

## **Assessment And Testing In Counselling Practice**

**B. I. Popoola**

Dept. of Educational Foundations & Counselling  
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife

**S. A. Oluwatosin**

Dept. of Educational Foundations & Counselling  
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife

### **INTRODUCTION**

The major goal of the educational system is to develop the potentials of individuals with a view to achieving overall national development. In doing this, the educational process is tailored towards achieving desirable changes in people's cognitive, affective and psychomotor behaviour, such that every individual is sufficiently equipped to contribute his or her quotas to overall national development. In this wise, professional counsellors are involved in helping people to make better decisions about matters relating to their personal development and, by logical extension, contribute to overall national development. In an era characterized by educational, social and economic reforms coupled with an ever-increasing need for efficient service delivery, counsellors are expected to become more proactive in assisting individuals to achieve their life goals and in facilitating the realization of national development goals.

A major requirement for counsellors to be able to assist people to make effective life choices and acquire new behaviours is a thorough understanding of individual clients and their presenting concerns. This understanding is based on information acquired from and/or about the clients in some systematic and objective ways using carefully-developed testing and assessment procedures. Assessment is used here to mean methods or procedures employed by counsellors and psychologists to obtain usable and valid data on various aspects of human behaviour including their potentialities, interests, aptitude and developmental concerns.

There is no doubt that testing and assessment play a pivotal role in the counselling profession. Wall (2004) expressed the view that basing judgments, decisions, and interventions specifically on information acquired in some systematic and objective way is of major importance in the life of a practicing counsellor. Decisions relating to numerous issues such as marriage and family, economy, career, education and mental health often require the use of observations, interviews, surveys, rating scales, and checklists, as well as more formalized assessments and tests. Thus, as a matter of necessity, practicing counsellors have to engage in assessment on a daily basis, whether through the use of published instruments, conducting intake interviews, or listening to clients' description of life experiences. As Whiston (2000) has suggested, integrating appropriate, skilled and refined assessment skills into counselling is necessary to deepen the effectiveness of counsellors, as inability to use tests and assessments when and where appropriate may limit counsellors' effectiveness in serving their clients.

In cognizance of the pivotal roles of testing and assessment in counselling practice, this chapter addresses topics and pertinent issues related to assessment application with a view to helping counsellors and counsellors-in-training develop a solid foundation in measurement concepts, obtain a clear understanding of specific methods of client assessment, and contribute their

quota to overall national development through efficient use of tests and assessment procedures in counselling practice. Specifically, the chapter explores the reasons why testing and assessment are integral to counselling. It identifies the various types of assessment tools available to counsellors and describes competencies which counsellors must possess to be able to perform assessment activities effectively. Finally, the chapter discusses the implications of assessment activities in counselling for national development.

### **ROLES OF ASSESSMENT IN COUNSELLING PRACTICE**

Testing and assessment are indispensable features and integral parts of the counselling process. Numerous research studies indicate that counsellors in a variety of settings consider testing and assessment as important aspects of their professional work. In a study of counsellors' perception of the significant roles of assessment in counselling practice, Ekstrom, Elmore, Schafer, Trotter, and Webster (2004) cited in Whiston (2008) reported that 91% of school counsellors indicated that they interpreted scores from tests/assessments and used the information in counseling. The researchers also found that the majority of school counsellors communicated and interpreted tests and assessment information to parents, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals. In another study, Sampso, Vacc and Loesch (1998) found that work behaviours related to assessment were considered fundamental to the general practice of counselling. In the same vein, Impara and Plake (1995) reported that teachers and school administrators typically considered the school counsellor as an expert who they would consult if they had questions about testing and assessment. Some studies have also indicated that clients expect their counsellors to be skillful in assessment strategies. To many clients, formal assessment strategies have an influence above and beyond a counsellor's verbal comments. Such clients tend to consider assessments results as having greater credibility than what they know themselves or what the counsellors may be telling them (Whiston, 2008). According to Heppner and Claiborn (1989), clients are more likely to accept a counsellor's feedback and less likely to discredit a counsellor if they perceive the counsellor to be expert, attractive, and trustworthy. Thus, the counsellor's conduct during a formal assessment is expected to have a positive influence on clients' perception of his or her expertness

It is significant to note that assessment activities are not distinct activities which can be separated from the counselling process. Whiston (2008) cautioned that counsellors should not view assessment as a distinct activity in the counselling process in which they simply administer tests. The discussions in this section on the roles of assessment activities during the four stages of the counselling process are adapted from Whiston's (2008) work.

