Summative Paper

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The goal of this paper is to explore my learning and experience from my participation in the “Assessment and Theory Practices” at the University of Calgary. I originally wrote this paper near the beginning of this course, based on my views of assessment at that point. I will reflect upon how my views have grown since my experience through this course.

**1. Enter into a discussion about the pros and cons of using tests in counselling. What are the reasons to support using tests in counselling, and in what areas do you think testing would be beneficial? What resistances or obstacles are there against using tests, and where do you believe test use is limited at best and harmful at worst?**

Since my experience at the summer institute, I have gained a better understanding of the role of testing in counselling. First and foremost, I have learned that testing can help the client and counsellor discover information about the client that may otherwise go undiscovered in the counselling process. For instance, using projective testing with clients may allow them to communicate feelings they would be unable to express consciously (MacDonald, 2013c; Torem, Gilbertson & Light, 1990). For example, when subjects are asked to draw a tree, it is theorized that they project a self-image through the tree, and incorporate features, such as missing branches or knots in the trunk that represent trauma they have experienced (Torem, Gilbertson & Light, 1990). Methods such as projective tests can allow the client various ways to express pain that may be too emotionally charged to express verbally.

Another benefit of using testing in counselling, as mentioned in my previous paper, is the ability to communicate effectively about the client’s level of functioning with third parties, such as parents (MacDonald, 2013a). For example, testing a child for learning disabilities may help parents (and the client) better understand why he or she is struggling in school. Testing for deficits in psychological functioning has led to better understanding of how a child experiences his or her learning disabilities, as well as how to best support that child (MacDonald, 2013b). In understanding precisely why the child is struggling in school, the parents are in a better position to support him or her. For instance, if the child has difficulties with reading comprehension, testing could reveal that the child can read fluently and accurately, but fails to understand what he or she just read (Nation, Snowling & Clarke, 2007). Parents now can understand specifics of the child’s struggles, such as why the child struggles with word math problems, but not numerical math problems. Furthermore, testing results may help parents understand their own struggles during childhood (MacDonald, personal communication, July 4, 2013). For example, their child may be diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, something that didn’t exist when the parent was a child. This can provide important understanding for the parent in terms of his or her own childhood, as well as provide information on how to advocate for the child.

Finally, testing in counselling can be helpful to enhance relationships. For example, if a client is tested and learns that he is a slow processor, it could give him valuable information on how he communicates with his partner, who happens to be a fast processor (MacDonald, personal communication, July 3, 2013). He may need more time during arguments to formulate what he wants to say, while she is shooting back her remarks rapidly. This could lead to an escalation in the argument, and leave both individuals feeling frustrated. If the couple were to enter into counselling, and realize their processing speed differences, it may enable them to better understand each other, and their own styles of communicating. This could lead to interventions that aim to help the clients improve their communication as a couple.

On the other hand, a disadvantage of testing includes the limitations of what it is actually testing. For example, the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) only provides a limited understanding of intelligence (MacDonald, 2013b). A client may come up with brilliant, abstract ideas during intelligence testing, but if her answers don’t match the ones on the score sheet, she will still receive a zero (MacDonald, personal communication, July 4, 2013). Unfortunately, divergent thinking is not recognized in intelligence testing, and I would argue that this type of thinking is certainly intelligent, and has many real-world applications, such as abstract problem solving. Knowing facts such as the capital city of Brazil may not be as helpful, but can gain you 2 points on the WAIS.

Furthermore, tests such as the WAIS can end up testing the wrong variable. For example, some clients may have anxiety around math, and as soon as they are asked to complete arithmetic problems, they freeze. At this point, the test is no longer testing their true arithmetic abilities, but rather their anxiety around math (MacDonald, 2013b). It is important in these instances to perform testing of limits, which can be done at the end of the subtest. Testing of limits allows the counsellor to use coaching, to see if the client actually knows the answer, without the pressure of being timed (MacDonald, 2013e). Although the results cannot be used in the final scoring, it can provide important information about the client, such as issues with test anxiety, which could impede upon his or her performance at school.

In conclusion, through taking this course, my views on testing have changed greatly. Although it does have its limitations, such as the failure to recognize divergent thinking, it has far more benefits that can be useful in the counselling process, something I had not realized before this course.

**4. Reflect upon the many and various ways in which you have been assessed throughout your life span. Assessment in this context can refer to a myriad of activities, including academics, athletics, social interactions, work performance, etc. Identify the salient components of being “assessed,” both those that you deem to be helpful (particularly as they can be generalized to the counselling relationship) and those you might consider to be somewhat negative in nature. Correlate these reflections with what you would anticipate a client might experience while being assessed.**

Since my experience at the summer institute, my views on assessment in counselling have changed. I have a new appreciation of the usefulness of assessment, particularly in terms of how it can strengthen the working alliance, and allow for a deeper understanding of the client’s issues.

By taking a client history, the counsellor can learn important information about the client’s past. This type of assessment can help to identify issues that are significant to the client in a structured manner, rather than trying to find out this information in an unstructured counselling conversation (MacDonald, 2013d). Areas to assess in a client’s history include personal history, developmental history, school history and medical history (MacDonald, 2013d). Important information can come up that crosses over two or more of these categories. For example, a medical history may reveal that the client was in and out of the hospital frequently as a child. This could lead to a better understanding of why he did so poorly in school during those years. This understanding can help the client to work through the frustrations of being labelled a ‘bad student’, because many of his struggles were due to forces outside of his control.

