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Book Review

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Surrounded by Idiots: The Four Types of Human Behavior or How to Understand those who Cannot be Understood

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Abstract

This book review presents the book, 'Surrounded by Idiots', a book originally published in 2014 in Sweden, and later released in English in 2019 by St. Martin's Essentials (U.S.) and Vermilion (U.K.) respectively, has approximately 282 pages across 21 chapters. In it, behavioral expert Thomas Erikson presents an engaging and humor-driven guide to improving interpersonal communication by introducing a four-color code personality system, red, yellow, green, and blue, rooted in the DISC (or DISA) model of human behavior. These color-coded types correspond to: Red: dominant, result-driven, (dominance), Yellow: sociable, optimistic, relationship-oriented (Influence) Green: calm, empathetic, supportive (Steadiness), and Blue: analytical, detail-focused, methodical (Conscientiousness). Erikson argues that self-awareness and recognition of these types in others can drastically reduce misunderstandings, foster empathy, and enable more effective, context-aware communication in both personal and professional settings. Though not scholarly in tone, the book's simplicity, humor, and vivid real-life examples make it highly accessible. Critics, however, caution that this framework oversimplifies complex human behavior into four rigid personality types and blurs into pseudo psychology; some even liken it to astrological generalizations rather than rigorous science. In summary, 'Surrounded by Idiots' offers a lively, and simplified approach into human personality types for readers seeking to better understand and adapt their communication styles, though it may leave those craving deeper theoretical grounding wanting more. It is recommended that the author should also discuss, the negative aspects of personality types, incorporate more comparative research on psychological theories, and, take into cognizance cultural bias among others.

Keywords: *Interpersonal communication, Personality types, Four-color code, Red, Yellow, Green, Blue*

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1. Introduction

"Surrounded by Idiots" by Thomas Erikson is a 282-page book comprising 21 chapters. Originally published in Sweden in 2014 by Hoi Förlag, it was later published in both the United States and the United Kingdom in

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2019 by St. Martin's Essentials and Vermilion, respectively. Erikson's main objective is to explore and improve communication in personal and interpersonal relationships. He does this by introducing a model that categorizes human personalities into four color-coded types: red, yellow, green, and blue. With a humorous tone and relatable examples, he makes these personality types accessible and easy to understand.

Erikson argues that when individuals recognize and understand different personality types, they become better equipped to appreciate others' perspectives, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflict. He emphasizes that effective communication depends on the communicator's ability to see things from the other person's point of view. According to Erikson, people differ significantly in how they communicate and behave, largely due to their personality types. By understanding these differences, we can dramatically improve our interactions, especially with those we might otherwise find difficult or perplexing.

Inspired by the wide range of human behaviors he observed, many of which he initially found confusing and difficult to understand, Erikson realized that, since he would be interacting with people throughout his life, it made sense to study why people behave the way they do. This curiosity led him to reflect on several key questions: Why are some people quiet while others never stop talking? Why do some people always tell the truth while others don't? Why are some consistently punctual while others struggle to be? And why did he feel more drawn to certain individuals than to others?

In exploring these questions and analyzing the differences in human communication, Erikson adopted a framework known as the DISA, an acronym for Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Analytic Ability. This system is also known as the DISC model, where the final "C" stands for Compliance instead of Analytic Ability. According to Erikson, each of these four traits is linked to a specific color: red, yellow, green, and blue, each representing a distinct personality type. Below are the key highlights of Erikson's personality types.

Red: Personalities are assertive, results-driven, bold, and dominant. They tend to be direct and focused on achieving goals. They are action-oriented people, and they always want to win. People with this personality type don't shy away from doing challenging tasks as they view shyness as a weakness. They do not care about relationships; they are more concerned about achieving their goals/tasks than anything else. They are self-motivated and confident about their ability to perform tasks and are good leaders.

