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## ON THE SYSTEM OF CONTINUING EDUCATION IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN POLAND: A DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The paper summarizes the discussion on continuing education in psychological assessment to which the lead article by Filipiak et al., published in *Roczniki Psychologiczne* (18(2015), No 2, 171-183 pp.), was an invitation. The issues discussed concern the definition of assessment as a service vs. competency, the placement of formal regulations on education at the Polish vs. European level, the contents of education, and the organization of education in the broader context of the psychologist's professional role, as well as the problem of education in assessment, not only for psychologists. Presenting their stance on the issues discussed, the authors formulate recommendations concerning: (a) systemic solutions for continuing education in psychological assessment, (b) the need to pursue research verifying the usefulness of particular forms of teaching assessment competencies, and (c) the need for promoting the culture of co-operation between practicing and academic psychologists.

**Keywords:** continuing education, psychological assessment, development of psychological competencies.

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To begin with, we would like to thank all the authors for taking part in the debate on continuing education in psychological assessment in Poland. One of the most important effects of this exchange of views is the opportunity to look at the issues discussed from a variety of perspectives. Each author introduced important topics into the debate, referring to: the principles of continuing education that have been developed in Europe (Ype H. Poortinga), proposals concerning the possible ways of organizing an assessment skills certification system (Małgorzata Toeplitz-Winiewska, Maciej Karwowski, and Joanna Szen-Ziemiańska), the significance of co-operation between practicing psychologists and scientists as well as the transfer of modern scientific knowledge to assessment practice (Piotr K. Oleś, Adam Tarnowski) or the forms of education in psychological assessment that take into account its importance in various contexts of practice (Peter Halama, Małgorzata Toeplitz-Winiewska).

In the following sections of this summary, we will overview the main topics that, in our opinion, have emerged in the polemic texts.

### **1. THE DEFINITION PROBLEM: A COMPETENCY OR A SERVICE**

Two of the polemicists – Peter Halama (2015) and Ype H. Poortinga (2015) – draw attention to the problem of defining assessment. The *EuroPsy* model (Lunt, 2011) describes it as a basic competency, not as a service offered by practicing psychologists. Halama (2015) stresses that it is impossible to dissociate assessment from the context in which it is performed and that assessment is usually inextricably connected with intervention. Of course, education in assessment does not have to and often should not be the only component of continuing education in psychological practice. Nevertheless, from our point of view, isolating this type of services is important and highlights the necessity of education in assessment as a form of specialized professional activity in every context of practice. For instance, in the context of psychotherapy in Poland nowadays, training courses are focused mainly on treatment interventions and the teaching of assessment is often reduced to problem conceptualizations grounded in a particular therapeutic approach. The value of “isolating” assessment in thinking about therapeutic interventions lies in the fact that this highlights the need to possess specific skills in its performance.

## 2. THE ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION

### Postgraduate studies

We fully agree with the thesis advanced by Peter Halama (2015) and by Małgorzata Toeplitz-Winiewska (2015) that the continuing education of diagnosticians at the general level is worthless when devoid of reference to specific contexts of practice. Specialist training courses should be held as part of postgraduate studies, whereas the right time for teaching basic procedures and standards of assessment is during unified five-year graduate studies in psychology (Toeplitz-Winiewska, 2015). It is then that – in a block of obligatory courses – basic assessment knowledge and skills should be taught<sup>1</sup>. According to the author, it is important that training in assessment covers not only psychological and psychometric knowledge but also the skills of putting forward hypotheses, selecting tools, and integrating data and that it shapes attitudes concerning the ethical principles of assessment. Maciej Karwowski and Joanna Szen-Ziemiańska (2015) recommend introducing specialist courses for those who have completed postgraduate studies: courses concerning specific tools as well as longer, one-semester training programs devoted to knowledge and assessment competencies (skills) in a particular area. Adam Tarnowski (2015) emphasizes the need to use some qualification procedure when admitting candidates for postgraduate studies.

