

Hard Science in a Soft World. (A Personal view.)

Psychometrics. Creating the box.

My background in psychology is as an independent psychologist who set up a company 9 years ago. It was important for me to obtain chartership for the simple reason I saw the whole industry of counselling, coaching, and psychotherapy as a bit of a minefield and I wished to obtain a sense of having a high quality professional identity. I find after working for these 9 years as a psychologist, (the last 1 and a half years as a chartered occupational psychologist) that there is still quite a bit of ambiguity concerning the differences. For me I choose to simply call it one to one work. Whether my client comes from a clinical population and has a DSM IV TR appendage or not, the way in which I find myself working is similar, I choose to simply see in front of me a human who operates according to the principles of psychology.

I could imagine the use of psychometrics in coaching/counselling is determined as much by the personality type of the administrator as by anything else. With level A, (BPS accredited training in basic principles of psychometrics and ability testing) and level B (BPS accredited training in personality testing) left in the dust many moons ago, I have found my idealistic undergrad days of believing it is only a matter of time before the science of psychology pins down the fundamental variables creating the human condition waning. After many years of being in the grip of my inferior types namely Sensing and Thinking, I find myself naturally relaxing back into my more natural type of intuiting and Feeling. As you might guess the box in which I am currently musing is that of Myers Brigg Type Indicator. (MBTI). When in this mode, I find psychometrics in coaching offer themselves to me as a type of portal, where by I can assist my client understand and appreciate where they lie in the vast sea of tested humanity. However this portal always remains the project of a Ph.D. student, or one with equal curiosity in a distant past. However many papers are written demonstrating a host of reliabilities and validities during the interim, the fact remains a psychometric is only one way in which we carve up the sensory world with abstract words creating in many cases a self fulfilling prophesy, and circular reasoning. One of the most useful properties of a psychometric is to assist a client think accurately within a box to allow them at a later time to exist outside of the box, having a greater control over how they think, feel and behave in a variety of contexts. This is the main link as I see it between coaching/counselling and psychometrics. Careful selection of the appropriate psychometric creates a way of carving up the world with words in a way which is meaningful for the client. This provides an opportunity for the client to experience the fact that their reality is only one of many permutations, represented by their profile. This realisation allows them to then make choices as to whether that reality is one that will assist them in moving towards their goal when one works in a solution focused context. Because the psychometric is also feeding back to the client their own reality, use of a psychometric quite early on in an intervention is an excellent way of establishing rapport and a strong therapeutic alliance. This would be especially relevant given that Wampold (as cited in Jay Lynn et al 2004) believed such an alliance "accounts for the largest proportion of systematic variance in psychotherapy outcome."

Discussion Documents.

With my coaching hat on I refer to psychometrics as "discussion documents". They provide me with an entry point into the client's world. Even though the words they have responded to are not their words, the internal variations provide a unique imprint of who this person is, and an opportunity for this person to explain that variation in their **own** words. The psychometric therefore is not the end point, but the beginning point, the point at which a rapport is established and a powerful dynamic created. I have found in coaching how this dynamic is managed is the crucial factor determining a successful outcome for the client. I have also found in my personal development and journey, just as when giving presentations, PowerPoint slides or flip charts can be a barrier to effective communication, and something to hide behind if all is not well, so too in individual work, psychometrics can be a professional prop, and a bail out strategy if the dynamic created between coach and client is not effective. I believe as psychologists even though we work in a scientific way, because of our subject matter the necessity to work as an artist as well is undeniable. However unlike artists, the creation of a well defined dependent variable against which to evaluate the independent variable of a coaching intervention is essential. During discussion over this document what the psychometric often does is bring the client back to an undeniable reality; they responded to certain important and relevant questions in a particular way, for whatever reason, and the way in which they have answered differentiates them from others who have taken the questionnaire. One popular psychometric that measures personality is the 16PF5. This has 16 factors. One of the factors, which is made up of 10 questions is that of "Vigilance". One of the items in this factor to give you a taste of it is "I suspect that people who seem friendly to me could be disloyal behind my back." To say this item is often true for you is to incur a score of 2 compared with if you answered "hardly ever" in which case you would score nothing. If for instance I point out to a client that on the 16PF5 that their sten score is 10 on the factor of Vigilance, then it is pretty undeniable to a psychometrician that their present preferred style of relating to others is suspicious, sceptical, and wary.

If one takes as a useful coaching paradigm "Outcome, Acuity, Flexibility", (O'Connor & Seymour, 1995) then it becomes clear how psychometrics during discussion can assist the client accept certain present "truths", leading to a greater **acuity** of where they are now in relation to their defined **outcome** of where they wish to be in the future.

During discussion, psychometrics can also assist in **flexibility** as well. People often become stuck because they process information and act upon it in an inflexible manner, even when feedback demonstrates to them such internal and external behaviour is not effective in moving them towards their goal. Psychometrics such as Kolb's learning cycle and Sylvia Downs learning block questionnaire, in the hands of a skilled coach can assist in providing the client with a new way of experiencing how to learn. Kolb's learning cycle can help the client understand whether or not they naturally learn more through reflection or active participation, through a theoretical approach or an approach which requires more concrete thinking involving experience. Successful learning it is suggested involves using a mix and match of all of these approaches. Likewise Sylvia Downs' learning block questionnaire can help a client understand whether or not they have blind

spots in their learning. The 4 dimensions elicit whether there is a difficulty in learning from others, anxieties about learning, difficulties with concentration, or a deficit of basic learning skills. However the emphasis in a good coaching intervention is not only to provide acuity, and outcome, but also to create flexibility, providing the client with a greater range of options concerning their thought, affect and behaviour within the context of their defined outcome. Without generating this flexibility within the client they are left being very aware that they are very different from what they want to be, or where they want to go, but without the means to do anything about it. What psychometrics **can not** do is address the subtle skill and art the coach needs to bring their client to the realisation they can achieve their outcome quite easily.

