The Question is the Answer:
The Cultural Preparedness Approach to Assessment for Career Guidance

Arulmani, G. (2015). The question is the answer: The cultural preparedness approach to assessment for career guidance. In M. McMahon & M. Watson (Eds.), *Career Assessment: Qualitative Approaches.* (pp. 207-220). Melbourne: Sense Publishers.

INTRODUCTION

An important proportion of the engagement between a career counsellor and a client focuses on bringing together information that would sharpen self-awareness for effective career decision making. The methods used to collect and organise this information could be influenced by the philosophic and theoretical models to which the career counsellor is committed. The rationale underlying methods of assessment and measurement have been the subject of extensive debate and the field has differentiated into the quantitative (psychometric) and the qualitative (non-psychometric) positions. This chapter presents a brief critique of these methods and provides an example of a blended approach to assessment for career guidance, based on the cultural preparedness model.

QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

Based on trait-factor theory, the older, quantitative school was established on the postulation that individuals possess a distinctive configuration of intrinsic traits and qualities which can be accurately measured and quantified. Hence, assessment methods emerging from the trait-factor position are usually quantitative-psychometric in their approach. Observations are expressed as quantities, usually in numbers (e.g., IQ = 121 or Linguistic aptitude = 23/40). Tests are administered in a "standardised" manner: testing conditions, test instructions, scoring and interpretation are expected to be uniform across test-takers and testing environments. The meaning of an individual's score is obtained by comparing performance against a "norm": the performance of a representative sample (e.g., a score of 23/40 on a test of Linguistic aptitude may be interpreted as "below average" according to the norms of that test). The illustration in Box 1 provides an example of how quantitative measures would be administered.

Central to the usefulness of psychometric devices is the relevance of a test to the group on which it is used. Psychological tests are useful when they are:

- standardised and statistically validated for the group for which they are intended
- age and gender appropriate
- suitable to the cultural background of those on whom the test is administered
- implemented by a person who has been trained in the administration of that test
- scored accurately and interpreted on the basis of appropriate norms

The quantitative approach reflects the logical positivist, empirical stance taken by the discipline of psychology in its attempt to emulate the physical sciences. The test is central to the process of assessment rather than the tester or the test-taker. An important feature of psychometric devices is that the limitations of the test and the ambit of its effective functioning are clearly articulated. Psychometric approaches are expected to declare the various kinds of error that are possible at the statistical level and the limits of a particular test, for example by reporting standard error and estimates of reliability and validity. *Objectivity*, therefore, lies at the heart of the quantitative method. However, a number of factors influence and even vitiate the successful implementation of psychological tests.

The validity and reliability of psychological tests are largely statistical and mathematical constructions and therefore require certain assumptions to be met if the results are to be valid and reliable. The reliance of quantitative methods on statistics has been pointed to as a limitation. This becomes particularly obvious when tests are adapted for use in contexts outside which they were originally constructed. For example, even though many psychological tests are developed using samples composed primarily of Anglo-Americans, normative data for the use of these devices with other racial, ethnic groups are rarely developed (Hansen, 2005). It is not uncommon for assessment instruments to be directly translated from the American and European versions, without re-standardising the translated versions (e.g., Leong & Hartung, 2000). On the rare occasions when translations are available, the quality of the translation and adaptation could vary (Cheung & Leong, 2003). Hambleton (2005) makes the observation that test adaptation is not merely a statistical exercise or an exercise in creating literal translations of test content. Adaptations require translators to find equivalent constructs, words,

and expressions in the recipient language that accurately capture the psychological and linguistic underpinnings of the language in which the test was originally developed.