### Certificates

Małgorzata Toeplitz-Winiewska (2015) proposes that certification should be carried out in psychological associations and based on experts' decisions. This procedure seems to us to be insufficient. We rather see experts as potential authors of tools for measuring the competence of psychologists-diagnostics and at the same time as people verifying the usefulness of these tools. These tools could also be used by psychologists themselves to monitor the level of their own competence anonymously in order to apply for a certificate the moment their qualifications are appropriate. Optimally, such tools should be developed by teams of experts proposed by Piotr K. Oleś (2015), composed of practitioners and scientists.

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be added that what can be regarded as basic knowledge changes year by year, and therefore it is not clear whether or not postgraduate training for assessment practitioners who graduated 20 years ago should include some of the contents understood and taught as basic today.

### **Good practices**

What we consider particularly valuable is proposals concerning the establishment of supervisory groups (Toeplitz-Winiewska, 2015) and discussing the standards of assessment practice in professional circles, which includes discussing the issue of selecting assessment tools adequate to the purpose and to the context (cf. Poortinga, 2015, Paluchowski & Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2013). Training courses should develop patterns of good practices, pertaining not only to the use of tests but also to the selection of tests for verifying a particular assessment hypothesis (cf. Tarnowski, 2015; Łuczak, in press), and to coping in situations when adequate standard assessment tools are not available; they should offer a comprehensive array of courses at all levels of assessment (devoted to planning the entire assessment strategy, to tool selection and usage, as well as to the integration and interpretation of results, communicating the diagnosis, and planning the evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions recommended in the course of assessment).

### **Assessment tools**

Responding to Halama's text (2015), we wish to stress that the general knowledge acquired in the course of graduate studies and necessary for correct assessment is not limited to "the knowledge of psychological tests." For example, a clinical psychologist diagnosing a person who has reported due to psychological problems should possess extensive knowledge in at least a few areas: psychopathology, developmental, social, and cognitive psychology, as well as the psychology of emotion and motivation. Knowledge about constructing and using standard assessment tools is only a fraction of the psychologist's indispensable know-how, just like testing is only a fragment of assessment (cf. Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2001). This means that continuing education should include opportunities for psychologists of various specialties to improve their familiarity with general modern psychological scientific knowledge. A necessary complement to such training would be courses developing skills that are useful in work in specific areas of psychologists' activity and thereby promoting the use of contemporary knowledge in practice – which is recommended by Adam Tarnowski (2015). It is not our intention, however, to argue for withdrawing the offer of courses that teach how to use specific assessment tools (mainly tests), since training in practical skills of using a test manual (if available) and/or in the test-based assessment procedure and test results interpretation is better (and safer for psychologists' clients) than relying on anyone to read through and understand

such a manual on their own. Naturally, this kind of course does not give competence in assessment – what is necessary to achieve such competence is a training in assessment concerning a given area (problem) and in selecting tools appropriate for the diagnostic hypotheses that they are supposed to test (cf. Tarnowski, 2015). What we find questionable, though, is the statement that in psychotherapy the only instruments of assessment are observation and interview (Halama, 2015). In our opinion, it is only true when psychotherapy is practiced by individuals who have not completed studies in psychology, because they cannot use the standard instruments developed for and available to psychologists. In their case, assessment has to be done using interview and observation (including the patient's self-observation) as the only methods.

### **Training staff and finances**

We fully support the remarks of Piotr K. Oleś (2015), who draws attention to the problem connected with the competence level of those whose task it would be to teach postgraduate classes, pointing out that they should be academics who are at the same time practitioners, not academics without practical experience or practitioners without up-to-date theoretical knowledge. A possible solution is to combine postgraduate classes taught by academics with those taught by practitioners and co-operation between them, as well as co-operation of teachers-academics with students-practitioners – that would make it possible to introduce theoretical knowledge into the world of the students' practical experience. It is worth stressing here that postgraduate education, including the supervised practice recommended by Halama (2015), seems to be an effective way of acquiring and developing practical skills indispensable in the assessment process. As Oleś (2015) rightly notes, the policy of financing universities based on points earned for scientific publications leads to universities employing mainly “scientists prolific in terms of publications rather than diagnosticians with clinical experience (these two forms of work are very difficult to combine)” (p. 207). Considering that in Poland during the second stage of education – which, in the *EuroPsy* model, should be devoted to training in the practical application of academic knowledge to actual challenges faced by the psychologist – the teaching responsibility lies mainly with nonpracticing scientists, and considering that an organized system of one-year postgraduate traineeships, required in education according to *EuroPsy*, does not exist in our country, it seems that the requirement of 80 hours of education per year (only 40 of them documented) that *EuroPsy*

