Psychological assessment

What does ‘psychological assessment’ (PA), as referred to in our tariff codes, involve? Re-evaluating the concept may both remind us of the significance of thorough evaluation and introduce us to wider means of hypothesis testing, diagnosing, classifying and outcome measuring.

PA is a process whereby a combination of techniques and multiple sources provide integrated information on an individual's behaviour, personality and capabilities. This definition (ref resources) further states that PA involves various parts; that is interviews, observations, informal assessment and/or norm-referenced (standardized) psychological tests. A combined medical examination is recommended during the process.

The purpose of PA is thus to provide the necessary first step in treating a diagnosed disorder. It elevates our understanding of the problem and defines our therapeutic decisions.

Psychological tests (PT) are instruments that measure latent variables (unobserved constructs) for maximum performance whereas questionnaires measure typical performance.

‘Whatever exists at all exists in some amount’. Thorndike 1918

Deciding on the method of PA often stems from the practitioners psychotherapeutic outlook. Some may feel that informal assessment promotes rapport, others that the problem is explicated during the therapeutic process. Still others warn against the disadvantages of informal assessment, such as the possibility of overlooking important information, potential bias, the absence of a point of reference and unnecessary time consumption.

A sensitive approach during the initial interview, together with a balance between structure and flexibility, would seem to be the advised route to take.

Psychometrics is that area of psychology that specializes in how to measure what we talk and think about. http://personality-project.org/r/book/c1.pdf

Recommended reading
Psychometric Theory 3E. Jum Nunnally 2010
Yet one wonders if clinical psychologists employ these instruments, and if so, to what measure. High costs, remuneration limitations and training requirements may contribute to their limited application.

The process of PT involves administering, scoring, interpreting and reporting on the results of various test instruments. With technological advancement this often is available in time saving computerized format for some tests (i.e. the MMPI-2RF at a cost of approximately R610,00 per report).

A meeting, together with Healthman, with PsySSA regarding tariff coding and the re-examination of descriptors has been placed on the urgent agenda.

With regards to PA the CPF is of the opinion that ‘psychological assessment’ refers to interviewing, observing and psychometrically evaluating (including the process of administering, scoring, interpreting and reporting) groups or individuals with presenting mental disorders.

References:


Psychometric tools are designed to complement the expertise of psychologists. In clinical practice for example, they provide valuable insight into clients’ personalities which in turn facilitates the process of differential diagnosis. Although the knowledge of the practitioner is essential in understanding the client’s unique situation, the advantage of having an additional, objective record of the client cannot be underestimated. Distressed clients may not be able to accurately report their mental states due to limited verbal skills, deceptiveness, defensiveness or a lack of personal insight (Eisman et al., 2000).

Psychological assessments are beneficial when used appropriately and skilfully by well-trained professionals. It is important to remember that these assessments are tools that assist in drawing inferences about individuals and groups, but should not be used in isolation. They can be a key component in the practice and science of psychology. However, when misused psychological tests may have limited use or could even be harmful (Urbina, 2004). One of the ways to avoid the misuse of psychological tests is to ensure that the measures used are appropriate for the client’s population. For example, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI™) and the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (MCMI™) are well-known personality measures, both of which demonstrate good reliability in the South African context. Intelligence measures such as the Wechsler scales allow practitioners to assess their client’s cognitive functioning in order to make diagnostic and treatment decisions in various developmental, neurological and psychiatric contexts (Pearson, 2009). Currently, a large scale validation project is being conducted to create norms for the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales®-Fourth Edition (WAIS®-IV) in South Africa.

There are various instruments available for assessing and monitoring clients in clinical practice. The choice of assessment should be guided by a clear purpose that will facilitate and support the clinicians’ judgement, but not suspend it. Care should therefore be taken to ensure that the assessment is relevant and applicable to a specific context.

Please note new date for next GM in Pretoria: Wednesday 5 June 2013. Topics include PMB’s and Suicide Management (CPD points available).

Please forward any comments or requests to cpf@healthman.co.za.

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