Box 1
"They are all below average…"
Excerpt from personal diary (Arulmani, February, 1993)

Some years ago very soon after I completed a high level degree in Clinical Psychology, I was invited to assess the children of tribal families to identify their potentials based on which they could be given scholarships for further education. The invitation was from the 86 year old head of the erstwhile royal family of the region who were owners of vast iron ore mines in the area. The fathers of these children were unskilled labourers in these mines and the mine owner's desire was to support the further education of the children so that their talents and potentials could be fruitfully realised. Brimming over with my new found knowledge about psychological testing I set off with my tests of intelligence, aptitude, interest and temperament. The tests were all administered in a "standardised" manner and the test instructions were meticulously followed. However, even during the administration of the tests, I noticed that almost all my young test-takers were "underperforming". Most of them could not use the various blocks and cards in my testing kit, their drawings were not "age appropriate", in fact they could not even correctly hold the pencils that I supplied. The tests were scored. As anticipated almost the entire group recorded a "below average" performance. I wrote up the various psychometric reports and handed them over. A few days later I was asked to meet the person who had commissioned the project. "From your reports it seems none of my children are worthy of a scholarship", he said to me. "Perhaps you are correct because you have taken a highly scientific approach. But before we come to this conclusion, could you visit these children in their homes and then tell me what your impressions are?" I didn't understand why that was necessary, since after all I had taken a "highly scientific approach". Anyway, I set off to the remote hamlets that were home to these children. As I approached, I began to see, scribbled on the rocks, examples of the most attractive child art – cavorting animals, soaring birds, twirling plants, dancing humans – executed in sophisticated (entirely age appropriate!) detail. The children and their families were thrilled to see me and I was treated as an honoured guest. Still amazed by the drawings I asked who had made the drawings and with what. Three of the "artists" in the group shyly came up and showed me lumps of iron ore – their drawing tools! These were the very ones who "underperformed" on my paper-pencil tests! Further, all around me I noticed an almost seamless involvement of children in what would be considered adult duties in urban environments: keeping the yard clean, caring for the livestock as well as their younger siblings, stoking the fire, were all activities that the children were quite naturally involved in. I was introduced to one of their "board" games (the board being the floor) the complexity of which required the intellectual prowess of a chess master! I could go on with my description of what I saw in that little hamlet. But gradually the wisdom of these children's 86 year old benefactor dawned on me: my tests had "underperformed" and not these bright eyed children.

At the practical level, another trend that must be noted is that psychological assessment today is a corporatized business. Capturing markets and selling psychological test products commonly override the scientific principles upon which psychological testing rests. An often ignored reality, particularly in countries where career counselling is in its infancy, is a slackening of the rigour of training and certification for administrators of particular tests.

At the epistemological level, philosophic shifts in the world of psychology moved discourse from the functional-materialistic to the existential-humanistic position. Objectivity, the central feature of trait-factor theories, was itself questioned and psychological tests were criticised as being mechanistic and reductionist.

Criticisms of the quantitative method must also be considered at the political level. Commenting on this in her appraisal of the literature, Gottfredson (2003) points to the political stances of the time and in her opinion, "…civil rights and women's movements had made counseling psychologists reluctant to tell counselees they could not become whatever they wished to be" (p. 116). Against this background, resorting to psychological tests became politically "incorrect". Hence, the central assumption of the quantitative school that objectively examining a *sample* of behaviour can help to understand the *whole* of behaviour lost favour and the use of such approaches became limited in Western forms of career counselling. It must be noted here that this position faded from favour not only because of its limitations but also because of changes in wider political stances.

QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

The qualitative school, places the individual and the context, rather than the testing method or instrument at the centre of the process. Qualitative approaches focus on quality rather than quantity and aim at describing rather than measuring or quantifying. They are non-numerical and rely on verbal, non-mathematical descriptions. Going back to an earlier example, the qualitative observer would not say, Linguistic aptitude = 23/40 but would *describe* the aptitude in terms of the person's fluency with words, sensitivity to shades of meanings and so on. Where quantitative approaches are mainly cross-sectional, qualitative methods attempt to take a longitudinal perspective and where quantitative approaches rely on psychometric testing, qualitative methods take a dialogic approach. Qualitative approaches are intentionally *subjective*.