recommends to psychologists (cf. Poortinga, 2015) is insufficient, particularly in the case of people who have graduated only recently.

### **The effectiveness of training**

One must agree with Adam Tarnowski (2015), that what makes training in assessment meaningful is the aims of education (the competencies acquired), not the list of activities done in the course of training. There is no doubt that the ways of assessing the level of competence achieved must be clearly specified. In Donald Kirkpatrick's model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007), commonly used in assessing the effectiveness of training, evaluation concerns both the difference in competence before and after training (pretests and posttests) and the level of practical usage of the competencies acquired. The methods of training effectiveness evaluation understood in this way include not only something along the lines of a graduation exam but also the evaluation of practical work performed by the trainee (a case analysis). This would make it possible to accurately evaluate the level of knowledge and competence acquired as well as to issue certificates confirming eligibility for performing assessment procedures specified therein, to be obtained only by trainees above the required competence threshold.

### **3. HOW TO MOTIVATE FOR EDUCATION**

Psychologists can be motivated for education by means of pull and push strategies. In the pull strategy, influence is exerted on the recipient of educational activities (e.g., by the employer). As a result, it is the employer that forces the employee into education. The push strategy consists in evoking the need or willingness in a person to pursue voluntary education. It involves a higher proportion of internal motivation and orientation towards achieving the standards of mastery. It is possible to generate motivation for education by resorting to the pull strategy – for example by the requirement of earning points for education, by educating the recipients of diagnosticians' work (e.g., those whose activities are sanctioned by psychologists' certificates) – by introducing qualification courses (e.g., giving a certificate entitling a psychologist to buy or use a test), or by resorting to the push strategy through building a culture of learning (giving prestige to learning; the image of an expert). Maciej Karwowski and Joanna Szen-Ziemiańska (2015) propose obliging assessment practitioners to earn points for education, the way this is done in the case of physicians. According to the

Medical Profession Act, different numbers of such points for education can be awarded for various forms of professional development (e.g., for participation in a training, in a scientific conference, or in a convention of a scientific association, for publishing in domestic or foreign journals, or even for individual subscription to journals) in accordance with the regulations adopted, provided that they are run by an organization authorized to offer such education. The regulations also specify how many points confirmed by certificates should be earned over a particular period of time. It should be added that no penalty is provided for failure to meet the professional development requirement.

Ype H. Poortinga (2015) points out that what is new in the model of psychological education promoted by EFPA is the fact that, after graduation, further education is not a matter of the psychologist's willingness but something recommended and required by the community of psychologists. In our opinion, the next step should be made and the people whom the federation requires to pursue further education should receive proper support, at the very least in the form of a description of what kind of further education to pursue. A person who takes up continuing education should have access to tips concerning knowledge, tools, and effective further education options – something more than a general number of hours of any kind of education per year. In essence, what we propose is a stronger standardization of the education process.

#### 4. EDUCATION FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

Training courses and postgraduate studies devoted to psychological assessment not only for psychologists is an important problem raised by Karwowski and Szen-Ziemiańska (2015). It is true that we should be anxious to improve the quality of practice of all the people dealing with assessment in Poland, not only psychologists. The way to achieve that is to focus on assessment competencies, their evaluation and development, rather than merely on formal certificates. This would require defining the types of competencies and their level that is necessary to begin further education. When classifying tests according to their potential users, the Psychological Tests Committee of the Polish Psychological Association assumed that they are defined mainly by the type of studies they have completed. It seems that a system based mainly on qualifications would be better for describing test users, but this issue should probably be discussed elsewhere. Karwowski and Szen-Ziemiańska (2015) also ask whether people with doctoral degrees in psychology could take part in such training courses. After all, con-

ducting scientific research (even using psychological tests: self-designed, adapted, or commercial) does not give sufficient knowledge and skills to do psychological assessment professionally.

