

Ethics in Psychological Assessments

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Historical events and societal needs have shaped the evolution of psychological assessments (Cohen, 2022). As testing practices evolved, a distinction emerged between "tests" and "assessments." Tests are generally considered standardized instruments anyone can administer, score, and interpret. In contrast, assessments involve a comprehensive evaluation process, with validity contingent upon administration and interpretation by trained professionals (Cohen, 2022). Today, tests, screeners, and assessments remain widely used across various professional fields, including counseling, to support diverse multicultural needs. This paper discusses multicultural and diversity issues, ethical issues, ways to avoid ethical violations, the ACA Code of Ethics, the impact of assessment choice, and cultural and subculture behaviors regarding assessments, tests, and mental health treatment.

Ethical, Multicultural, and Diversity Issues

In counseling, therapists must work to be competent in multicultural diversity and ethical responsibilities. With a highly diverse population in the United States, it is imperative that therapists utilize a therapeutic assessment model that accounts for multicultural differences. Multicultural diversities such as disabilities, cultural differences, and language can cause issues with diagnosis and treatment if mental health providers do not take them into consideration. For example, cultures can be defined as individualist or collectivist. Individualist cultures are described as having values of self-reliance, autonomy, independence, individuality, and competitiveness (Cohen, 2022). Collectivist cultures value conformity, cooperation, and interdependence and are goal-oriented (Cohen, 2022). If a therapist is not aware of the patient's culture and how it pertains to their development and life experiences, then they may misdiagnose

them for something that is culturally acceptable. For example, avoiding eye contact when talking is considered respectful in some cultures. If a therapist is unaware of this, they may read it as anxious or shy body language. Language is another multicultural element that a therapist can misinterpret. For example, verbal and nonverbal language can be unique to different cultures, and certain words or phrases can have different meanings. Even the rate at which one speaks or completes daily tasks can be tied to cultural upbringing (Cohen, 2022). For example, specific locations in the world are slower or faster paced. Sedona, Arizona, is considered a peaceful place with minimal traffic, and people move slowly in their daily activities. This differs from a place like New York City, where there is a lot of traffic and the environment is much faster-paced. Finally, disabilities are another diversity that has unique needs and experiences. As a counselor, one must be open to learning and understanding how the patient's multicultural diversities affect their daily lives. A therapist who can be open to learning, genuine, and non-judgmental will have a more effective relationship with the client and be able to help guide them through their unique issues with a customized treatment plan.

How to Avoid Ethical Issues in Psychological Assessments

One way to avoid ethical issues in psychological assessment is to learn and abide by the ACA code of ethics, state laws, and policies. Therapists often utilize frameworks such as DOVE—representing desire, opportunities, values, and education—as ethical guidelines in their practice (Tjeltveit & Gottlieb, 2012). Many individuals enter the counseling profession with a strong desire to help others, yet this desire can sometimes lead to boundary violations. Such boundary violations contradict the ACA Code of Ethics, which can delay therapeutic treatment and cause harm to clients (Tjeltveit & Gottlieb, 2012).

The counseling profession gives therapists the power and opportunity to provide help to others, which, if misused, leads to the exploitation of vulnerable clients. Awareness of one's potential for self-serving bias is crucial in avoiding ethical downfalls. Furthermore, values play an integral role in counseling, shaping therapists' development, and guiding ethical decision-making. Counselors must be self-aware regarding their values, upholding them without imposing personal beliefs on clients, thus fostering a non-judgmental therapeutic environment (ACA, 2014). Moreover, education is equally critical, equipping therapists with the competencies to conduct accurate assessments and create effective treatments. Emotional intelligence is also imperative, including self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-monitoring, and self-care. Therapists must recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and limitations to maintain high standards of competence in their therapeutic and assessment practices (Tjeltveit & Gottlieb, 2012).

Assessing Behaviors that Stem from Cultures and Subcultures

Clinicians can assess behaviors associated with various cultures and subcultures by applying empathy, curiosity, and respect. As Kodjo (2009) describes, cultural competence is a continuous and evolving process, given the dynamic nature of cultures and subcultures. Adolescents, for example, represent a subculture defined by distinct slang communication and expressions, clothing styles, musical preferences, and unique values, all of which change over time (Kodjo, 2009). This constant evolution creates a never-ending learning curve for clinicians.

Therapists must understand how clients' cultural or subcultural backgrounds shape their presenting issues. Effective cultural assessment requires a genuine curiosity and willingness to learn about the client's cultural background. Tools such as open-ended questions and the Cultural Formulation Interview (CFI) are instrumental in this process (Cohen, 2022). Respecting clients'

cultural identities is critical, as cultural diversity significantly influences clients' life experiences and presenting issues. By embracing these principles, therapists can create a culturally sensitive therapeutic environment that acknowledges and respects each client's unique cultural upbringing and develop a treatment plan for their needs.

Impacts of Assessment Choice

Assessments are critical tools utilized by counselors to learn about the patient and their presenting problems. Since the inception of tests and assessments, they continue to grow, and now there is a plethora of tests to choose from. However, a counselor must be competent in testing procedures and evaluations to diagnose and treat patients appropriately. Most tests, such as standardized tests, were designed to allow persons with limited or no psychological experience to conduct and assess the test—an example of a standardized test would be school assessments (Cohen, 2022). School tests and assessments are often utilized to identify academic needs on an individual basis. Psychological assessments such as projective tests like the inkblot test should only be administered and analyzed by a skilled psychologist competent in the test and interpretation (Cohen, 2022). Choosing the proper test or assessment that fits the patient and is known by the counselor is critical to effective treatment.

Ethical Issues as Specified in the ACA Code of Ethics

The improper administration of psychological tests and assessments can present significant mental health risks to clients, including the possibility of inaccurate results, misdiagnosis, and the development of an ineffective treatment plan. According to the ACA Code of Ethics, Section E.2.a., therapists must utilize only those assessments and tests within their area

of competence; otherwise, they should refer clients to a qualified professional (ACA, 2014). Failing to do so creates an ethical violation and compromises the quality of care provided.

Furthermore, therapists must consider clients' multicultural diversity when selecting and administering psychological assessments. Tests must be validated for the specific population being assessed, and interpretations must be made cautiously to account for potential cultural biases (Koocher & Rey-Casserly, n.d.). Section E.9.a. of the ACA Code of Ethics requires that therapists consider clients' cultural backgrounds, personal contexts, and comprehension of test results to ensure ethical and effective assessment practices (ACA, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of psychological tests and assessments dates back to the early 20th century, driven by societal needs and demands. Over time, new assessments were created and implemented, leading to growing public concern regarding their application and interpretation. In contemporary practice, numerous ethical guidelines are essential for conducting and analyzing psychological assessments, including adherence to the ACA Code of Ethics, consideration of emotional intelligence, and applying cultural competence frameworks such as the DOVE and Cultural Formulation Interview (CFI) tools. It is imperative that therapists demonstrate competence in administering assessments and treatments while remaining open to understanding diverse cultures and subcultures to ensure accurate diagnosis and effective treatment of their patients.

References

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