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ON THE SYSTEM OF CONTINUING EDUCATION IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN POLAND

The article is an invitation to a discussion on creating a continuing education system in the field of psychological assessment in Poland. This kind of learning is recommended in numerous documents relating to assessment practice, including the rules of obtaining *EuroPsy* – the European Certificate in Psychology. There is no coherent and commonly accessible system of learning and verifying assessment competencies in Poland. A degree in psychology alone is enough to be allowed to use all the assessment tools available. Research on the education of psychologists suggests that continuing education combined with clinical practice is the best way of developing assessment competencies. In this context, the article addresses a number of problems – and questions derived from them – that focus on the task of organizing such a system in Poland.

Keywords: psychological assessment, clinical assessment, assessment competencies, continuing education.

Let us begin our considerations concerning the possibility of implementing a systemic solution in the area of continuing education for psychologists on the Polish market, a solution that would be aimed at improving the market of assessment services by summing up what has already been done as regards the professionalization of psychological services.

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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY AS A PROFESSION IN THE EUROPEAN FORUM

As pointed out by Lunt (1999), the professionalization of psychology in Europe started after World War II, when the need for psychological assistance arose. It progressed by extending the time of education, the formation of new specializations, and the formulation of ethical codes and legal solutions. At present, a psychologist is defined as “an academically educated professional who helps clients to understand and solve problems by applying the theories and methods of psychology” (Roe, 2002, p. 193). At the same time, in accordance with evidence-based practice (EBP; APA, 2006), it is also emphasized that, apart from the requirement of scientific basis for the psychologist’s actions, there is the requirement of expertise in the area of practical skills and the requirement of showing an attitude characterized by sensitivity to the context (especially the cultural one) in which psychological services are provided (cf. APA, 2006; Bartram & Roe, 2005). A psychologist is also expected to have psychological competence, that is, “a learned ability to adequately perform a task, duty or role” (Roe, 2002, p. 195). A psychologist-diagnostician should comply with guidelines concerning the performance of assessment services, taking into account the requirements of evidence-based assessment (EBA) as described in the Guidelines for the Assessment Process (GAP; Fernandez-Ballesteros et al., 2001; cf. Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2009; Stemplewska-Żakowicz & Paluchowski, 2008) that relate to the entire assessment process.

THE FORMULATION OF EUROPEAN TRAINING STANDARDS IN PSYCHOLOGY

In 1990, the first European standards for professional training in psychology (*Optimal Standards for the Professional Training in Psychology*; cf. Freeman & Steyaert, 2011) were developed by EFPPA (*European Federation of Professional Psychologists’ Associations*¹). In the past decades, discussions were in progress about the shape of the European psychology certificate, *EuroPsy*, focusing on the standards that should be met by a practicing psychologist. In the first version of the European Diploma in Psychology (*EuroPsyA*), three basic stages of psychological education were described: stage one includes gaining theoretic-

¹ In 2001, EFPPA was transformed into EFPA (European Federation of Psychologists’ Associations; Freeman & Steyaert, 2011).

cal knowledge during academic studies; stage two includes the acquisition of applied knowledge; finally, stage three involves the beginning of supervised practice (Lunt, 2005). At present, psychologists are obliged to meet continuing professional development requirements, in accordance with the idea of continuing education. As research has revealed, competencies are developed in the course of further education (cf. e.g., Bradley, Drapeau, & Destefano, 2012; Levenson, 2014; O'Donovan & Dyck, 2005; O'Donovan, Bain, & Dyck, 2005). At the same time, failure to take action aimed at one's own personal and professional development exposes the psychologist to the risk of occupational burnout and practicing below professional standards (cf. e.g., Johnson et al., 2013; Kaslow et al., 2007). It is also emphasized that the psychologist's competencies are specific to particular areas of practice, which are distinguished, among other things, according to: the type of clients, the place of work (e.g., organization, hospital, private practice), or the type of tasks performed (e.g., therapy, development, or assessment; Roe, 2002).

BUILDING A CONTINUING EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN POLAND

In Poland, in some areas of services offered by psychologists, there exist continuing education systems. For example, in the area of psychotherapy, psychologists have an opportunity to develop their knowledge and improve their skills during certified training and also to obtain a certificate confirming the acquired competencies acknowledged by employers. Psychological assessment, by contrast, is an area with no systemic solutions pertaining to psychologists' continuing education. It is possible to become specialized in clinical assessment; however, the system of obtaining this specialization does not oblige diagnosticians to continuously update their knowledge or improve their skills (cf. *Journal of Laws* [Dz.U.] No. 173, item 1419).