Qualitative methods allow matters to be considered in detail and in depth. Since interactions between the counsellor and client are not limited to a set of standardised questions, the direction of an interview can be guided and thereby more responsive to the client in real time. On the other hand, going back to the question of error, the quality of the data obtained relies heavily on the counsellor/assessor. There is a good chance that the biases, idiosyncrasies and preoccupations of the assessor influence the direction that the interview takes. The possibility that the assessor misses cues is strong. This can also contribute to error. In the case of quantitative methods, the error is known at least as an estimate. With qualitative approaches, error can remain unknown.

From a practical, implementational point of view, qualitative methods are well positioned to capture "real" experiences and identify subtleties and complexities. This can be more eloquent and compelling than data obtained through standardised quantitative procedures. However this requires a highly trained and experienced assessor, who is able to maintain objectivity while simultaneously eliciting subjective data. Qualitative approaches can generate large volumes of information which must be analysed and interpreted before this information can be considered to be "data". This can be time consuming and here again, a high degree of competence is required on the part of the assessor. Further, these methods imply intense engagements between client and counsellor which most often may be possible only at a one-to-one level or at best in small groups. This is a limitation that could be sharply felt in contexts where the numbers of clients who require career guidance runs into the thousands! Bringing interventions to scale, in an economical, yet rigorous manner may be difficult through qualitative methods.

The qualitative school rests upon the epistemological notion of subjectivity. However, there appear to be contradictions at the theoretical and methodological levels. From the points made above, it seems that objectivity cannot but lie at the heart of qualitative assessment, albeit in a non-quantitative way. For example, the qualitative assessor is trained to maintain neutrality, to ensure that personal biases do not affect the collection and interpretation of information (e.g., Guba, 1981). This points in fact, to a striving to be objective. It has been suggested that terms such as credibility and accuracy of representation are used in place of the constructs of reliability and validity used by the quantitative school (Agar, 1986). While the terminology may be different, the underlying epistemological meaning remains the same. Thematic analysis, an important qualitative data analysis technique is in fact an exercise in ordering and reducing information into categories. This is closely reminiscent of the quantitative method of factor analysis. It seems therefore, that differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches are mainly at the methodological level. Epistemologically, both approaches strive for objectivity.

In summary, a critical evaluation of the quantitative and qualitative approaches indicates that both are valuable and as with any single system, both have their limitations. It also seems that assessment as an exercise would be poorer if it rests on any *one* of these methods. The next section takes this point further.

ASSESSMENT AND THE CULTURAL INTERFACE

Underlying the points made in the previous paragraphs is the often ignored fact that culture is a powerful, yet unacknowledged, arbitrating factor. It is quite possible that a construct being measured or a method being used in a certain culture may be unknown, considered odd, or perhaps even improper in another culture. As described in the illustration in Box 1, the lack of sensitivity to cultural factors can completely subvert the assessment process, as well intentioned as it may be. This criticism is commonly directed toward the quantitative approaches. However, the same criticism could also be true of the qualitative methods. Almost all the theoretical positions discussed above are rooted in sociocultural processes that characterise the West and assume that the individual has the cultural freedom and the economic resources to be able to volitionally engage in career development. Watson (2013) points out that many of these conceptions are viable in a post-industrial work world. These ideas may not even be relevant in developing world economies where engagement with

work continues to occur in pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial environments, undergirded by a collectivist form of social organisation.

At another, more practical level, clients' responses to the methods and outcomes of assessment have a distinct cultural flavour. Going by reports in the literature cited above, qualitative approaches seem to be well accepted in Western contexts. However this acceptance does not seem to be reflected in other cultures. In India (particularly in urban contexts) for example, formal, quantitative testing is an integral and expected part of the educational system. When families bring their high school aged adolescents for career counselling, parents as well as the adolescent *expect* aptitude testing and are confused and disoriented if the interaction ends without a set of "test-results" being produced. Families quite frequently express dissatisfaction when a career report does not carry quantitative information about the "level" of their child's aptitude and interest.

Against the background of this felt need, would-be career counsellors also expect that a course in career counselling would by default train them in psychometric tests of aptitude, interest and personality. For example, the single biggest "lacuna" that has been pointed out about the courses we conduct in India is that we do not focus *enough* on psychometric testing. Similar findings have been noted in surveys of career guidance services in India (e.g., Almeida, Marques, & Arulmani, 2014), where psychometric evaluation is expected, valued and counted upon.

