

PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Psychological testing is a topic that is commonly misunderstood. At times the concept of psychological testing brings forth images of patients being asked to describe ink blots or draw pictures. Such projected testing might properly be described as the 'ugly' and has been described in a classic textbook on psychological testing as providing more information about the examiner than the individual being tested.

However, there are a significant number of psychological tests that are strongly evidence-based, provide objective interpretation, and have been shown to enhance the validity of psychological assessment beyond that based simply upon clinical interview and clinical judgement. The 'good' when applied to psychological testing includes the careful selection of psychological tests that are interpreted by a knowledgeable psychologist as part of a comprehensive assessment that includes, at minimum, a clinical interview with the patient and a review of relevant clinical records. The use of psychological testing can improve both the reliability and the validity of diagnosis¹, assist significantly in treatment planning², and assist in evaluating the response/progress to treatment.

Psychological testing can also be of significant assistance in carefully, and objectively, evaluating any potential response bias that the individual being assessed may bring to the assessment situation. Tests are available to evaluate less than optimal effort being put forth on tests of memory functioning or cognitive abilities. Testing can also evaluate what can be referred to as positive impression management, when individuals are failing to acknowledge common psychological failings or weaknesses or expected psychological distress.

Similarly, appropriate testing can assist in evaluating what is sometimes referred to as negative impression management when individuals appear to be over-emphasizing emotional or psychological distress, or over-reporting physical or somatic complaints. When properly done, testing is even well accepted by the courts in both Canada and the United States as a more objective and evidence based measure than a clinical evaluation (by psychologist or psychiatrist) alone, which is of course subject to possible interviewer bias.

However, even good tests can be badly used if not selected and interpreted appropriately.

When you are faced with trying to evaluate whether proposed testing is going to be valuable and properly used, or whether testing that has already been done has been

¹ Meyer et al (2001) Psychological Testing and Psychological Assessment: A Review of Evidence and Issues. American Psychologist, 56, 2, 128-165

² See for example: Butcher and Perry (2008) Personality Assessment in Treatment Planning. Oxford University Press.

utilized appropriately, the following criteria may be of help.

- First and foremost, psychological testing should be done by, or under the supervision of, a licensed psychologist. There is no substitute for the experience and training of a licensed psychologist to assure proper administration and interpretation of the psychometric tests.
- Licensed psychologists have differing areas of expertise, and in some cases it is important to ascertain where the psychologist's specialty lies. For example, neuropsychologists are experts in the area of cognitive functioning, while other psychologists may be more experienced in assessing risk of violence, as opposed to evaluating complex clinical situations such as chronic pain, mood disorders, etc. It is perfectly appropriate to inquire about a psychologist's experience and expertise in the particular area being assessed.
- Finally, it is also important that the assessment itself be focused on specific clinical issues, and that the assessment be appropriately comprehensive, including not simply psychological testing but necessary clinical interview and evaluation of the patient and, when applicable, includes a review of background documentation, clinical records, etc.

When appropriate testing is properly conducted and carefully interpreted in the context of necessary and relevant other information, the 'good' inherent in such testing can produce a much more reliable, valid, and defensible assessment than when such testing is not utilized. It is of course important to avoid the 'bad' use of even good tests, as well as the 'ugly' use of bad tests interpreted badly.

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