

What is psychological assessment?

Psychological assessment is the extensive purview of psychologists. The term “psychologist” is reserved for individuals who have met the requirements for licensure and have passed the licensing exam in their state. Psychologists are the only professionals who, as part of their doctoral education and the licensure process, receive extensive training and supervision in psychometrics (the theory and technique of measurement), how to select and administer tests appropriately, as well as the ethnic, racial, cultural, and other important factors that impact interpretation of psychological tests (APA, 2000). The assessments that psychologists conduct assist a wide array of individuals and institutions; including medical patients, students, parents, teachers, job applicants, individuals with disabilities, schools, colleges, businesses, and government agencies.

Similar to how a physician may order an x-ray or blood test to understand what is causing physical symptoms, psychologists use assessment tools to better understand what may be causing behavioral, emotional, or cognitive symptoms. Simply by observing a person’s behavior during various structured and unstructured tasks, having them and those who know them answer questions on psychological tests, and/or meeting with the person directly, a psychologist can help identify underlying causes and develop a plan for assisting them.

Why conduct psychological assessment?

It is not always clear what is underlying an emotional, cognitive, or behavioral problem. For example, a child who is disruptive in class may be given a wide variety of potential diagnoses (or explanations) for their behavior. Some may suggest that the child is simply “acting out” or intentionally misbehaving. Instead, the problem may stem from a developmental disorder, conflicts at home, a learning disorder, school bullying, a childhood anxiety disorder, or a whole host of other concerns. Without a correct understanding of the individual case, the child is at risk for misdiagnosis, ineffective treatment, and a poor outcome. Similar circumstances may occur in hiring decisions for high-risk occupations or procedures, in determining treatment options for adults with psychological difficulties, in assessing if a defendant truly understands their Miranda rights, in determining a worker's mental health after a work-related injury, or in deciding if someone should be referred to a physician for medical evaluation. In all of these cases, psychological assessment greatly assists in arriving at a correct understanding of the cause of concerns and suitable treatments.

Additionally, psychological assessment helps address many of the problems that arise when simply interviewing someone. Psychological assessment tools undergo rigorous evaluation to determine how consistently they are able to measure what they are supposed to. They are also statistically normed (conducted on a large sample from the population), which permits comparison to a relevant group of peers and allows a psychologist to make inferences about an individual’s strengths and limitations. Finally, assessments have a standardized administration and scoring procedure, which can minimize unintended biases in the assessment process (Meyer et al., 2001). Efficient and accurate formal psychological assessment can thus save taxpayers, insurance companies, and the individual both time and expense.

Are psychological assessments effective?

In order to begin answering this question, the American Psychological Association established the Psychological Assessment Work Group (PAWG) in 1996. By 2001, the PAWG had found that psychological tests predicted outcomes as well as, and sometimes better than, medical tests including Pap smears, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and electrocardiograms (Meyer et al., 2001). Even the authors of the study were surprised by the apparent power of psychological assessment to diagnose, describe capacities, and predict subsequent functioning and treatment needs (Clay, 2006).

Therefore

Given a) the extensive training of psychologists in the administration of psychological assessments, b) the recognized validity of psychological assessment, and c) the demonstrated efficacy of psychological assessment in predicting future functioning and treatment needs; it is clear that psychological assessment is effective. Therefore, be it resolved that the Iowa Psychological Association, as an association intended to advance psychology as a science and as a profession, endorses the use of psychological assessment as an evidence-based practice. Be it further resolved that the association commits itself to promoting those efforts meant to facilitate the responsible incorporation of psychological assessment, as administered by psychologists, into healthcare, government, and organizational systems.

References

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