Assessment is one of the basic activities undertaken by psychologists (Toepfritz-Winiewska, 2013); it is also listed as one of six categories of the psychologist's basic competencies in the *EuroPsy* diploma (Lunt, 2011). It is impossible to imagine any psychological intervention not preceded by assessment or not accompanied by assessment. For many psychologists, assessment is the main or even the only area of practice (e.g., expert witnesses, transport psychologists). At the same time, a psychologist-diagnostician does not have opportunities to develop their competencies within a coherent system, allowing to identify the qua-

fications of the person being trained in a manner that does not depend on the ministry to which their practice is subject². For example, mental health assessment can be performed both at a psychological outpatient clinic (subject to the Ministry of Health) as well as at a psychological and pedagogical counseling centre, subject to the Ministry of Education. At present, experience gained at one facility is not recognized by another facility, despite the fact that it may pertain to the examination of the same areas of mental health and refer to an analogous group of clients. Additionally, psychological opinions drawn up at a facility subject to the authority and supervision of one ministry are not formally recognized at places subject to the authority and supervision of another ministry. Even within one ministry, requirements pertaining to the qualifications, including experience, that a psychologist should have to be authorized to perform specific assessment tasks, are not coherent. For example, requirements pertaining to the psychologist's seniority that make the facility eligible for a refund for assessment services provided by the psychologist as part of contract with the National Health Fund differ depending on the type of clinical facility where the psychologist provides his or her services: no or minimum work experience is required from a psychologist working at a 24-hour ward at a hospital and at least 2-year clinical experience is required from a psychologist working at a psychological outpatient clinic (cf. *Journal of Laws [Dz.U.]* of 2011 No. 101, item 583). There are no systemic solutions targeted at building conditions leading to systematic growth and allowing the level of competencies to keep up with the growing practical experience. Continuous development of practicing diagnostician's competencies seems particularly important in the light of research showing that the diagnostician's practical experience does not always have a positive influence on the accuracy of diagnoses (cf. e.g., Eells et al., 2005).

A Polish psychologist-diagnostician who wants to develop his or her competencies can use various forms of education available after the completion of master's degree education: doctoral studies, postgraduate studies, training within clinical specialization as well as various trainings and internships (Mróz, 2009). A question can be asked, however, about the quality of each of these forms of education in the context of the purpose, which is to increase diagnosticians' competence. Doctoral studies in Poland are not related to practice (including assessment practice). As far as postgraduate studies are concerned, their offer in the area of psychological assessment is modest and selective. Clinical specializa-

² It is worth emphasizing here that there are no official requirements concerning the development of a psychologist-diagnostician's competencies: the completion of psychological studies alone is enough for a graduate to be authorized to use all the diagnostic tools available.

tion is relatively difficult for psychologists to obtain. A psychologist who undertakes this form of education directly after the required internship period after the completion of master's studies encounters the same subject matter as during graduate studies (cf. Basińska, 2009), which may result in a justified sense of participation in classes which – instead of leading to the development of competencies – is only the fulfillment of formal requirements. In contrast, a psychologist-diagnostician who works in a context other than the clinical one cannot obtain a professional specialization at all (cf. Kasprzak, 2009).

As far as training and internships available on the market are concerned, a psychologist who wants to take part in them does not have information about their quality. Both psychologists' professional associations and training institutions offer not only professional training but also courses where participants learn to use methods that are not based on scientific psychology (cf. Brzeziński, 2011; Witkowski & Fortuna, 2008). Moreover, the selection of forms of education and the motivation to undertake them are, to a large extent, a matter of the psychologist's personal decision under current conditions. At the same time, the psychologist's assessment competencies acquired through various forms of education are not taken into account in a coherent professional promotion system. Thus, the psychologist's qualifications are rather recognized by an employer on the basis of the number of completed training sessions and not on the basis of their quality, which the employer often cannot assess as he or she does not have sufficient knowledge to do so. This situation creates conditions in which unreliable training practice has its recipients both among psychologists and among employers sending them to training.

In this article, we propose to discuss the issue of building a continuing education system in Poland in the area of psychological assessment, which would allow psychologists to improve their skills in a conscious and consistent manner as well as provide them with support in justifying their own choices pertaining to specific training and to the standards of their assessment practice.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE FORM AND PRINCIPLES OF OPERATION OF THE SYSTEM OF CONTINUING EDUCATION IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN POLAND?

At present, numerous courses in psychological assessment are offered in Poland (cf. Baran & Biegańska, 2013), not all of which meet the criterion of

compliance with contemporary standards of evidence-based psychological practice.

Question 1: *What criteria should training meet to be included in the system and how should its compliance with the established criteria be verified?*

The following specific issues should be addressed in view of the aforementioned question:

- Should compliance with the standards of evidence-based psychological practice be included among the criteria that training has to meet to be included in the continuing education system?

