal are probably already aware, “personalities” according to these theories is a vague concept, not drawing on empirical research but rather on impressionistic ideas of how to characterize people's qualities. Still they are interesting to go a bit deeper into considering the topic of this essay.

Starting with DISC, the theory characterizes people according to four different “colors,” depending on, frankly, barely distinguishable parameters. A well-working group should consist of people from all four colors, although some colors might not work well together. A non-academic author from my home country Sweden, Thomas Erikson, has made a fortune selling books based on DISC and the four colors. Starting with the book *Surrounded by Idiots* [2], Erikson's book and its sequels have been translated into several languages and his schemes for characterizing people are widely used in private firms as well as in governmental organizations, at least in Sweden, but I am afraid also abroad. His approach is not new though, in fact it is pretty old. The father of DISC was William Moulton Marston, an American psychologist, who introduced the ideas already in 1928. To a broader audience, Moulton Marston is better known as the creator of the iconic comic book hero Wonder Woman. This is less interesting in this

context, though. Yet, Wonder Woman has made a great impact on comic book fans all over the world as the first female hero and is thus worth appreciation; the DISC theory is not.

Unlike Erikson, Moulton Marston was not a quack. He was a trained psychologist, and his DISC theory was based on what he thought was up-to-date psychological theory at the time. That is, in 1928, psychology has developed since then. The “colors” was just a means to make his ideas more understandable. If we stick with Carl Popper, Moulton Marston presented a theory possible to falsify. The problem is that it was falsified by later empirical research, but neither authors such as Erikson nor several practitioners seem to have noticed this, they just go on and make money. Moulton Marston viewed people behaving along two axes, with their attention to being either passive or active, depending on the individual’s perception of his or her environment as either favorable or antagonistic. The two axes make four fields, each of them possible to fill with some color. People usually fit two color characteristics better than the other two, and the task for the HR practitioner is thus to find out how they best work together, Erikson [2] claims. The categorization is however as hinted impressionistic, and the empirical evidence is as weak for Erikson as it was for Moulton Marston.

So, what about the Myers-Briggs Personality Index? How does it relate? The founders of the theory, thus the name, were Katharine Cook Myers and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers. They started their work in the first decades of the 20th century and were inspired by Carl Jung’s writings, in particular the English edition of his book *Psychologische Typen* [3] translated into English two

years later as *Psychological Types*. Neither mother nor daughter were trained psychologists but found Jung’s writings tempting. Many did so at the time, in the early and mid-1920s. Today Jung has lost most of his credibility. Jung’s ideas of archetypes, and Myers and Briggs following Jung, argued for four fundamental temperaments: meditative, spontaneous, executive and social. It is not far from the four colors of DISC, although the final outcome was more elaborated – hence MBTI employs more colors than DISC. Still there is no empirical support for any of the ideas, they are just ideas, based on authorities’ thinking, such as Jung and his predecessor and former colleague Sigmund Freud. It is not necessarily wrong to be inspired by theories from the 1920s, people were as smart then as today. It is however wrong to not consider a century of research in the field. Vermeren puts Jung, Moulton Marston and their followers in the doghouse. I will not go further on this; MBPI and DISC face the same ideas of grouping people and none of them seem to work. Thus, the disqualification by Vermeren.

The Mapping of theories

So where do we draw the line as scholars? First of all, many theories are not made up by charlatans. Neither Myers-Briggs nor DISC (Moulton Marston) were made to seduce innocent people; the founders had serious intentions. It is therefore not fair to label these, or several other theories as pure pseudoscience from the start. They are rather theories worth to be tested but found falsified. And reading his book, I think Patrick Vermeren agrees, thus his thorough scrutinizing of all of them.

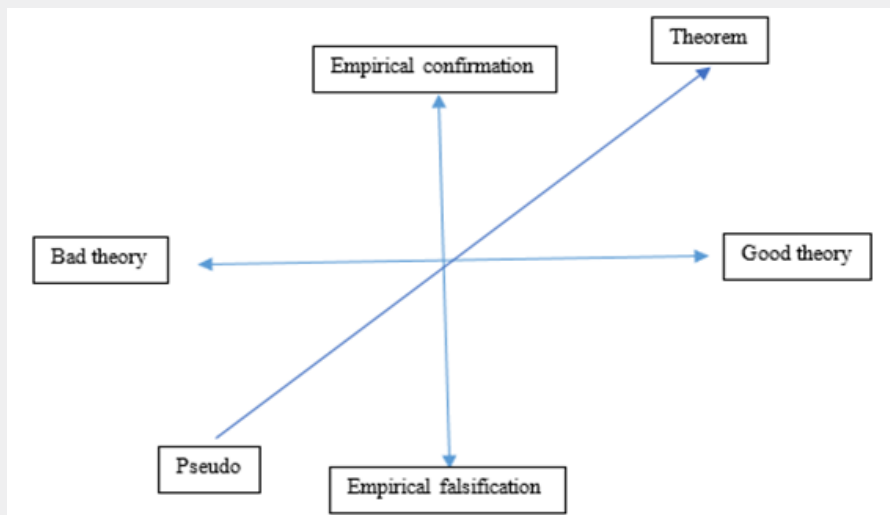


Figure 1: Vermeren plots theories in a coordinate system looking like this.

The Figure 1 is presented in a special section, 15 pages with its own page numbers placed between p. 512 and p. 513 in the book. The section is labelled “Color Section” and illustrates several

of the more or less refuted theories. The title color section forms associations in two ways. The figure in this section is actually printed in colors, but it also seems to address the problems with

the easy-bought idea of grouping people according to colors. For instance, Vermeren invites the reader to play “Color Bingo” in this section, drawing from a table where some of the bad theories he discusses are present. In the columns the reader finds theories such as MBTI and DISC, while the rows are named by colors. The aim, to show how impossible those theories really are, is obvious and well argued, but playing Color Bingo is still pretty fun, any reader of the book should try it.

