

To give or not to give – that is a difficult question. (Challenging assumptions regarding feedback of psychometric tests)

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Background

It is good practice to give people feedback when they have taken a psychometric¹. This has become a standard benchmark, is incorporated into BPS guidelines and is taught religiously on Level A and B courses in occupational testing. However, are we clear about what we mean by feedback? Are there different situations that require (or can accept) different kinds of feedback? Verified assessors for Levels A and B should be clear what the guidelines are and be able to present a consistent message. However, I believe that there may be a variety of interpretations and/or opinions within the industry and the psychologist's profession. I am therefore writing this to stimulate what I see as a necessary debate in order to "get the ferrets out into the open" and lead to more general agreement about what we should advocate, when and why. This is overdue, given that the industry has undergone significant change, and current practice is more variable and "best practice" needs to be clarified.

Historically a decision was made to allow people other than psychologists to gain access to psychometric instruments, which some may regret. However, the current situation introduced by the steering committee in the 1990s, is based on demonstrated competence (safeguarded through the whole Level A and B system). As a flagship system influencing practice across Europe and the globe it is important that the message delivered by different Level A and B assessors is clear and consistent. Is our house in order – or do we need to challenge some sacred cows along the way?

What has changed?

Firstly we need to recognise that the backdrop against which the original guidelines on feedback were developed has changed. Clearly today there is a far greater awareness and exposure to psychometrics – as witnessed by the balance sheets of test publishers and the number of qualified people on the Register of Competence in Psychological Testing. However, perhaps a more important change is the way access to psychometrics has increased through the use of the internet. This means that the original model of face-to-face administration and feedback is being challenged (and even flouted). The whole process can be managed without any direct contact. Previously this could be done using the postal system but this was heavily frowned upon. The model in our minds was face-to-face feedback and even telephone feedback was barely acceptable. Anyone who simply sent a report in the post was definitely beyond the spirit of the guidelines (although I know this happened and I do not know of anyone being disciplined or struck off).

Why feedback is considered to be "best practice"

The reasons for the strict code concerning feedback can be summarised under three main headings as follows:

- Respect for the individual – a person has given their time to complete a psychometric and so deserves a chance to learn and grow from their time investment (as long as the feedback is given in an appropriate manner).
- Validating the results – this is especially true for the use of self-report questionnaires but it also provides the "right of reply" whereby people can comment, add to or challenge the interpretations.
- Reducing negative impact – if testing gets a bad name people will stop using them. Feedback can be seen as a way to engage/persuade the individual that the information is valid or that its use will be appropriately integrated in order to provide a balanced and holistic evaluation.

All of these are worthy aims with which I cannot disagree. However, the mechanism for achieving these aims can be debated. It also raises the question of when is feedback *not* feedback?

What is feedback and how good does it need to be?

The image I have of feedback is of two people sitting together having an important conversation. It

involves a purpose, some exploring of certain information, attentive listening, corrections to possible mis-understandings and it could, potentially, challenge a person to think more deeply about themselves. It also strongly implies benefits for the individual. This picture makes it very hard to see how anyone would not get most benefit from this process being face-to-face rather than using the phone, text messaging, video-conferencing or simply reading written reports.

However, some years ago Team Focus was involved in one of the first research projects to evaluate the effect and benefit of video-conferencing as a way of providing psychometric feedback. I must say that the results surprised me. The recipients not only valued the process, but many expressed the fact that they felt they got as much if not more than they expected – and they did not expect the face-to-face option to be able to deliver more. Such positive responses certainly challenged my expectations. I therefore suggest that we should all remain open to other forms of feedback (telephone, online chat room, simple written reports) also adding value. Is this a holy cow? Even if we believe that face-to-face feedback is “the best”, should second-best options be offered on the basis that they nevertheless add value? Our current position could put us in the position where excellence becomes the enemy of the good.

An analogy could be considering how we satisfy our thirst. If we picture a glass of water, how empty does it need to be before we say it is not worth the effort of drinking it? The parallel is how “full” does the feedback need to be or how much value does it need to add? The internet has changed the nature of access to psychometrics and to different forms of feedback. Now is a good time to review the principles and examine what we mean by feedback and agree whether different situations allow different forms of feedback.