#### **Stage One: Assessing the client's problems:**

In the initial stage of counselling, a counsellor needs to assess the clients' problem because there is 'no one-size-fits-all' approach to the therapeutic process. It is important that counsellors skillfully assess the client's problem, for if the assessment process is incomplete or inaccurate, the entire counselling process can be negatively affected. Furthermore, if counsellors have limited assessment skills, they may miss or underestimate important client issues. If problems are delineated in an efficient manner, treatment can be initiated sooner.

Epperson, Bushway, and Warman (1983) found that clients are more likely to continue in counselling if they and the counsellor agree on the nature of the problem. While Hood and Johnson (2007) recommended combining different types of assessment data (e.g. formal and informal) to maximize the strengths and minimize the limitations of different strategies, Meyer, et al (2001) found substantial empirical support for the practice of using multi-method assessment batteries and that clinicians who use interviewing exclusively often have

incomplete client information. Assessment skills, however, are not needed solely in this first stage of counselling, they are important throughout the entire therapeutic process.

### **Stage Two: Conceptualizing and Defining the Client Problems:**

A counsellor may be extraordinarily skilled at initial assessment, but if he/she refrains from gathering additional information, then the process will be hampered. During conceptualizing, the second stage of the counselling process, counsellors need to continually assess a client to ensure that they maintain an adequate understanding of the client's needs and problems. Distinguishing between simple and complex problems is critical in the selection of treatment and the effectiveness of the counselling. Mohr (1995) found that one of the most robust predictions of negative outcomes in counselling and psychotherapy is the clinician's underestimating the severity of the client's problems. Dawes (1994) presented some compelling evidence that counsellors are not always objective in their perceptions and analyses of client issues. There is research supporting the notion that counsellors do have a tendency toward confirmatory bias, which entails the tendency to seek evidence that confirms an individual's preferred hypothesis (Spengler, Strohmer, Dixon, & Shivy, 1995). For example, if a counsellor believes that substance abuse is rampant in our society, that he/she may have a tendency to perceive many clients' issues as being related to their abuse of substances. Fredman and Sherman (1987) proposed that clients often benefit from formal assessments because they can provide counsellors with a different avenue for reaching the client. They contended that counsellors should occasionally get away from relying completely on auditory experience and add visual, kinesthetic, and tactile dimensions to their sessions. They suggested that testing can provide a visual experience that often inspires more confidence in the information than do spoken words. In addition, this visual experience often motivates clients to take action about a conflict or problem. Thus, assessment skills are necessary for adequately conceptualizing the client's concerns, identifying contextual factors that may be contributing to the problems, and ascertaining factors that may be helpful in the treatment phase of counselling.

### **Stage Three: Selecting and implementing effective treatment(s):**

The third step in counselling involves implementing treatment that is based on previous assessments. However, assessment does not stop once treatment begins. Rather, the assessment process continues throughout the treatment phase of counselling. This is the stage of counselling where a counsellor might use either informal or formal assessment to answer a therapeutic question. Clients often come to counselling for assistance in answering questions such as: Should I drop out of school? Should I get a divorced? or Should I change careers? Increasing the amount of information clients can use in decision making usually enhances their decision-making process. Selecting instruments that generate information about occupational choices, career interests, and family dynamics can often assist clients in making major decisions. Using assessment information to aid clients in decision making, however, does not always necessitate administering tests. Counsellors can often use assessment instruments that clients have taken during previous educational experiences or in other situations.

