

# CAVEWAS Corner

## *Ethical Dilemmas Related to Vocational Assessment of a Multicultural Population*

By Corinne McAuley, MSED, RRP, (F)ABVE, (C)OACCPP, MCVP

Psychometric testing of individuals from countries where English is the second language can be a difficult experience for both the client and the psychometrist/vocational evaluator. Using tests that are "culture-fair" are of utmost importance in order to ensure valid results. Despite taking cautionary measures, I have noticed that some individuals educated outside of North America do rather poorly on tests of mental ability even with the use of culture-fair tests. For example, I tested a woman who had a university degree from India, but she tested in the low average range of intelligence on a test of non-verbal intelligence. As a university student, she must have demonstrated stronger reasoning abilities having been exposed to the post-secondary examination process at some point, however, she did not test at an expected level.

I have noticed that several confusing anomalies

exist when testing for mental ability within a multicultural population, particularly those who were not educated in North America.

A possible explanation for this is that in a North American culture, children play with mechanical or building toys, such as Mechano, Lego, Tinkertoy, or Lincoln Logs. They learn to figure out how things fit together early in life, and have gained understanding through the manipulation of shapes and geometric designs. The advantage is that we are programmed from an early age to apply reasoning and logic to solve problems that (as similarly found on many tests of non-verbal reasoning) use abstract designs and shapes. This form of non-verbal intelligence is taken into adulthood.

People from other cultural environments may have less access to these learning methods, possibly due to impoverished living

circumstances, or living in rural areas where there is not as much access to formal schooling. Another factor may relate to parents' ability to support their child's learning. For example, there may not be as much reading and writing materials in the home.

Another factor considers whether the client comes from a stressful environment where there is little focus placed on formal learning. This might occur if one is coming from war-torn countries where terror is experienced on a daily basis; or where there is exposure to domestic violence in the home. We can apply this thinking to various psychometric tests a vocational specialist might administer, such as assessing for clerical aptitude, spatial ability, form perception, or any test that involves problem-solving using abstract designs and shapes.

Cultural barriers in vocational testing/assessment continue to challenge many vocational evaluators. The clients I typically see have individual or a combination of physical, emotional, or cognitive injuries. They have been disabled from returning to the competitive labour market in their previous capacity, or if they were a student, their educational plans have been cut short.

In order to gain understanding of the individual's background and circumstances, the vocational rehabilitation interview process is essential to investigate the client's history. During the vocational rehabilitation interview process, I gather relevant background information regarding medical, psychosocial, employment and educational histories, as well as symptoms



### CAVEWAS Corner

Dear fellow colleagues and readers, here is our most recent contribution to CAVEWAS Corner.

As many of you know, CAVEWAS (Canadian Assessment, Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Society) is a member society of VRA Canada, serving in large part to represent and support the professional and developmental needs of vocational evaluators as well as professional rehab personnel specializing in work adjustment of injured workers and the like. In this section, you will find current and candid articles authored by CAVEWAS members, non-members (and future members alike) that will share, discuss, and communicate with you developments and changes affecting our membership. Amongst them issues of best practice, professional development and designation, as well as industry trends.

We hope you continue to find the content in this section stimulating, motivating, and informative and we encourage your ongoing participation and contributions.

**Enjoy!**

### CAVEWAS National Board Of Directors

If you are a CAVEWAS member and have any ideas, opinions or thoughts relevant to this section and you would like to share, discuss, and communicate them in the next issue, please contact: Jodi Webster at [jodi@keyrehabservices.ca](mailto:jodi@keyrehabservices.ca) We also encourage you to join our group on LinkedIn.

and limitations in their activities of daily living. I also review the medical/rehabilitative file as well as academic and employment records. Based on my psychometric test findings, review of the file, behavioural observations in addition to the clinical interview, I am able to form a comprehensive opinion and make recommendations. It is important to understand that test results should not be interpreted in isolation.