- In the assessment of courses, should emphasis be placed on whether training is aimed at developing the skills of integrating contemporary scientific knowledge with practical expertise?

- How should the criterion of compliance of both the content and the form of training with the principles of the psychologist's professional ethics be included in the assessment of training?

Question 2: *What should be the content of training offered in the continuing education system in the area of psychological assessment?*

Specific questions:

- Is training focused on the use and interpretation of various assessment techniques (single tests) sufficient?

For example, training aimed at teaching how to use and interpret a given assessment tool could include two stages. During the first stage, after a pretest pertaining to knowledge available in the test manual, classes supplementing this knowledge could be held. Next, there would be workshop classes, during which testing skills, including score calculation and interpretation, would be practiced (using case study examples). This stage would end with “homework” – participants preparing cases on their own. In the second stage, the tutor would discuss such cases with the participants. Such training would refer to the basic assessment level as described by Katarzyna Stemplewska-Żakowicz, in which the diagnostician uses selected assessment techniques in a professional manner (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2009, p. 53). The assessment process itself, however, does not include just this basic level but also the intermediate and comprehensive levels, comprising stages such as negotiating the content of an assessment question, searching for knowledge that would allow the diagnostician to put forward assessment hypotheses, the integration of data obtained from various sources (interview, standardized tools, observation), and formulating a conceptualization and recommendations for the client (Fernandez-Ballesteros et al., 2001; Stem-

plewska-Żakowicz, 2009; Groth-Marnat, 2009). In view of the above, further specific questions can be asked:

– Is there a need for training focused on more complex levels of the assessment process in specific contexts of psychological practice?

For example, training could include the skill of formulating case conceptualizations. For the aforementioned tasks, the knowledge of contemporary psychology (including social psychology, emotion and motivation psychology, and psychopathology) and the skill of using this knowledge to understand the psychological mechanisms contributing to the specific way in which a person (a group of people) functions are essential. It is also worth asking how to ensure that training aimed at developing competencies related to the intermediate or comprehensive levels of assessment is not limited to the superficial presentation of the contents of selected test manuals.

– Should the continuing education system for psychologists-diagnosticians include training aimed at developing the basic competencies of a psychologist that are nonspecific as regards the psychological assessment context?

For example, the competencies that should be developed by a practicing psychologist should include basic and functional competencies, which include assessment competencies (Rodolfa et al., 2005; Fouad et al., 2009; cf. Paluchowski, 2012). The following competencies are listed among the basic ones: professionalism (including: understanding professional values, honesty and responsibility, understanding the principles of professional conduct, reliability and awareness of the need for sustaining and protecting the interest of other people), reflective practice, including, among other things, self-awareness and understanding the importance of taking care of oneself for effective practice, knowledge and scientific methods (critical scientific thinking, understanding the basics of professional practice), the ability to build significant relationships with persons, groups, and communities, the awareness of individual and cultural diversity, and the knowledge of basic issues of related disciplines. Professional psychological assessment requires that the psychologist should have basic competencies in accordance with the model described above. Thus, the question of how to develop basic competencies within a continuing education system for diagnosticians seems worth considering. Should the training offer include courses not related directly to the context of assessment but aimed at developing fundamental competencies? Or perhaps a different assumption should be made – for example, that training within the system should focus on issues specifically related to psychological assessment (and contribute to the development of basic competencies in this area).

Question 3: *How to motivate psychologists-diagnosticians to take part in continuing education in psychological assessment?*

We can ask if Polish psychologists would be interested in participating in courses constituting a coherent continuing education system offering a confirmation of the competencies that are learned and developed within such a system. The question of the need for developing a continuing education system in psychological assessment constituted a part of a survey conducted on-line in 2013. The results of this survey were discussed during the Third National Scientific Conference entitled “Psychological Assessment as an Object of Research and Teaching” (Filiipiak, Tarnowska, & Zalewski, 2013). The majority of respondents declared that they used various forms of education in the area of psychological assessment and that they were interested in taking part in various forms of postgraduate education. A majority of respondents were also in favor of creating a continuing education system for psychologists-diagnosticians in Poland.

It is worth noting here that persons who completed the questionnaire constituted approximately 30% of the people invited to respond to it. A similar percentage of responses was obtained in other surveys (cf. e.g., Baran & Biegańska, 2013; Rodolfa et al., 2013). In this context, a question should be asked about the representativeness of the data obtained for the population of psychologists in Poland. If we assume that the survey was completed only by the most involved and active individuals, can conclusions about the interest in a continuing education system for psychologists-diagnosticians be drawn on this basis? Our answer to this question is negative – the data obtained cannot be regarded as representative and they do not confirm the general need for such a system of education. What, then, is the significance of the results obtained and what role in the popularization of such a system can be played by the minority, who are the most willing to express their opinion? As dynamic social psychology reveals (cf. Nowak, Borkowski, & Winkowska-Nowak, 2009), new trends in communities spread in such a way that they are initially set by few people, who are gradually joined by the rest of the group. Therefore, if a vast majority of the people who decided to take part in the survey think that a continuing education system in the area of psychological assessment is needed and if they also declare their willingness to take part in various forms of education, it can be assumed that this group could fulfill the role of precursors and model the participation in training offered within such a system.

