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The Ethics of IQ Testing and the Advent of "Intelligent Testing"

Lyndsay T Wilson 2.7K reads

"You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions." - Naguib Mahfouz

A psychometrist is a professional skilled in the development, administration and interpretation of tests of psychological constructs, including intelligence. Depending on their jurisdiction, psychometrists can be registered to work in different capacities, but invariably they are tasked with the ethical and accurate use of quantitative inventories such as personality or aptitude tests.

A psychometrist or related professional must not only know how to use a particular test, but also how *not* to use it. Because the results of such tests can have far-reaching consequences, the onus is on the tester to make sure they are frequently considering all the relevant ethical issues.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center, with the text "EXPLORABLE" in a large, bold, white font and "Quiz Time!" in a smaller, white, cursive font below it. Below the logo are three quiz cards, each with a different image and title:

- Card 1: Image of red roller skates on a wooden deck. Title: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2"
- Card 2: Image of a fan of colorful pens. Title: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2"
- Card 3: Image of a Ferris wheel at sunset. Title: "Quiz: Flags in Europe"

At the bottom right of the banner, there is a call to action: "See all quizzes =>" in white text.

Question 1: What is the purpose of testing?

Perhaps a psychometrist encounters a family that wishes to have their child tested. They

believe the child is “gifted” and want it confirmed. Would it be ethical to conduct a battery of tests to assess the child’s intellect in the absence of any difficulty?

Generally clinicians avoid unnecessary testing, especially with children who may bear the burden of a label for the rest of their lives. In some cases, psychoeducation about the limitations of IQ testing is more appropriate. When the clinician first understands the events that have led to IQ testing being sought, they can more appropriately consider their role and the best course of action.

Question 2: What test is being used and why?

Sometimes, of course, a test *is* necessary. Here the psychometrist must consider the test that best assesses what truly needs to be assessed. What are the properties of the test they’ll be using? Which population was it normalized for? Would it be better to use a combination of tests? If a test is chosen, does it need to be interpreted with some caveats given the unique person being tested?

Various IQ tests are like tools in an inventory, and a skilled psychometrist will know which ones to select according to the needs of each case.

Question 3: How should this test be administered?

Psychometrists are authorized to administer tests under specific conditions. Ethical use means observing test parameters and making sure that the effect of other variables is minimized. Etiquette plays a large role – the psychometrist needs to respect their client and establish an atmosphere of trust before testing commences. They will take note of any distractions or peculiarities on the test day, obtain all the relevant informed consent and make sure their client’s questions are answered before and after testing.

Question 4: What is the best way to interpret the results?

An ethical psychometrist works accurately and carefully, but also pays attention to the interpretation of results. What are the mediating variables, and how does the score fit into the context of their client’s lives in general? If the test has not been designed specifically for the client, how can the result be interpreted given this unfairness? What are the confidence intervals of this test and how does it affect the validity of the result?

Question 5: What is the most appropriate way to share these results?

Arguably the most important part of testing is the ethical dissemination of the results. The relevant parties need to be appropriately informed of the results and these need to be explained and contextualized. Tact and moderation should be employed as testing is often a stressful event and could bring up strong emotions – particularly if children are involved.

The process is not over after the results are obtained. Rather, the psychometrist has a responsibility for providing suggestions for further action given the results. They may need to

moderate expectations, provide further resources or refer their clients to the right professionals.



Ethical and Unethical Testing: An Example

Unethical:

A family is concerned about their son's poor performance at school and have been referred by frustrated teachers who believe he has intellectual disabilities. The parents are angry and deny that their child is "stupid" and desperately want to prove that he should not be placed in a remedial class. The other children in the family are high achievers.

The psychometrist indeed discovers some learning difficulties, but succumbs to the parents' expectations and assures them that the child can manage at his current grade. As a result, the parents push their son harder, believing his poor performance must simply be because he isn't trying hard enough. Thus, testing has ultimately reinforced the problem.

Ethical:

The psychometrist might have first taken time to explain what testing could and couldn't do, and that there is no shame either way in the result obtained. He could have carefully explained the results without judgment and encouraged the parents to understand the bigger picture, and how best to support their son.

During testing, he may discover that the child does not primarily have learning difficulties but problems with attention and interest, and is stressed by his parents' unrealistic expectations.

By understanding this, the psychometrist can alleviate the parent's concerns and misconceptions, and recommend the appropriate course of action. He will realize that part of the treatment plan will also be in educating the *parents* on how best to approach their son's difficulties. In this way testing has been used to identify and correct an issue.

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