When we do testing, we should also utilize a comprehensive battery of tests to get a cross-section of the individual's abilities, potential, and interests. The standardized tests that I administer are within my scope of practice. They measure verbal and non-verbal intellectual functioning (e.g., GAMA, TONI-3, WPT), academic achievement levels (WRAT-4), work-related aptitudes (GATB), and vocational interests (SDS or Who Am I). With the right training, a mental health test is administered (P3) to screen for emotional issues and determine whether a referral to psychological treatment is required. The overall assessment provides insight into a client's potential to undergo educational and training programs, and whether there is a need for a career development process. It also assesses employment barriers, such as chronic pain and physical limitations, emotional difficulties, cognitive deficits resulting from a TBI or pre-occupation of thought in regards to accident-related circumstances, advanced age, literacy difficulties, English as a second language, limited educational attainment, and limited transferable skills.

In addition to cultural or psychosocial aspects, many factors can influence performance in a test situation, such as client presentation and behaviours. For example, if the client did not sleep well the night before the assessment, this could lead to mental inefficiency. Observations of social behaviour are also important, such as signs of apprehension or test anxiety, concentration difficulties, apathy, or hostility. Unusual observations should be reported so counsellors reviewing results can ascertain factors that may have influenced those results. Additionally, following ethics and standards is necessary for effective test usage and interpretation of results.

In terms of a career development process (if there is a need for exploration of this nature), my many years spent as a career counsellor—with clients ranging in age from 15 to 60+—have provided me with the opportunity to coach and guide many populations (including multicultural). This included assessing whether academic upgrading, post-secondary education, and training were required. I administered and

interpreted standardized personality (MBTI) and vocational interest tests (JVIS & CDI), in addition to skills assessments and work values inventories. The goal was to provide career development or redirection with realistic career action plans. We must bear in mind that test-takers need the requisite language skills to complete these forms.

In a case where a vocational rehabilitation client is unable to return to his/her previous occupation but has the potential to retrain (and



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where the referral source approves career counselling), I add on to my existing battery of tests by utilizing personality, skills, and work value tests (as above) and combine these results with initial assessment findings. The results of cumulative test findings aid in addressing and forming comprehensive return-to-work plans that are individualized to the client. Counselling assists clients in the career exploration process to redefine their work identity in order to move forward. Referral to community programs may be required for clients who need language or academic skills upgrading in addition to employment readiness training.

Another perspective to cultural barriers in vocational assessment is expressed by psychologist Dr. Philip Spergel in his doctoral dissertation, related to the relationship between interest and aptitude as a function of personality integration. He believes abstract reasoning does exist in every culture; just not the type of reasoning we might think is abstract. Abstract reasoning, in Dr. Spergel's opinion, is problem-

solving. For example, in primitive cultures people learn to survive by their wits, i.e. the best ways to hunt, fish, and respond to danger. Concrete learning teaches the mechanics, but insight learning teaches the best way of performing the activity.

Dr. Spergel has encountered individuals born and raised in North America who demonstrate below average abstract reasoning skills as I have identified, but have other abstract skills that may puzzle us. In an extreme example, Dr. Spergel studied an area of inner city Philadelphia where there are daily “combat trauma” killings and maiming. To survive, residents must quickly learn what is needed to stay alive. Those who learn through trial and error are less successful than those who can quickly size up the problem (insight) and make the best of a bad situation. In other words, in each culture there are abstract and concrete thinkers. Those who are abstract thinkers adapt to a new culture more readily than those who think more concretely. They have better transferrable skills. Dr. Spergel goes on to say that much has recently been written of the inadequacy of psychometric tests for educationally and culturally deprived individuals.

In our Canadian context, we often encounter individuals who have arrived from situations of civil unrest or war time deprivation, whose schooling and career development were interrupted. Additionally, there are others whose learning experiences involved well-intentioned but rote-oriented schooling.

It is imperative that cultural barriers in assessment be evaluated fairly, and integrated with test results that are culturally fair in a meaningful way that does not place the individual at a disadvantage when comparing them to the general working population. Although we try to be culture-fair with the knowledge and tools available to us, the psychometric tests that vocational evaluators use may be limited, and this must be taken into consideration and coupled with a more holistic approach to assessment and counselling. ☺

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