Yellow: Personalities are social, enthusiastic, and optimistic. They thrive in creative environments and love engaging with others. People with this personality type prioritize relationships and enjoy connecting with people, often speaking more than they listen. They are easily distracted and may distract other people as they spend time talking than working. Yellows dislike boredom and lack patience. They also tend to seek validation from others and are sensitive to feedback, unlike reds, who are more confident in their own opinions.

Green: Personalities are calm, empathetic, and supportive. They value relationships and harmony and are great listeners. They value stability and avoid going out of their routines. They avoid any conflicts and risks. People with a red and yellow personality are rare to come by. Most of the population consists of green personalities. They are neither introverts nor extroverts, but they avoid standing out in competitions. They speak only when it is necessary. They could also be loyal. They are indecisive and seek social approval to minimize risks.

Blue: Personalities are introverts and analytical, detail-oriented, and methodical. They seek accuracy and structure in everything they do. They are good at remembering details. They do not feel comfortable among people and are not social. They are deep thinkers and are more concerned about data than about social interaction. They are perfectionist and love to do things systematically.

2. Comparing Erikson's Personality Types

When comparing these personalities, it becomes clear that while reds might quickly jump into a task, blues are more likely to take a methodical, thoughtful approach that could lead them to finish the job more effectively. Yellows, in contrast, may waste time chatting, while reds push ahead to start the work. Greens tend to play it safe, while reds jump in without worrying about others' opinions. Though blues may take longer to complete tasks due to their analytical nature, their systematic approach often leads to a better result.

Erikson's personality types, Red, Yellow, Green, and Blue can be compared to Aristotle's classical temperaments, Choleric, Sanguine, Phlegmatic, and Melancholic. Both frameworks divide people into four

core personality types, and there are striking likeness between the, however, they are grounded in different foundations. Aristotle's approach is more philosophical, originating from ancient medical theories that linked personality traits to bodily fluids, emphasizing the importance of balance. On the other hand, Erikson's model is more modern and practical, based on observable behavior. He used color coding to simplify the types and applied them primarily to improve communication in interpersonal and organizational settings. Below are the basic similarities.

Erikson's Red personality type can be likened to Aristotle's Choleric temperament. Individuals in this category are typically ambitious, assertive, and goal-driven. They often take leadership roles and are highly results-oriented. The Yellow personality type shares strong similarities with the Sanguine temperament. People in this category are usually outgoing, energetic, and talkative, thriving in social situations. Green corresponds closely with Phlegmatic. Individuals with this personality are calm, steady, and supportive. They tend to be reliable, easygoing, and emotionally balanced. Lastly, Blue resembles the Melancholic temperament. Those in this group are thoughtful, detail-oriented, and careful. They are analytical thinkers who value order and accuracy.

The importance of these personality classifications cannot be overstated, as they offer profound insights into human behavior and contribute to various areas such as psychological profiling, life skills training and self-management, relationship building, and behavior modification. In understanding human behavior, both Erikson's and Aristotle's models provide valuable explanations for why people think, feel, and act the way they do. This understanding is important in predicting reactions, interpreting actions accurately to a large extent, and reducing misunderstandings during human interaction.

From a psychological profiling standpoint, personality classification lays the foundation for assessing individual traits, behavioral patterns, strengths, and potential risk areas. This makes it highly useful in psychotherapy, counseling, recruitment, education, and even criminal profiling, where creating detailed psychological profiles is essential.

In life skills training and self-management, personality awareness allows individuals to develop personalized strategies for stress management, emotional regulation, goal setting, and decision-making. This promotes greater self-awareness, personal growth, better habits, and improved emotional intelligence.

When it comes to relationship management, recognizing the personality types of others enables people to adjust their communication styles and expectations. This understanding fosters stronger, more empathetic relationships, whether personal or professional.

Additionally, personality classification serves as a valuable tool in the hands of therapists, counselors, and life coaches. Knowing a person's personality tendencies allows for the development of targeted behavior modification strategies such as helping a spontaneous individual become more disciplined or encouraging a reserved person to build confidence. This tailored approach enhances personal development and supports long-term behavioral transformation.