Sometimes clinicians believe that assessment is used only to identify problems or pathologies. This seems somewhat inconsistent with the developmental and preventive foundation of counselling. Rather than using tests to diagnose pathologies or identify limitations, counsellors can use an instrument's assessment to reveal strengths. Wright and Lopez (2002) suggested a four-pronged approach to positive psychological assessment. In this approach, counsellors should identify (1) undermining characteristics of the client, (2) client strengths and assets, (3) missing and destructive aspects of the client's environment, and (4) resources and opportunities within the environment. Counsellors can also use positive psychological

assessment to chart changes during the counselling process and to measure the development of client strengths.

In addition, during the third step in counselling, counsellors need to continually monitor whether they have comprehensively understood the client and the client's situation. Furthermore, practitioners need to scrutinize whether progress is being made and adjust the counselling process if the client is not making progress towards the therapeutic goals. Because the matching of effective treatment to specific clients is not always a simple task, counsellors must continually reassess the client and the efficacy of the counselling services they are providing.

#### **Stage Four: Evaluating the Counselling:**

Finally, once the treatment phase is completed, counsellors need to assess or evaluate whether it was effective. Once again, just as counsellors need effective communication skills to help clients, they also need effective assessment and appraisal skills related to evaluation. Outcome assessment can provide clinicians information about their own effectiveness and, if gathered by all clients, can provide information to administrators, appropriate boards (e.g. school board), and other relevant organizations. Hence, assessment is an integral part of the entire counselling process and it should not be viewed as a distinct area in which counsellors simply administer tests.

### **TYPES OF ASSESSMENT IN COUNSELLING PRACTICE**

To use assessment tools effectively in counselling, the counsellor must understand the basic types of assessment. Different modes of assessment exist in counselling literature. Jeffrey, Greene, Kegal and William (2007) aptly summarized some of these to include educational, career, behavioural, personality, neuropsychological and organizational assessments.

#### **Educational Assessment:**

Counsellors working in educational institutions have a duty to promote the academic progress of students. Educational assessment therefore offers important information to counsellors. This involves method of obtaining information relating to the clients' overall academic progress in formal and informal learning. The importance of this process lies in its uses, part of which is to allow counsellor and others to make informed decision about academic advancement of learners.

#### **Career Assessment:**

In counselling, career assessment is often utilized to provide information regarding a variety of areas, such as interests and personality styles. Career assessment can provide a body of information that might take years to get in any other way. Some methods of career assessment measure interests and aptitudes, and yet others measure values. They can be used to deliver an objective message about what part of a person's behaviours or personality might get in the way of executing a career plan and what he or she can do to mitigate the challenges.

#### **Behavioural Assessment:**

This is mainly used in clinical and school settings. It involves systematic gathering of observations of a set of target behaviours, examining the relationship between these observations and possible causes of behaviour, and applying information to treatment planning and progress monitoring. Behavioural assessment involves the following:

- Behaviour analysis, which includes systematic observations of behaviour within experimental conditions.

- Applied behavioural analysis, which is used to describe behaviour analysis in applied settings
- Functional analysis, which is concerned with the relation between the causes of behaviour and the behaviour (Jeffrey, Greene, Kegal & Williams 2007). Regardless of which approaches the counsellor adopts, all depends on two basic procedures of information gathering. These are self report and direct observation methods.

### **Personality Assessment:**

This is a method that counsellors use to measure a variety of components of personality including traits, states, identity, cognitive and behavioural styles, and other characteristics. This method of assessment is based on numerous theoretical approaches, which include psychoanalytic, cognitive, behavioural, dispositional, humanistic, existential and multicultural approaches.

### **Neuropsychological Assessment:**

This focuses on psychosocial constructs such as intelligence, personality traits and behaviour. Neuropsychological assessment primarily deals with biological factors that influence behaviour. It draws inferences about brain functioning based on behaviours exhibited by a person under structured conditions. Neuropsychological assessment covers a wide range of sensory, perceptual, motor and intellectual capacities, as well as provides detailed information on the client's behavior and emotional functioning.