CULTURAL PREPAREDNESS AND ASSESSMENT FOR CAREER GUIDANCE

Culture refers to human phenomena that are not linked to genetic or biological inheritance, but to that repository of consistent and assimilated systems of learned behaviour patterns which characterise the members of a specific social group, by which that group achieves the distinction of being different from other groups (e.g., Durkheim, 1893/1984; Hoebel, 1966). The cultural preparedness approach proposes that the manner in which individuals and groups are prepared by their cultures explains their engagement with work and career (Arulmani, 2014a). The model suggests that while group-specific influences of enculturation establish a cultural preparation status *equilibrium,* external acculturative forces can *alter* this equilibrium. "Acculturative forces could be consonant or dissonant with the individual/group's cultural preparation status. Consonance would mean that the acculturation supports, enhances, or further stabilizes the existing career preparation status equilibrium. Dissonance would mean that the forces of acculturation disturb the existing career preparation status equilibrium" (Arulmani, 2014a, p. 95).

The illustration in Box 1 shows how the assessor imposed an assessment framework for which the children in the study were *not* culturally prepared. The example also reveals various other contextually grounded observation points: the kinds of domestic chores the children were *naturally* involved in, their games, the manner in which they engaged with each other, all would have yielded rich *qualitative* information had the assessor been sensitive to their cultural preparedness. Much of this information could not have been recorded by the standardised, quantitative approach that was taken. At the same time, the brief given to the assessor was to identify and articulate the potential profiles of *each* of these children, individually. Using a qualitative approach to achieve this project objective would have been difficult given the limitations of time and resource. It must also be acknowledged that the assessor was culturally prepared for a different approach to assessment, where culture is the academic and training environment in which he had been immersed. Viewed from the cultural preparedness perspective, neither the qualitative nor the quantitative methods were individually sufficient to achieve the assessment target. The cultural preparedness perspective would ask that *both* cultural backgrounds are valued and an attempt is made to meet the project's requirements as holistically as possible, always ensuring the resulting change is consonant with the group's existing career preparation status equilibrium.

THE STRENGTHS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE (SAQ):
A BLENDED APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

Key Features of the Method

Based on the Cultural Preparedness model, the Strengths and Accomplishments Questionnaire (SAQ) is an approach to aptitude assessment that attempts to blend qualitative and quantitative methods. The aim is to ensure that the testing method is contextually grounded and at the same time able to offer the assessor a framework within which objective measurements can be made. Figure 1 provides an example of the Linguistic section of an SAQ developed for young adults in Vietnam (Arulmani, 2014b). The structure of the instrument is based on the logic of Likert type scaling. Accordingly, the instrument comprises two parts: items (referred to as "activities") and response categories (referred to as "levels of accomplishment"). The items are anchored to an

ordered continuum of response categories, with increasing numeric values assigned to each category. The framework for assessment is based on the Multiple Potentials Framework (MPF), an adaptation of Gardner's

Linguistic Accomplishments			Levels of Accomplishment				
			I am involved in this activity at the personal level	I have participated in events / competitions in school	I have won prizes at school OR My work was selected for school presentations (e.g., school magazine) OR I was recognised in school for this activity	I have won prizes outside school (e.g., Youth Union or other public competitions) OR My work was selected for public presentations (e.g., Youth Union, Newspaper) OR I was recognised in public for this activity	My accomplishment has been recognised at a high level (District, Province, National) OR I got a job because of my expertise in this activity.
Question	Activities	Explanation	1	2	3	4	5
1	Transform thoughts and ideas into words	Write your ideas, thoughts and experiences into words so that people would like to read what your write. This maybe in the form of essays, articles, stories, poetry, reports	✓	✓			
2	Talk to groups of people	Talk attractively so that people like to listen to you. Use language correctly. Be clear in your speech.	✓	✓	✓		
3	Debates and Discussions	Discussing questions, making arguments based on reliable information to prove a point. .	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Teach and train others	Coach others through tuitions, lectures, instructions and demonstrations. Help others develop skills to apply knowledge.	✓				
5	Using languages	Learning new languages. Translating. Checking the meanings of words. Checking if grammar and spelling are correct.					
6	Participate in drama and acting	Act out a story using words, actions or songs.					