3. Critique of the Book

Erikson's primary purpose in this book is to provide valuable insights into human behavior, offering readers the tools to navigate interactions with individuals who have different ways of thinking and acting. By identifying and understanding these personality types, readers can adapt their communication approaches to foster better relationships, both personally and professionally. Through practical advice and real-life examples, Erikson emphasizes that differences in communication styles are not inherently wrong, but rather part of human diversity. He encourages readers to tailor their communication to each personality type, fostering more harmonious and productive interactions in all areas of life. To understand *Surrounded by Idiots* by Thomas Erikson, it's important to recognize the book's strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of this work lie in its broad applicability to various audiences, offering insights into communication strategies and personality types that can improve social interactions. This includes professionals in business seeking to improve workplace dynamics, human resource professionals who benefit from understanding diverse personality types and how to engage with both employees and employers, self-help readers aiming to enhance their interpersonal skills, particularly in conflict resolution and relationship management and leaders or coaches looking for ways to better motivate and connect with those they guide.

The book's cultural relevance is also notable. While it is rooted in Swedish culture, the universal principles of human behavior make the concepts relevant globally. Erikson's accessible writing style further strengthens the book's appeal, as it's engaging and often humorous, making it approachable for a wide range of readers, even those without a background in psychology. The practical nature of the text, paired with examples, case studies, and actionable advice, allows readers to apply the lessons to real-life interactions. Erikson effectively communicates his ideas with clarity and relevance. He uses vivid real-world examples to illustrate the four personality types, Red, Yellow, Green, and Blue, helping readers better understand how to identify and interact with each personality type in various situations. This blend of humor, relatable examples, and actionable advice makes the book not only informative but enjoyable to read.

In terms of sources, Erikson builds his framework on well-established psychological models, notably the DISC model developed by William Moulton Marston in the 1920s which categorizes behavior into four types: Dominance (D), Influence (I), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C). Erikson aligns these traits with his own color-coded personality system: Red, Yellow, Green, and Blue. The Red type represents Dominance, characterized by assertiveness and a strong focus on results. The Yellow type corresponds to Influence, marked by sociability, optimism, and creativity. The Green type stands for Steadiness, defined by calmness, supportiveness, and empathy. Lastly, the Blue type represents Conscientiousness, characterized by analytical thinking and attention to detail. While the book is not heavily academic, the concepts are grounded in these proven theories. Erikson's own professional experience in coaching and training further enriches the content. The text focuses more on practical application than on academic theory, which suits Erikson's background and expertise. Moreover, the book addresses challenges in communication and personal development, making it relevant in both personal and professional settings. It provides a framework for understanding and adapting to different personality types, helping readers improve their interactions with others.

Despite Erikson not holding a formal degree in psychology, his extensive experience as a coach, trainer, and behavioral expert makes him well-qualified to write *Surrounded by Idiots*. The book adds something new to the field by presenting a simplified and accessible approach to understanding human behavior. The use of color-coded personality types (Red, Yellow, Green, Blue) makes the framework easy to grasp for a wide audience. Additionally, Erikson's lighthearted tone and humor offer a fresh perspective on personality, distinguishing his work from more clinical, academic discussions.

While *Surrounded by Idiots* provides valuable insights, there are several criticisms and potential biases worth considering. One primary issue is the oversimplification of human behavior into just four personality types. While this system makes the content easy to understand, it can be limiting. Human beings are more complex, and many people exhibit traits from multiple personality types depending on the context. This rigid categorization can miss the nuances of individual personalities and may lead to misunderstandings if readers take the categories too literally. The book also does not delve deeply into the psychological theories behind these personality types. Although it is written for a general audience, readers with a desire for a more in-depth understanding of personality theory may find the book lacking in this regard. Furthermore, while the book is widely applicable, it originates from Erikson's Swedish perspective, which may reflect certain cultural biases. For example, dominant and assertive Red personalities may be praised as strong leaders, but in some cultures, these traits might be viewed as aggressive or undesirable. The book does not fully explore how these personality types might manifest differently across cultures, limiting its global relevance.

