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## SOCIETY FOR PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

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# Standards for Education and Training in Psychological Assessment: Position of the Society for Personality Assessment

An Official Statement of the Board of Trustees  
of the Society for Personality Assessment

The Society for Personality Assessment is a national and international professional organization devoted to research and practice in the field of psychological assessment. As such, it represents practitioners of assessment regardless of discipline or degree.

It is the position of the Society that psychological assessment is a specialty that requires intensive and ongoing education and training to be practiced competently and ethically and in order to protect the public. At a minimum, practitioners should adhere to the appropriate standards for educational and psychological testing (American Educational Research Association, et al., 1999; Turner, et al., 2001). With the pressure of managed care for diversified services, and the burgeoning of shorter degree programs for mental health practitioners, the likelihood that more inadequately trained individuals will begin to practice assessment has increased. Indeed, there have been recent efforts in several states to downgrade the level of professional expertise required to practice assessment by including assessment as a generic service under most or all mental health licenses. While many such programs include education and training in assessment, this is not required for licensure in disciplines other than psychology in most states.

This document will articulate the rationale that psychological assessment, which heretofore has been a specialty within psychology, is not a generic mental health service and set forth standards for education and training in this area.

### I. Need for Standards for Education and Training in Psychological Assessment

Psychological assessment is a complex specialty within psychological practice that requires specific training. Psychotherapy training alone does not prepare the practitioner to provide psychological assessment. Practitioners of competent assessment must be conversant with methods of test construction and the theory of measurement. They must understand the strengths and limitations of particular psychological tests and instruments as well as the proper ways of administering them, interpreting them, and integrating them into a coherent and clinically relevant report.

It is important to appreciate the difference between two aspects of clinical evaluation that are commonly confused: appraisal and psychological assessment. By *appraisal* we refer to either informal assessments of patient problems or the use of rating scales that produce single scores with very specific interpretations. *Psychological assessment*, on the other hand, is a complex task that involves the integration of information from multiple sources, including psychological tests, to answer complex clinical questions. This distinction is important to clarify what has been confusion about precisely what constitutes “appraisal” and what constitutes “assessment.” Although all clinicians appraise their clients informally and many use rating scales and other unidimensional instruments, *psychological assessment* involves the use of psychological tests and techniques to derive a complex, detailed, in-depth understanding of an individual from multiple data sources to facilitate diagnosis, treatment, and/or outcome. Integrating the complex information from these instruments and tech-

niques requires specialized expertise and training in order to analyze and formulate the findings competently.

Inappropriate or untrained use of psychological assessment instruments exposes patients to harm. Unreliable or invalid conclusions drawn from psychological assessment can be more dangerous than ineffective psychotherapy for four reasons:

1. Psychological assessment typically involves a relatively brief encounter with the client. As a consequence, the possibility for serious misinterpretations is magnified. Therapists typically have many hours to get to know an individual, thus improving on the possibility of eventually making an accurate diagnosis. In addition, for the same reason, there is a greater likelihood that a client can recognize inadequate treatment and make a change. By contrast, assessments typically occur over the course of one to three sessions, so the opportunity to correct an inaccurate diagnosis or inference on the basis of subsequent information is far less. Furthermore, by the time a client notices that the assessor has erred, the assessment is likely to be concluded.
2. Psychological test reports usually become a permanent part of an individual's medical record and are likely to follow him or her throughout his or her life, carrying with them the imprimatur of scientific fact. While ineffective or poorly conducted psychotherapy can be harmful, it is less likely to leave the kind of record that will influence subsequent medical decisions about the client. The record of treatment will be more easily viewed as the opinion of a single individual and therefore held with less certainty. In addition, psychotherapy notes are more protected under privacy regulations than are the results of psychological assessment.
3. Psychological assessments lead to important decisions about clients' lives. While such assessments are typically used to inform treatment decisions, they can be used in other ways as well. In addition to informing decisions about what kind of psychological, neurological, or psychiatric treatment—including the need for hospitalization—to pursue, psychological assessment is used in other contexts that can significantly influence high-stakes outcomes in the life of an individual or family. Such decisions include: assessing dangerousness, awarding or denying disability benefits or access to special education services, and offering or denying employment or security clearance. Psychological assessment also plays an important role in informing courts and other bodies in various matters concerning decisions as to whether or not an individual is to be awarded or denied custody of his or her children, compensated for alleged emotional trauma as part of civil damages, incarcerated, or put to death. Inadequately trained psychological assessors can have a

profound impact on the lives of individuals well beyond the sphere of mental health treatment.

4. Society as a whole is harmed both by inappropriate decisions made about individual clients as well as by the loss of confidence in professional judgment resulting from psychological assessment errors.

## II. Education and Training Standards for Competent Practice

Comprehensive education and training are essential for competence in psychological assessment. Assessment requires both specific knowledge and specific training that are not merely an extension of general psychological or psychotherapeutic principles. The following are minimal requirements for competence in assessment:

**Education:** Two or more courses of graduate education in psychological assessment with additional coursework in psychopathology, diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric disorders as a pre- or corequisite. More education and training is necessary in order to conduct neuropsychological assessments. This coursework should include both didactic instruction and practical experience in the following:

- Psychometric theory, including issues of reliability, validity, reference group norms, limits of generalizability, and test construction.
- Theories of intelligence and human cognition, including the role of race and ethnicity in intellectual evaluation and the administration and interpretation of cognitive assessment instruments.
- Theory, administration, and interpretation of performance-based measures of personality such as the Rorschach and major projective tests.
- Theory, administration, and interpretation of major self-report inventories, such as the MMPI-2 or the PAI, including the applicability of specific population norms to individual clients.
- Appropriate selection of instruments to answer specific referral questions and the construction of a test battery.
- Integration of data from multiple data sources, including interview, psychometric tests, and collateral sources.
- Communication of assessment results to different referring individuals and agencies and feedback to clients themselves.
- Relationship between assessment and treatment.

**Training:** Supervised practicum, internship, and post-terminal degree training in psychological assessment is also essential for the development of competence. This training should include regular administration of assessment batteries under the supervision of a licensed professional with expertise in assessment throughout the education and training period.

Attainment of minimum education and training requirements in psychological assessment is necessary for entry-

level practice. These minimum standards should not be confused with the necessity for the mental health practitioner to develop competent and ethical practice, which can only be obtained through seeking additional educational and training opportunities through workshops, consultation, and coursework. As is true for any area of mental health practice, it is the responsibility of practitioners to hone their skills, develop new techniques, and remain current with developments in the field

### III. Conclusion

Practitioners of any mental health discipline can, in theory, fulfill the educational and training requirements necessary to become proficient in assessment. With this said, historically it is doctoral level psychologists who have received such education in the normal course of their training and who have conducted the bulk of research that serves as the underpinning for competent practice of psychological testing and of assessment training models. It is our position that anyone wishing to practice assessment needs to be held to these standards of training and education in order to protect the public

from the adverse impact of incompetent psychological assessment. As mentioned above, practitioners should adhere to appropriate ethical standards. Additionally, Section 9 (Assessment) of the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002) provides well-elaborated guidelines for the practice of assessment. For any state to give its imprimatur to the practice of assessment on the part of a group of mental health professionals who do not possess the education and training outlined above risks exposing the public to significant unnecessary risk.

### REFERENCES

- American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (1999). *The standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: Author.
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