(1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences that uses five factors: Linguistic, Analytical-Logical, Spatial, Personal, and Physical-Mechanical as categories (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). The method rests on the assumption that a person's *accomplishments* in real life reflect his/her talents and potentials. Accomplishment is defined as any activity in which the person has been consistently involved and which has been noticed by others. Items therefore comprise a list of *activities* through which a person could have registered accomplishments. Response categories reflect opportunities that actually exist in the person's life situation through which he/she can register various levels of accomplishment. Clients are required to select activities they have experienced and indicate the levels at which accomplishments have been registered for those activities. In the example given in Figure 1, out of the six activities given, the client is required to choose any four based on the frequency of the occurrence of that activity in his/her life. Levels of accomplishment carry increasing numeric values. The sum of the respondent's selections is taken to indicate his/her accomplishment level for a given factor. In this example the assesse has scored 20 out of a maximum of 60 on the Linguistic factor. Scores are similarly plotted for the other factors. The aim of assessment is not to identify how *high* a person's score is. Instead the objective is to identify the *pattern* of scores across the five factors. Therefore, the SAQ lays greater emphasis on the *shape* rather than the *height* of the individual's potential profile. Interpretation of scores is not based upon norms. Instead the SAQ uses the person as his/her own norm, since the objective is not norm-based comparison but rather a person-centred profiling. In order to arrive at such a scale, the manner in which items are generated is crucial.

Item Generation: A Blended Approach

The SAQ blends the qualitative with the quantitative and attempts to ensure that the instrument is culturally and contextually grounded. The activity list as well as the response categories are generated through qualitative and quantitative methods such as systematic observations, focus group discussions, checklists and open ended questions. Participants for item generation include representative samples of the target group, community elders, teachers, parents, related government officials, NGO and other welfare workers. Desk review of text books, reports and other relevant materials is also conducted. The information collected is then composed into items and iteratively presented to a relevant and informed local group that is qualified to comment on selection of items for the final scale. Universality of relevance of the activity and response category to the target group is an important criterion for item selection. It is critical that the items and response categories finally selected lie within the potential test-taker's sphere of experience. When constructing such a device, it is also important to clearly indicate its limitations. A number of the response categories in the Vietnamese SAQ in Figure 1 for example, would not be relevant to other contexts. Hence the use of this SAQ is limited to Vietnam.

In summary the SAQ is qualitative in the manner in which it allows the assessor to construct an assessment protocol that is in tune with the opportunities offered to the test-taker by his/her socioeconomic environment, schooling, and cultural background. It does not expect the individual to respond to items that may or may not be relevant to his or her situation but instead endeavours to tie in with the person's lived experience. It encourages the counsellor to dialogue with the client and guide him/her toward identifying and rating relevant aspects of his/her experiences. At the same time, resting as it does upon the psychometric logic of a rating scale, the method draws upon quantitative methodology.

CONCLUSION

An assessment by itself is a one-way communication if the exercise stops at "assessing" and "telling" the client. Findings need to be interpreted and explained to the client in a way that he/she understands and finds useful. A vital task before the career counsellor therefore is to substantially help the career aspirant extract meaning from the process and results of an assessment. What is the *question* that guides the actions of the counsellor who assesses a client? Does the answer to this question emerge from a philosophic stance pertaining to assessment or does it emerge from the motivation to arrive at answers that are relevant and meaningful for the client? If it were the latter, then it is critical that we acknowledge that different questions would be best answered by different methods. Some questions would respond best to a qualitative approach, while others may require measurement and quantification. It is with this final objective in view that this chapter carries the title that it does, for it is in the question indeed, that the answer could lie.

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