### **Assessment of Organizational Culture:**

Every organization has its own culture and develops traditions around how the organization is to be run and how people are to act within the organization. Organizational culture is simply defined as socially-transmitted behaviour patterns characteristic of a particular organization or company (Cohen & Swerdhk; 2004,pp 552 as cited by Jeffery et al 2007). The constructs within this aspect of assessment according to Jeffrey et al (2007) include the structure and roles of the organization, leadership styles, dominant values, support mechanism, past traditions and characteristic ways of interacting with people and institutions outside the culture. Assessment of organizational culture is important because organizational dynamics can affect the health of employees, and limit their productivity and job satisfaction.

## **TYPES OF TESTS IN COUNSELLING PRACTICE**

There are many behaviour characteristics in man that require peculiar measures for appropriate classification and treatment. This is why there are lots of testing instruments available for counsellors' use today. Fremer and Wall (2004) identified five major uses of tests in the professional practice of counselling. These are selection and placement, diagnosis, accountability and evaluation, identifying trends or progress and self-discovery. For each of these uses, various testing instruments have been developed and are usually available for use by counsellors. They include:

- **Achievement tests:** These are primarily designed to measure what an individual has learnt. Achievement tests are often used in educational or employment settings. They attempt to measure how much a person knows about a particular topic, that is, the person's *achieved* knowledge. Counsellors use achievement tests for diagnostic and selective purposes in educational institutions and work places.
- **Aptitude tests:** These are specifically designed for selection and production purposes. According to Hamersma (1972), aptitude tests are largely concerned with the question of what a person's capacity or competence is in a special area. This testing tool is relevant in making right prognosis on clients' problems.

- **Interest and occupational tests:** A counsellor sometimes needs to assist his or her clients to make distinctions between their interest and occupational realities. There are lots of familiar grounds in this area when it comes to making occupational and institutional decisions. Occupational tests, such as Ottis Employment Test, Strong Vocational Interest Blank, Minnesota Vocational Interest Inventory and Vocational Interest Inventory (Nigerian version), attempt to match the client's interests with the interests of persons in known careers. The logic here is that if the things that interest the client are also things that interest people in his or her target occupation, then he or she might be a suitable candidate for the target occupation.
- **Personality tests:** These are tests designed to measure the way a person typically responds to stimuli around him/her over time. Two of the most well-known personality tests are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), or the revised MMPI-2, composed of several hundred "yes or no" questions, and the Rorschach (the inkblot test), composed of several cards of inkblots in which a person simply gives a description of the images and feelings experienced in looking at the ink blots.
- **Intelligence tests:** These are tests which attempt to measure a person's intelligence, that is, a person's basic ability to understand the world around him, assimilate its functioning, and apply this knowledge to enhance the quality of life. Intelligence, therefore, is a measure of a *potential*, not a measure of what has been learnt (as in an achievement test), and so it is supposed to be independent of the testees' culture.

The use of tests by counsellors usually follows a number of procedures which include selection, administration, scoring, interpretation and dissemination of test results. Hoover (1988) provided an apt description of each of these procedures thus:

**Test Selection:** Having defined the purpose for testing, the counsellor looks for a variety of sources for information on available tests. Resources include review books, journals, test manuals, and textbooks on testing and measurement. The most complete source of information on a particular test is usually the test manual.

**Test Administration:** Test administration is usually standardized by the developers of the test. Manual instructions need to be followed in order to make a valid comparison of an individual's score with the test's norm group. Non-standardized tests used in counselling are best given under controlled circumstances. This allows the counsellor's experience with the test to become an internal norm. Issues of individual versus group administration need consideration as well. The clients and the purpose for which they are being tested will contribute to decisions about group testing.

**Test Scoring:** Scoring of tests follows the instructions provided in the test manual. The counsellor is sometimes given the option of having the test scored electronically rather than by manual scoring. Both the positive and negative aspects of this choice need to be considered. It is usually believed that test scoring is best handled by a machine because it is free from bias.

