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Psychological Assessment: What Will the Future Bring?

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Abstract: The author discusses the (de)valuation of psychological assessment from various perspectives.

In "Some Considerations for Enhancing Psychological Assessment" Roger L. Greene (2011), a very distinguished and long-term contributor to scientific psychological assessment, writes that "In no other area of science or technology has so little change been seen in the last 65 years" (p. 198). He seems to implicitly attribute "so little change" to a "perceived decline in general interest in the area of psychological assessment," to "difficulty clinicians have in getting reimbursed for assessment by third-party payers," and to the possibility that "assessment is out of date" (p. 198). The last could refer to how assessment is carried out as well as why and whether it needs to be.

Sure, change might be desired, but not any change that might ignore or discount some common purposes of psychological assessment. These might include understanding and explaining, influencing, and predicting human psychology for purposes of good. "Good" might refer to people leading more meaningful and productive lives, increasing or decreasing the presence and consequences of certain types of morals and ethics, and increasing or decreasing certain types of pleasure and pain. A multi-cultural history of philosophy (cf. Solomon & Higgins, 2003) and a history of personality study (cf. Millon, 2004) would yield much disagreement about how these purposes might be interpreted and implemented. Yet there are such histories, and this suggests that at least the purposes of psychological assessment have remained of interest even by those who attack, reject, or otherwise minimize it.

So here are two related questions. Are not those who are often recognized as expert personality assessors largely at fault for assessment being anything but a highly respected, sought after, and valued activity? And would radical change in the education, training, credentialing, and expert recognition of psychological assessors set us on the right road? Greene (2011) seems to answer the first question at least partially in the affirmative –"If we fail to develop guidelines…there is a strong likelihood they will be imposed on us…" (p. 201). He provides considerations—viz., appropriate test and training guidelines, substance for and measurement of competency, marketing of assessment, and use of electronic technologies and computer adaptive testing—pertinent to the second question, but they are not radical and seem obvious enough to instill discomfort within those of us who have left these considerations in the breach. What follows are more radical considerations for enhancing psychological assessment.

Mathematics and Statistics. Why do assessors at least implicitly assume that the mathematics and statistics applied to theory and data analysis in the psychological and human sciences should be so less complex than that applied to the physical sciences? This is the reality based on current practice. Breaking free from current best practice might lead to advances as to the ontological significance of psychological constructs, the appropriateness of epistemology supporting measurement procedures, the competing definitions and multiple valuations of reliability and validity, and identification and analysis within, between, and among forces, flows, and fields constituting what Kurt Lewin termed the life space (1943). This is not a suggestion that the psychological and physical should march to the same philosophy of science, for physics envy may have significantly harmed personology. But it is a suggestion to see if we've been on the right march.

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Behind the Mathematics and Statistics. Assessors need to know the psychological assumptions and implications of quantitative and qualitative analytic techniques, not just the step-by-step procedures of manipulating data—even as knowing the latter is decreasing due to the sophistication of analytic software. Aping procedures from current refereed journals, symposia, and panels leads not to the clever signifying monkey (Gates, 1989) but a mindless paradigm-constrained mime (Kuhn, 1970). Although there are some textbooks purporting to provide conceptual underpinnings of techniques (cf. Grimm & Yarnold, 2000), this material too often does not relate psychological implications—what are more likely to be described and inferred and the opportunity cost of what cannot be. These matters have much topical relevance for psychological assessors who might wish to go beyond pure clinical work to domains as diverse as counterterrorism, advertising and marketing, and public diplomacy.

Interpretive Strategies. How does one create meaning from text (e.g., life history, test, behavioral data), be it verbal or nonverbal, and is not this the ultimate challenge of psychological assessment? Some of the partially overlapping, relevant, and technical areas of study applied to the creation of meaning include hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1974), historiography (White, 1973), and critical theory (Adams & Searle, 2005). Education and training in such areas would complement and supplement the use of correlational and experimental psychological data as well as clinical and personality anecdotes from socially identified experts bearing on what means what. This would be to the benefit of questions such as whether and to what extent a text's meaning derives from the intent of the text's creator, the reactions of the text's recipient, structural features of the text itself, or factors in the text's ecology and environment; from what types and levels of analysis one might construct meaning—e.g., aggregating moments through aggregating years, longitudinal and cross-sectional sampling, normative and ipsative sampling; categories, dimensions, and trends; what types of narratives bearing stories and plots best constitute meaning; various deductive, inductive, and abductive logics; allegories, analogies, synecdochies, and metonymies; elements of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and ideology as performance or as objective state. When all is said and done, psychological assessors may be no different than weavers of timeless stories such as the creators of the Gilgamesh, Bhagavad Gita, or Iliad—save for being more scientifically informed.

The Biopsychosocial. Gardner Murphy (1947) was not the first psychologist to cite the import of the biopsychosocial perspective to personality or what Murray (1938) termed personology. It has been often cited and even reified. However, common psychological assessment formats and content mitigate against capturing biopsychosocial integration and interaction constructing descriptive and inferential statements about an individual. This takes us way beyond the ritualistic test battery of Wechsler, MMPI, Rorschach, and TAT. A psychological assessment center might best be constituted not only with alliances among physicians, psychologists, social workers, assessee contacts—e.g., families, friends, schools, employers, places of worship, police—but also cultural anthropologists, cognitive neuroscientists, and geneticists. A biopsychosocially informed assessor might be less inclined to make the psychopharmacological leaps of faith or errors in logic critiqued by Kirsch (2011) related to identifying the etiologies of depression.

The Real World. An assessor needs to have some sense of how that creative fiction—real people—live. Formal education, training, and continuing education supporting psychological assessment need to be informed by a daily read of the national and international news (e.g., politics, economics, crime, entertainment, social trends, so-called human interest); by a habitual immersion in great novels, short stories, poems, biographies, autobiographies, and histories. Even more controversially, choosing and living a certain type of life might facilitate getting at something termed psychological truth. Certainly

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not becoming a psychological seer through a dérèglement of the senses (Rimbaud, 1871) or the passion of limit experiences (Foucault, 1985), but living intentionally for moments of testing oneself within the extraordinary. (Admittedly, there'd be a challenge in writing up the curriculum, ethically implementing it, and seeking school and program accreditation and, later, continuing education credit.)

Personality, Social Networking, and Telecommunications. This refers not only to electronic administration and interpretation of data and to new venues for conceiving of and carrying out psychological research, but to the vicissitudes of self and social behavior within the dynamic context of living in a telecommunications world. Heuristics for new conceptions of the self, related constructs, and how they might be assessed are being developed at locations such as the MIT initiative on technology and self (Turkle, 2011).

The Self. How does current training in psychological assessment handle important Issues bearing on the self? Is the self ontologically valid? A pragmatic fiction? Are there multiple selves and how accessible are they to the person, the professional assessor, and others? How contingent is the self and assessment of the self on situatedness within the world and how would assessment handle such contingency? Significant philosophers of the 20th century such as Heidegger (1962), Sartre (1956), Foucault (1985) had constructed analyses which have not been significantly mined by professional assessors.

The Self, Assessment, and Political Power. Is the self a product of political power relations? Are assessment and associated recommendations about a person in the service of political power? What are the ethical implications? (cf. Foucault, 1985).

Conclusion. So these are some radical considerations for enhancing psychological assessment. The intent is to come to terms with why something with so much potential excitement and social value seems to be in danger of being ignored, discounted, and devalued. The experts and their students need to take a long, hard look and get ready for a sea change.

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