There is also a bias in how certain personality types are presented. For example, Red personalities (dominant, assertive) are often depicted as strong leaders, while Green personalities (calm, supportive) may be seen as passive or less assertive. This can create an implicit bias towards extroverted, dominant, or goal-oriented behaviors, while introverted, empathetic traits may be underappreciated. This bias could cause readers to value some personality types over others, missing the strengths of quieter or more introspective individuals. Additionally, while Erikson outlines the strengths of each personality type, he does not address the potential drawbacks or negative behaviors associated with them. For example, Red personalities may be strong leaders but can also come across as aggressive or overbearing in certain contexts. This lack of exploration of the negative sides of each personality type can create an overly idealized view of human behavior. Another issue with the book is its title, '*Surrounded by Idiots*', which may mislead some readers. By merely looking at the title, it might suggest that others are the "idiots," which might cause potential readers to view others negatively rather than encouraging self-reflection and empathy. This could undermine the overall message of understanding different personality types.

Lastly, the book does not address the role of personality disorders in human behavior, possibly due to Erikson's lack of expertise in this area. This omission limits the scope of the discussion with regard to how the clinical assessment of personality could impact the treatment of disordered behaviors.

4. Conclusion

This book *'Surrounded by Idiots'* by Thomas Erikson allows readers to understand human behavior through a simple, color-coded personality framework. By drawing on the DISC model and infusing it with humor and relatable examples, Erikson makes complex ideas about communication and personality accessible to a broad audience. His goal is clear which is to help readers better navigate their personal and professional relationships by recognizing and adapting to different communication styles.

While the book might look great in terms of clarity, accessibility, and wide applicability, it is not without its limitations. The oversimplification of human behavior into four fixed types may overlook the complexity and nuance of individual personalities. Additionally, cultural and personality biases, along with the provocative title, could otherwise compromise the book's message. Despite these shortcomings, Erikson's work remains a valuable resource for those seeking to enhance their interpersonal skills and better understand the people around them.

Recommendations

To improve *Surrounded by Idiots*, several options of authorship could enhance its depth, applicability, and overall effectiveness. Expansion on the Complexity of Human Behavior. The current four-color framework oversimplifies personality types. Adding more depth about how people can display mixed traits or how personality types can evolve would make the book more reflective of the complexity of human behavior. Introduction of continuums instead of rigid categories: Erikson could present personality traits along a continuum rather than as fixed categories. This would help readers understand that behavior is fluid and context-dependent.

- i. **Discuss Negative Aspects of Personality Types:** While the book highlights the strengths of each personality type, it would be beneficial to also explore the negative traits or challenges associated with each. A more balanced view would help readers apply the framework more realistically.
- ii. **Incorporation of More Comparative Research on Psychological Theories:** While the book relies on the DISC (Dominance (D), Influence Steadiness, and Conscientiousness) model and other general frameworks, it does not delve deeply into the psychological research that supports these models. Including references to relevant theories or studies would add credibility and depth. Furthermore, integrating concepts like emotional intelligence (EQ), growth mindset, or conflict resolution strategies would offer additional value to readers.
- iii. **Treatment of Cultural Bias:** The book could be more inclusive by discussing how personality types may vary across cultures. For instance, traits like assertiveness or introversion are valued differently in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. Including a section on how personality types manifest in different cultural contexts would make the book more globally relevant.
- iv. **Acknowledgement of Personality Flexibility:** Instead of presenting personality types as static, Erikson could explore how individuals evolve and adapt their traits in different contexts. For example, someone who is generally a Green personality may act more like a Red personality in a leadership role. This flexibility would make the framework more applicable in complex scenarios.
- v. **Collaboration with Psychology Experts:** Collaborating with professionals in psychology would deepen the book's exploration of personality and add further value to the content.

Reference

Erikson, T. (2019). *Surrounded by Idiots: The Four Types of Human Behavior or How to Understand Those Who Cannot be Understood*. St. Martin's Press.

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