**Test Interpretation:** The interpretation of test results is usually the area which allows for the greatest flexibility within the testing process. Depending upon the counsellor's theoretical point of view and the extent of the test manual guidelines, interpretation may be brief and superficial, or detailed and explicitly theory based (Tinsley & Bradley, 1986). Because this area allows for the greatest flexibility, it is also the area with the greatest danger of misuse. Whereas scoring is best done by a bias-free machine, interpretation by machine is often too rigid. What is needed is the experience of a skilled test user to individualize the interpretation of results.

**Dissemination of test results:** Feedback on test results to the client completes the formal process of testing. Here, the therapeutic skills of the counsellor come fully into play (Phelps, 1974). The counsellor uses verbal and nonverbal interaction skills to convey messages to clients and to assess their understanding of it.

### **COUNSELLORS' COMPETENCIES IN THE USE OF TESTS AND ASSESSMENT**

Regardless of their work setting, it is crucial for counsellors to understand the various factors that enable them to use testing and assessment in the most competent, credible, helpful, ethical, and professional manner. The American Counselling Association (ACA) approved a list of competencies which counsellors must possess to be able to use tests and perform assessment activities effectively. A description of these competencies as approved by ACA (2003) is as presented in this section.

#### **Skill in practice and knowledge of theory relevant to the testing context and type of counselling specialty:**

Assessment and testing must be integrated into the context of the theory and knowledge of a specialty area, not as a separate act, role, or entity. In addition, professional counsellors should be skilled in treatment practice with the population being served.

#### **A thorough understanding of testing theory, techniques of test construction, and test reliability and validity:**

Included in this knowledge base are methods of item selection, theories of human nature that underlie a given test, reliability, and validity. Knowledge of reliability includes, at a minimum: methods by which it is determined, such as domain sampling, test-retest, parallel forms, split-half, and inter-item consistency, the strengths and limitations of each of these methods; the standard error of measurement, which indicates how accurately a person's test score reflects their true score of the trait being measured; and true score theory, which defines a test score as an estimate of what is true. Knowledge of validity includes, at a minimum: types of validity, including content, criterion-related (both predictive and concurrent), and construct methods of assessing each type of validity, including the use of correlation; and the meaning and significance of standard error of estimate.

#### **A working knowledge of sampling techniques, norms, and descriptive, correlational and predictive statistics:**

Important topics in sampling include sample size, sampling techniques, and the relationship between sampling and test accuracy. A working knowledge of descriptive statistics includes, at a minimum: probability theory, measures of central tendency; multi-modal and skewed distributions, measures of variability, including variance and standard deviation; and standard scores, including deviation IQ's, z-scores, T-scores, percentile ranks, stanines/stens, normal curve equivalents, grade- and age-equivalents. Knowledge of correlation and prediction includes, at a minimum: the principle of least squares; the direction and magnitude of relationship between two sets of scores; deriving a regression equation; the relationship between regression and correlation; and the most common procedures and formulas used to calculate correlations.

#### **Ability to review, select and administer tests appropriate for clients or students and the context of the counselling practice:**

Professional counsellors using tests should be able to describe the purpose and use of different types of tests, including the most widely used tests for their setting and purposes. Professional counsellors use their understanding of sampling, norms, test construction, validity and reliability to accurately assess the strengths, limitations, and appropriate applications of a test

for the clients being served. Professional counsellors using tests also should be aware of the potential for error when relying on computer printouts of test interpretation. For accuracy of interpretation, technological resources must be augmented by a counsellor's firsthand knowledge of the client and the test-taking context.

**Skill in administration of tests and interpretation of test scores:**

Competent test users implement appropriate and standardized administration procedures. This requirement enables professional counsellors to provide consultation and training to others who assist with test administration and scoring. In addition to standardized procedures, test users provide testing environments that are comfortable and free of distraction. Skilled interpretation requires a strong working knowledge of the theory underlying the test, test's purpose, statistical meaning of test scores, and norms used in test construction. Skilled interpretation also requires an understanding of the similarities and differences between the client or student and the norm samples used in test construction. Finally, it is essential that clear and accurate communication of test score meaning in oral or written form to clients, students or appropriate others be provided.