What criteria do we use for deciding on the right form of feedback?

A current principle guiding the British Psychological Society in its recommendations for giving feedback is that if people give up their time they deserve something back. Alongside this is the concept of adding value and avoiding harm. How can we apply these to a situation where a person chooses to give their time knowing that the feedback they will receive is a written report². Have they received feedback (perhaps minimal and not interactive) which adds value and does no harm? Does this meet the guidelines or not?

Historically the guidelines were built around a model of deep psychological constructs requiring an “expert” to interpret the results. I believe that this model does not apply to all situations today, two of which are described below:

- Some modern day questionnaires are better described as competency frameworks that have been put through some psychometric analysis. “Persuasiveness” or “Decisiveness” may cover complex syndromes of behaviour but they are not really deep psychological constructs. In fact, they are multi-factorial constructs covering a range of different attributes and skills and they are usually measured quite simplistically in questionnaires. It is hard to stretch their interpretation in terms of deep psychological constructs and research.
- Other questionnaires may be based on psychological theory but their interpretation can be many layered from quite straightforward to involving complex psychological ideas. Some provide quite self-explanatory reports that are written in a style designed for end-user consumption.

What constraints regarding feedback apply to the two scenarios above – especially if the choice to complete the questionnaires is self-solicited? Is it possible that non-interactive feedback, whilst not making best advantage of the information, nevertheless adds value and does no harm?

Some of the factors we need to address in this discussion are, therefore:

- Who is asking for the psychometric to be completed? – is it different if it is self-solicited by the individual (who believes s/he will benefit from the process) versus being asked by a third party?
- What is being measured? – is it different if we are measuring personal values, behavioural tendencies, behaviour under stress, “dark side” tendencies, emotional reactions, emotional intelligence, cognitive abilities etc.
- What is the purpose? – is it different if the person is asked to complete it by a third party where the purpose is the individual’s interest (as in a development context) versus the third party’s interest (as in a selection context)?
- What is the hoped-for outcome? – is it different if the hoped-for outcome is to address a

broken marriage versus gaining a few ideas about possible careers?

Perhaps we would benefit from exploring a shift of perspective from the original one which asked whether a person was qualified to use and give feedback (and will not misuse the psychometric instrument) to asking how the "client" will benefit from the feedback they receive.

Some suggestions for acceptable guidelines

My own ideas concerning the ethics of giving feedback are evolving. I still recognise that the best job will be done using face-to-face contact with experienced practitioners. However, when do we need a Rolls-Royce and when a Mini? I recognise how people have received great value from completing a questionnaire and receiving other kinds of feedback. One of the most important elements to consider is the purpose of the feedback – and to differentiate when it is for the benefit of a third party (as in selection) or for the recipient. I would like to consider the following as clarifying the guidelines which could then be presented as part of the Level A and Level B process:

- Face-to-face feedback should be offered wherever possible (logistically, financially and where there is the motivation from the recipient).
- Where face-to-face feedback is not possible some form of mediated feedback should be offered (video conference, phone, MSN chat, skype).
- Where only a written report is to be offered, this should be restricted to situations where the request for the psychometric is self-solicited and the results are for the individual and not for any third party (although the individual may choose to share with a third party if they wish).

The judgements required for applying the above and offering the minimum level of feedback would involve evaluating the purpose, the status of the information, the way an individual chooses or is invited to engage with the process, and the nature and language of the written reports. The British Psychological Society guidelines have often been interpreted to mean that psychometric instruments should never be used if only written reports are available – except that this is often over-ruled when the results are to be used purely for research. In such situations it is not unusual for the contract up-front to involve no feedback whatsoever. We therefore face the whole gamut – from no feedback to intensive face-to-face. Do we now need to become clearer about the stages in-between and agree where we should draw the line?

¹ I am using the term Psychometric to cover both ability tests and personality questionnaires since the generic word "Test" does not adequately cover the nature of many personality measures.

² Some people may argue that no-one should be allowed to complete any psychometric in this way – especially online – but the reality is that this does happen.