The matter of exclusiveness of training courses is also associated with the advantage of physicians over psychologists, pointed out above. The fact that psychology is perceived as an “inferior sister” of medicine is evident, for example, in public health service facilities, where psychologists earn significantly less than physicians and where the services they provide are not regarded as vital, contrary to what is known, for instance, about the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic interventions (cf. e.g., Lambert & Barley, 2002). Why is a person not allowed – after relatively short training – to use assessment tools reserved for psychologists, ask Karwowski and Szen-Ziemiańska (2015)? Let us imagine a similar question being asked in the context of medical assessment. Why could a person who is not a physician not learn, for example, to use a stethoscope and interpret the results of basic examinations so as to do medical assessment in selected contexts of practice? The answer to such a question would probably be obvious to most people: because a physician must possess knowledge much broader than that which is necessary to perform basic diagnostic activities, and that knowledge is acquired during medical studies. In the case psychologists and psychological assessment – the assessment performed requires knowledge that goes far beyond the knowledge of particular assessment methods; it requires knowledge that a person has a chance to acquire during psychological studies. Admittedly, psychology graduates in Poland have mainly academic knowledge, but this kind of knowledge should not be underestimated: further development of skills in any area of psychological practice cannot take place without it. It is frequently the case, anyway, that not until later stages of education, when theoretical knowledge has had a chance to be embedded in experience, do trainees in each psychological specialty begin to appreciate the information previously gained. Therefore, concurring with the recommendations made by Oleś (2015) and Tarnowski (2015), once again we wish to stress the importance of continuing education oriented towards using modern psychological scientific knowledge in practice.

## 5. NATIONAL OR EUROPEAN SOLUTIONS

The authors of comments draw attention to the progressing standardization of assessment services (Oleś, 2015) and of education in this area (Poortinga,



2015). Poortinga (2015) asks whether systemic solutions for education should be developed at the national level or, in the context of the current tendency to seek consensus, at the European level. We believe that it is valuable<sup>2</sup> to develop solutions for continued education at the international level. In this context, it is important to organize a framework for substantive discussion concerning continuing education in psychology, including assessment, within EPFA. Looking at the *EuroPsy* model, one can conclude that from the perspective of the description of the competencies exhibited by psychology graduates it is an *output* model whereas in its reference to continuing education it is essentially an *input* model, requiring only that a specific number of training hours are served within a particular time. We propose that it should be adjusted towards an output model – namely, towards a description of the effects of successive stages along the individually built path of continuing education. We also acknowledge the need for research verifying the usefulness of particular forms of education in assessment competencies.

The vision of the development of continuing education that we formulate is not mechanistically oriented. We fully agree with Piotr K. Oleś (2015) that the standardization of assessment practice needs to be accompanied by emphasis on education for co-operation, including the skills of building a human relationship. What we have in mind is not a standardized system of assessment psychologists' work quality control but a system offering opportunities for psychologists to pursue more conscious and reflective development of their professional competencies. The means to that end is, in our opinion, building a standardized database of training options, containing a free-of-charge opportunities for psychologists to verify the skills trained during particular courses (pretests) as well as databases of tools for psychologists who have been working in the market of services for some time to monitor the level of their own competencies. We believe that developing such educational tools for psychologists is impossible without active co-operation between scientists and practitioners.

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<sup>2</sup> This may be a more effective solution from the point of view of the objective, which is to create a formal government framework for the implementation of solutions developed in the professional community that will at the same time ensure the possibility of professional mobility for psychologists working in the EU.

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