In this context, it seems reasonable to ask how those who are not precursors should be motivated to take part in continuing training in psychological assessment. One of the questions in the survey discussed above concerned the respon-

dents' willingness to obtain certificates confirming their participation in training. A vast majority of respondents were in favor of such a solution, and this tendency was particularly visible among the psychologists who declared that assessment was their basic form of practical activity. We can assume that the possibility of obtaining a confirmation for the development of one's own competencies could constitute a significant factor motivating participation in postgraduate education. In this context, the following specific question can be formulated:

– What should be the basis for granting certificates confirming participation in continuing education in the area of psychological assessment?

The discussion on the professionalization of psychology that is in progress in Europe has led to a juxtaposition of two approaches to education and to the recognition of psychological competencies – the so-called input and output models (Lunt, 2011). Input models pertain to the contents that should be provided to future psychologists in the education process, while output models pertain to competencies – namely, to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a psychologist should have as a result of participation in the education process (Roe, 2002). The conclusion that can be drawn from the juxtaposition of these two approaches pertains to their integration in the education process (Roe, 2002). From the point of view of input models, it is important to define the contents of education and curriculum minima entitling the training participant to obtain a certificate.

From the point of view of output models, it is important to define the level of competence that a training participant should display to obtain a certificate. The task of specifying the required level of competence seems to be a serious challenge. A natural consequence of adopting such a solution for obtaining certificates is another important task: the creation of a system of recognizing various levels of assessment competence and doing so in various contexts of practice. The development of such a system would certainly require huge efforts: both content-related, organizational, and financial. It seems, however, that such a solution could bring an additional advantage, namely an opportunity for practicing psychologists to constantly monitor the level of their assessment competence and plan their further professional development in an informed manner.

Professional development is an important process not only from the point of view of practicing psychologists, but also from the point of view of their principals (clients and employers). In this context, another specific question can be asked:

– What importance should a certificate obtained within a continuing education system in the area of psychological assessment have on the Polish job market?

Assessment services, as we have already mentioned, are provided at facilities that are subject to the authority and supervision of various ministries. It seems that a key issue for building motivation to participate in continuing education would be the acknowledgement by individual ministries of the assessment competencies gained within the education system and confirmed by relevant certificates. In view of the lack of formal systemic solutions connected with the Act on the Psychological Profession, the definition of a group of psychologists certified to provide specific assessment services based on certificates issued by the system seems to be a factor promoting the organization of the assessment services market.

If a certificate that a psychologist-diagnostician could obtain within the system of continuing education in psychological assessment was recognized by institutions that are subject to the authority and supervision of various ministries, psychologists would be able to change their place of work freely and be certain that their competencies connected with a given assessment service would be recognized and that employers would have a way of choosing employees competent to perform specific tasks.

– What other advantages could participation in a continuing education system involve in the area of psychological assessment?

For example, an important asset of training institutions is access to databases with scientific articles, which practicing psychologists often do not have. There can be some doubts as to whether access to international databases of scientific articles would be an attractive element of the system for practicing psychologists, but it seems that the possibility of obtaining regular notifications pertaining to the latest research important for assessment practice would be a valuable support for such people.

Question 4: *What could be the financing sources for a continuing education system for psychologists-diagnosticians?*

Specific questions:

– Could funds necessary to launch the system be obtained from external sources – from Polish research and implementation grants as well as EU projects targeted at the development of human capital?

– Could further operation of the system be based on membership fees from persons using its resources as well as on research grants aimed at verifying the effectiveness of education offered within the system?³

³ If the system offered information pertaining to individual courses concerning the degree to which a given course contributes to the development of participants' specific competencies, it would be another tool supporting practicing psychologists in managing their own professional development in a conscious manner.

CONCLUSION

Is it necessary to talk about the standards of assessment services offered in Poland? It definitely is in our opinion, which can be confirmed by more and more numerous applications for participation in conferences devoted to psychological assessment as well as by the lively discussions held during these scientific events. Discussions of assessment standards are naturally accompanied by reflection on education – including the continuing education of psychologists who offer assessment services. Is a continuing education system in psychological assessment needed in Poland? If so – how should it be constructed and implemented? The general and specific questions formulated in this article are an invitation to a discussion on the problem of continuing education in psychological assessment.

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