Silence of the Lambs.

One of the ways in which I relax and unwind out of work is by watching films. I remember the time in the film "Silence of the Lambs", when agent Starling approached the menacing Dr Lecter with a wad of psychometrics. "Do you expect to dissect me with that blunt instrument?" he sneered, but took them anyway because as we know he had his own agenda.

As I come to the point of my professional life when it is appropriate to settle back into my natural intuiting and feeling mode I find when using psychometrics in coaching the issue of transference is quite central. I remember using Beck's triad of depression, anxiety and helplessness questionnaires to act as a dependent variable in evaluating my coaching intervention for a client who had suffered temporal lobe damage and had been referred to me by a health care organisation. After answering one set of questionnaires and handing them too me, this client must have caught me scanning her response set, "are they OK?" she inquisitively asked. The experience helps highlight the fact our clients will have a very different way of relating to psychometrics and psychometricians, ranging from a sneering know it all, to the obedient client who actually thinks it is you who knows it all. To administer the psychometric in the standard deadpan fashion as some say we should, to ensure standardisation across clients and therefore reliability of response set is something I no longer do in a coaching intervention. I recognise there is an element of transference in the person who is "being tested" and there is emotional baggage which goes back quite possibly to pre 11+ days. Without understanding the nature of their relationship to having psychometrics administered to them it becomes increasingly unlikely the coach will be able to use the instrument in the way I believe it is most useful in a coaching intervention, that is in a way so that it acts as a portal into the client's own world. Unless we use our coaching skills to encourage our "naive" client to relax and answer honestly, unless we use those same skills to get our "know it all" on board, the opportunity to connect with the client not just at a cognitive level but also at an emotional level will be attenuated. Without this connection the ensuing discussion will not develop in the client the full capability of being self aware and opportunity to develop the required flexibility to move forward with their life along the dimension of their choice. As a side note of course the opportunity to develop rapport with our "know it all" is very much increased if we know what we are talking about. If they are statistically minded to

talk of tests of maximum and typical performance, ipsative and non-ipsative measures, range restriction or standard error of measurement is actually quite useful. It is also one reason why someone administering psychometrics should be qualified to at least level A if they are going to use psychometrics in their professional life.

Just in case there are some readers who are beginning to think I have just come out of the "Lord of the Rings" film set, or maybe "the Final Fantasy", I will explicate what I mean by "connect".

I simply mean to be able to create within the coach's mind a working model of the client so the coach can predict accurately what the client will say and how the client will feel in answer to questions and other external stimuli. To then at one level associate into that model when relating to the client, whilst at a higher cognitive level being able to act as a coach in that dynamic.

Rapport and Change.

Piaget came to the conclusion after his 3 mountains experiments that children under the age of around 8 could not de-centre. They could not pick out the abstract representation seen by another. However when care was taken to, in a Vygotsky way, keep within the zone of proximal development, Martin Hughes came up with quite different findings. By establishing a rapport with his participants by ensuring they fully understood, children of 8 and under, literally became more intelligent over night. They were shown to be able to de-centre quite easily in Hughes replications of Piaget's experiments. (Donaldson, 1987). In the same way we will find when working with a client who is a sten 10 on the vigilance dimension of the 16PF5, when we take care to develop rapport, a very different person can emerge. One who is trusting, believing and friendly, one who has that capacity in abundance. Thus psychometrics in coaching help the client understand not only where they stand in the sea of tested humanity, but also help the client recognize they are only there because there is a primary or a secondary gain to be obtained for them in that place. It helps them recognise they in fact have a capacity to be different and to feel different, and to experience their phenomenal world in a very different way should they choose to do so. This I suggest applies to the range of psychometrics from personality, through ability, aptitude, and interest, to mood and intelligence. The reason we often remain similar throughout our life, is possibly because if we are honest we find we inhabit the same environment throughout our life. We warm towards people who are similar to us, we engage in task with which we are familiar, we readily develop habits which ultimately define who we are. We can in fact change, however we choose not to. If who you are at present floats your boat, and life is an exhilaration cool. If that is not your experience pick out a psychometric and change your life forever.

Summary.

Psychometrics are constructs within which we explain behaviour. Rather than being used in a prescriptive way, when they can become self fulfilling prophecies, and seal clients into single loop learning, they can more effectively be used in an exploratory way to

assist the client create their own language to explain their response set when norm referenced. Psychometrics are a useful tool, but can never replace the skill and art of being a good coach/counsellor. They can usefully be regarded as an entry point into the client's phenomenal world, creating an effective counselling alliance, where the coach can then work with the client to move towards and eventually obtain agreed outcomes.

References:

Jay Lynn, S. & Hallquist, M, N. (2004) Toward a scientifically based understanding of Milton H. Erickson's strategies and tactics: Hypnosis, response sets and common factors in psychotherapy. *Contemporary Hypnosis Vol. 21. No. 2. pp63-78.*

O'Connor, J. & Seymour, J. (1995) *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming.* (rev edn) Thorsons.

Donaldson, M. (1987). *Children's Minds.* Fontana Press

Word count 2,449.