**Knowledge of the impact of diversity on testing accuracy, including age, gender, ethnicity, race, disability, and linguistic differences:**

Professional counsellors using tests should be committed to fairness in every aspect of testing. Information gained and decisions made about the client or student are valid only to the degree that the test accurately and fairly assesses the client's or student's characteristics. Test selection and interpretation are done with an awareness of the degree to which items may be culturally biased or the norming sample not reflective or inclusive of the client's or student's diversity. Test users understand that age and physical disability differences may impact the client's ability to perceive and respond to test items. Test scores are interpreted in light of the cultural, ethnic, disability, or linguistic factors that may impact an individual's score. These include visual, auditory, and mobility disabilities that may require appropriate accommodation in test administration and scoring. Test users understand that certain types of norms and test score interpretation may be inappropriate, depending on the nature and purpose of the testing.

**Knowledge and skill in the professionally responsible use of assessment and evaluation practice:**

Professional counsellors who use tests should understand the legal and ethical principles and practices regarding test security, using copyrighted materials, and unsupervised use of assessment instruments that are not intended for self-administration. When using and supervising the use of tests, qualified test users demonstrate an acute understanding of the paramount importance of the well being of clients and the confidentiality of test scores. Test users seek on-going educational and training opportunities to maintain competence and acquire new skills in assessment and evaluation.

**ASSESSMENT, COUNSELLING AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Following the understanding that Nigerian educational system is committed to the training of citizens to become useful to themselves and the nation, it is expected that its products should be people of good academic qualification and acceptable character. Today, the nation is bedeviled with people who have acquired various academic qualifications but who lack good moral standing. This problem has called the attention of scholars and researchers to the issues of all-round testing and assessment of would-be university graduates through institutionalized guidance and counselling activities. This view was expressed by Adegoroye, Ayodele and Babatunde (2007). Their argument was based on the fact that the counselling units in Nigerian institutions have not been able to properly assess and test students' character such that it also



should form part of their grading. They suggested that the counselling units in collaboration with the Student Affairs Divisions of Nigerian universities should engage in thorough testing and assessment of student's character to ensure that university graduates are people of tested learning and character, who possess professional skills and social intelligence.

In recent times, the nation has been so concerned about the character of people in public offices such that agencies like the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have been established to checkmate misconduct and unethical professional practices in public offices. The assumption here is that if during their training, people in public offices have been exposed to good character modeling along with their academic learning, and have been objectively tested and assessed, there would be less work for these agencies and the entire nation would achieve accelerated development in all spheres of life. According to Oana (1981), university counselling programmes that primarily focus on personality development along high exemplary performance in public and private entrepreneurial activities and services are not only for students in trouble, students who misbehave or students who have difficulty conforming to the norms of the society. They are also meant for everyone who needs to develop good character, attitude and skills required for national development. In this vein, Adegoroye et al (2007) succinctly recommended that the counselling units of the nation's universities should serve as psychometric units to examine the psychological wellness of students through professional testing and assessment procedures. According to the researchers, the reports from the counselling units should serve as part of the graduating requirements for all students to ensure that all graduates have been objectively tested and found worthy both in learning and character. The foregoing analysis underscores the need for more pragmatic assessments of the affective domain by counsellors as a necessary aspect of the graduating requirements for students at all levels of the educational system.

### CONCLUSION

Testing pervades nearly all aspects of today's society, including education, licensing, life planning, jobs, promotions, decision-making, legal decisions, mental health, insurance, interventions, life progress, and many more. Few other experiences in our lives have as much impact as testing and assessment with regard to available opportunities, activities, and future possibilities. The professional use of testing and assessment procedures by counsellors gives them a fundamental and integral role in today's society, unmatched by other professionals. Savvy, competent, and confident counsellors should welcome such a role and life-changing opportunities.

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