Vermeren’s plots the scrutinized theories according to theoretical soundness and what empirical studies have to say about them. I must admit that I do not follow all aspects of the methodology Vermeren devotes to group the theories. In particular not how he quantifies the value of sound vs. bad theory. He uses a scale with 12 steps from +6 to -6. +6 is described as “The body of top experts now considers the theory to be a theorem” while -6 is described as “Proponents employ a last-ditch defensive claim such as ‘the current scientific method fails.’” Although it is not always easy to follow Vermeren’s distinctions between different categories are made, they all draw on loads of research and small changes of some of the theories would barely change the overall picture. Empirical confirmation vs, empirical falsification is easier to cope with, though.

Following the diagonal line, we find a clear correlation between empirical confirmation and theoretical soundness on the one hand and empirical falsification and bad theories on the other. At the top, we find theories such as Agency and Communication, Evolutionary Psychology, and Personality and Context. Best of all is Evolution, but I am not sure why this is incorporated in a study dealing chiefly with HRM, perhaps as a benchmark or ideal type (cf. Weber). In the poor corner, we find NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) as the absolutely worst way to handle HRM matters. Jung-related ideas, including MBTI, are not far behind, though. Here is one reason why I do not fully understand Vermeren’s methodology; DISC is also considered a bad theory with poor empirical background, but it is still considered less bad than MBTI. My gut feeling says that DISC is worse than MBTI, but I cannot say that I have any empirical evidence for this, since both theories are bad. It should also be noted that Vermeren is fully aware of that empirical “confirmation” is not necessarily a final verdict. I referred to Popper above and Vermeren knows his Popper. The heading of Part V of the book, where the “sound theories are presented, is “Sound and (provisionally) proven facts and probabilities.”

The threats

In the first paragraphs of this essay, I claimed that consultant companies have an advantage over university scholars when it comes to real impact on HR practices. Would not a book of this dignity be a serious equalizer? Well, there are still considerable obstacles, and they are not of a scientific kind. Interviewed by Swedish psychologist and sceptic Dan Katz [4], Vermeren highlighted the danger of being sued. This, he said, was the reason why he has not dared to sell his book in the USA.

Vermeren mentioned a case when Dutch mathematician Pepijn van Erp was sued by American-Italian physicist Ruggero Santilli. Obviously, it is not HR related, but it has bearing on this essay. On a web page, van Erp had questioned Santilli’s claim to have invented a telescope able to detect “anti-material light,” which was not possible according to van Erp and colleagues. Santilli sued van Erp, the website host company and the president of the Dutch sceptic’s organization Sticing Skepsis, Frank Israel. Santilli claimed that he had suffered financial damages in the range of USD 3 million and the sole aim was to defame him. Frank Israel, by the way? The name is of some interest here. Santilli claimed that he was exposed to a “Jewish conspiracy” by Israel, van Erp and Sticing Skepsis [4,5].

Anti-Semitic ideas about Jews in cahoots to slander American-Italian physicists is not a strong argument today, not in Europe and not in the USA. Nor is it clear why Jews in particular should dislike Santilli’s telescope. Accordingly, van Erp, Israel and the owners of the website won the case. Yet this was still not a happy ending for the defenders of the right to use scientific arguments against the financial damage of the scrutinized. They won, but the costs for lawyers were USD 260,000, that is, far more than Santilli had actually claimed [5].

A few years later, Vermeren was involved in a similar case, despite his urge to stay away from such matters. Vermeren and sceptic friend Bart Van der Ven criticized the popular – and rich – business coach Carl Van der Velde for spreading pseudo-scientific ideas. Van der Velde demanded EUR 400,000 in compensation. Vermeren and Van der Ven took up the fight, despite the high legal costs. In the interview by Katz [4], Vermeren said that this was a typical “SLAPP-suit.” SLAPP stands for “Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation,” devoted by organizations (or individuals) with strong financial resources in order to silence criticism. The idea is that even if the criticism is correct, the legal costs will be too high for research groups or even universities to take up a fight in court. Vermeren and Van der Ven still decided to proceed with the case. When the interview with Katz was made, the costs for legal help was as high as EUR 70,000. The Belgian association for sceptics has helped with EUR 8,000, hoping to collect even more money from members and other interested people.

In both first and second instances, the court’s verdict was that the importance of the freedom of expression overruled the claims by Van der Velde and his company. Despite the win, the price was high for Vermeren and Van der Ven. They still have to pay the attorney fees themselves, possibly with the help from other sceptics [4].

In sum, scientific freedom to criticize supposed pseudo-science is still complicated. In the days of Copernicus, Galileo and later on Darwin, one could always blame the Church, perhaps not always fair, but possible. Today it is people and organizations making a fortune by selling easy-bought HR concepts for a lot of money that are the main threat [6].

Of the two cases mentioned here, the first one, Santilli vs. van Erp and colleagues, is interesting even though it has nothing to do with HRM studies or practices. The basic ideas are the same: sue critics with less money and they will withdraw. van Erp continued the case despite the fear of losing money for attorney costs, supported by Dutch sceptics organization Sticking Skepsis. They had not much money for the lawsuit, so one might say that this was the real meaning of "Dutch courage" that is, an expression with pretty demeaning connotations in English parlor. As mentioned, ideas about a Jewish conspiracy is not the best way to forward a case. The crucial problem remains though, that scientific arguments can be brought to court. The latter case, in which Vermeren himself is involved, is even more scaring..

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