Assessment is also useful to help guide the counsellor to choose the appropriate intervention for a client. By assessing the client’s needs, the counsellor will be better able to design an effective intervention. Furthermore, the counsellor can consider the client’s way of relating, to find the best suited intervention. For example, if a client is good at logical-sequential tasks, she may be well suited for directive counselling approaches, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (MacDonald 2013b). Using information from a client’s assessment can lead to a choice in intervention that will encourage meaningful change in that client.

In terms of areas where assessment may not be useful, my views have changed since the formative paper. During the summer institute, I began to realize that my association of assessment and judgement was inaccurate. In my first paper, I held the belief that assessment does not fit well with a humanist approach to counsellor, but I now see that my belief was erroneous. Assessment is ongoing in the counselling process, and can actually enhance the process as client-centered because it allows the counsellor to tailor his or her intervention to that client’s specific needs, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach (MacDonald, 2013e). I see now that the danger lies in the misuse of assessment, rather than the assessment itself. For example, it can be dangerous to use assessment if the counsellor has not been properly trained. Assessment could be oppressive, for example, if the counsellor determines a client’s behaviour is maladaptive, when really it is culturally appropriate for that client (Friedman & MacDonald, 2006). It is imperative that counsellors be aware of cultural differences when assessing their clients.

Further, it is important to maintain a strong working alliance when conducting assessments. As I learned during my experience at the summer institute, being assessed can bring up emotions such as anxiety and frustration. Test anxiety, a concept that I was introduced to as an examinee during the summer institute, is the “experience high levels of stress, nervousness, and apprehension during testing and evaluative situations that significantly interfere with their performance, emotional and behavioral well-being” (Salend, 2011). It was helpful to have my examiner be supportive and encouraging (within the limits of what the examiner is allowed to say and do). Building rapport with the examinee can help to reduce test anxiety (Hood & Johnson, 2007). I found that phrases like, “this can be a challenging test for many”, was encouraging. Through being an examinee at the summer institute, I realized how difficult and tiring it is to be tested, and this will allow me to empathize with my future clients who have undergone similar experiences.

In conclusion, during the summer institute, I gained many important insights on the usefulness of assessment, and also the importance of understanding the examinee experience, to be able to relate to my clients who are undergoing testing. My judgements around the concept of assessment have also changed, as I now see how assessment can be used within a humanistic, client-centered approach.

**8. The use of assessment in placement of individuals has a long and, unfortunately, frequently disturbing history. Gould’s text (supplemental and therefore not required to respond to this question– but excellent reading, nonetheless) discusses this history in detail. Postulate how you think that future generations might look at/ critique the current use of psychological assessment, keeping in mind how we currently look at the use of psychological assessment over the past century or so.**

My thoughts and beliefs around this question have not changed greatly since the last paper. I still agree that the history of assessment has been quite oppressive, and that we have come a long way in terms of how we conduct assessment, and how we treat our examinees. A major learning for me during this course was the devastation that the misuse of assessment can cause. A quote from Gould’s text stood out for me: “few tragedies can be more extensive than stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive, or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within” (1981, p.55). Unfortunately, the history of testing and assessment holds many examples of oppressive acts. Practices that were taken as scientific fact at one point are now considered horrible injustices, such as Shockley’s proposal in the 1960’s to provide monetary compensation for voluntary sterilization of individuals with an IQ below 100 (Gould, 1981). An example of extreme racism comes from Nott and Glidden (1854) who compared the bone structure of people of African descent to apes, implying that black people are inferior to white people, and possibly even inferior to apes (Gould, 1981). Although today this type of assertion would cause an outrage, racism is still a pervasive problem that I think needs to be addressed, not only in assessment and testing, but the whole of psychology.

I am apprehensive that future generations of psychologists will look upon our current methods of assessment, and find them alarmingly racist. I think the major issue is that racism has such a consistent presence in our society. As the case of Trayvon Martin, a young black man who was shot in killed in Florida by a Caucasian man, plays out in the news, I can’t help but wonder how the trial would be different if the races were reversed. Would there even be a trial? Many people assessed Trayvon Martin as dangerous, because he was black, and dressed a certain way, walking through an upscale neighbourhood (Hancock, 2012). I believe that if Trayvon was white, and George Zimmerman was black, people would have assessed the situation completely differently. The reason I bring this case up is because I believe we live in a racist society, and those ideals unfortunately leak into different aspects, such as the construction of psychological tests. When Nott and Gliddon were creating their comparisons of black people to apes, racism was an acceptable, if not promoted attitude at that time. Therefore, I shudder to think what future generations will reveal about our oppressive testing methods.

Fortunately, there are steps that psychologists can take to now to ensure their practice is anti-oppressive. Psychologists and counsellors can strive to be more cognizant of themselves as cultural beings (Arredondo & Pere, 2006). This includes contemplating how being a member of a dominant culture may affect the working relationship with a client of a non-dominant culture. Furthermore, counsellors and psychologists should take steps to ensure their training includes a multi-cultural component, and also partake in continuing education that is culturally relevant (Arredondo & Pere, 2006). Finally, psychologists should ensure that the assessment tools they are using are culturally relevant for their clients (Stewart, 2010). It is important that the questions in the assessment are culturally-competent, and that the norm groups are representative of the client.

In sum, while taking these steps will certainly not eradicate racial bias from testing and assessment, it is still important to strive for cultural sensitivity in all our practices as counsellors. It is my hope that future educational programs for counsellors will have not just one multicultural counselling course in the curriculum, but rather infuse it as a theme throughout the entire program.

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