

The practice of psychological assessments in Poland

Interview with Urszula Brzezińska, Warsaw, Poland

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About the interviewee

Urszula Brzezińska is a senior test specialist in the Research & Development department of the Psychological Test Laboratory of the Polish Psychological Association (i.e., Pracownia Testów Psychologicznych Polskiego Towarzystwa Psychologicznego – PTP PTP). She is also a delegate to the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations on behalf of the Polish Psychological Association (PPA) where she serves as a member on the Board of Assessment. Her professional interests centre around the implementation of psychological assessment standards in work settings, data integration procedures in psychological assessments and the measurement of leadership and entrepreneurial competences. She is especially passionate about helping organizations work with diagnostic models that are evidence-based and compliant with professional ethical standards.

Urszula works on creating and validating Polish versions of new psychological assessments and she is responsible for shaping the PTP PTP's policies surrounding the accreditation of assessment competencies among professionals without a psychological degree. As a certified trainer of the POA she often supports work and organizational psychologists' (WOP) advanced professional development in assessment procedures. In addition, she plays an advisory role for public and private sector organizations interested in improving their employee assessment policies.

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Introduction

In September 2020 Diana had the pleasure of interviewing Urszula, a highly experienced WOP researcher and practitioner, living and working in Warsaw, Poland. Urszula was one of the organisers of the EAWOP Small Group Meeting (SGM) held in Warsaw, Poland, September 11–13, 2019 aimed at exploring ethical issues surrounding psychological assessment. We took the opportunity to ask Urszula about the psychological assessment landscape in Poland and the ethical challenges faced by WOP practitioners resulting from the changes in the workplace due to COVID–19. We agreed on a series of questions prior to the phone interview that lasted for around 60 minutes. This article is a summary of our conversation.

Interview summary

Diana: *Can you describe the practice of psychological assessments in Polish organizations at the moment?*

Urszula: It might help your readers to understand the Polish psychological assessment culture if I first briefly describe the history of the PTP PTP. The PTP PTP was established in the 1970s (in those days it operated under the name of the Psychological Test Laboratory) due to the efforts of researchers from the Psychology Department at the University of Warsaw and the PPA. Its aim was to collect psychological assessment methods from around the world and to make them available to university students and practitioners. At that time, there were no commercial entities that offered psychological assessments for sale; therefore, it was important to create and maintain a comprehensive database of psychological assessments that practitioners could access. The PTP PTP quickly became the heart of Polish psychological assessment practice and it has maintained this position to this day. Of course, the PTP PTP has changed over the years, and currently, it focuses not only on disseminating psychological assessment methods that were imported but also on developing original methods that are uniquely suited to the Polish context. In addition, it has taken on the role of educating WOP practitioners as well as Human Resources (HR) professionals in the proper usage of psychological assessment methods and in advising organizations on how to develop diagnostic models that are evidence-based and in line with ethical standards. I would say that most Polish WOP practitioners would agree that the PTP PTP has a reputation for a scientific evidence-based approach and is seen as setting the standards for the practice of psychological assessments in Poland.

One also needs to understand the broader historical context of psychological assessment in Poland. Given the scarcity of validated tools up until twenty-thirty years ago, most practitioners have tended to focus on gaining access to diagnostic tools (any diagnostic tools) that they could implement. This has also meant that *the validity or the evidence-base of these tools* did not always get questioned. In addition, as a WOP practitioner you don't need to undergo a formal certification process to be allowed to use diagnostic tools in Poland. As a result, some questionable diagnostic tools such as the Rorschach Inkblot Test or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) have gained popularity in recruitment or selection and have been widely implemented in organizations (see also the article by Grzegorz Rajca).

This issue of determining the evidence-base of a tool has become even more important these days. First, the number of commercial providers who offer psychological assessment tools (which vary in terms of validity and scientific backing) for sale in Poland has proliferated. Second, providers of digital diagnostics with automatically generated reports have mushroomed. Whereas these tools are generally user-friendly and appealing, more often than not, their underlying assumptions and methodology are obscured and hidden in a 'black box'. Therefore, I deem two things to be important for the future.

First, *WOP practitioners need to become better educated in asking critical questions about the evidence-base of diagnostic tools presented to them*. In this respect, the PTP PTP has been active in advising organizations and providing workshops and trainings for WOP practitioners and HR professionals. Second, *the psychological assessment market in Poland needs to become more transparent*. For instance, about a decade ago, we tried to introduce the psychological testing standards proposed by the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA) into the Polish market. We initially set off by organising a conference to discuss the issue with relevant stakeholders from different organizations such as HR professionals, WOP practitioners, managers, and WOP researchers. Next, a group of experts was tasked with creating a set of Polish psychological testing standards by adapting the EFPA psychological standards to our local context. This initiative was partially successful in that some organizations have readily adopted and implemented these standards, whereas others have not managed to make them their own and incorporate them into their organizational cultures. We also collaboratively developed a variety of high-quality training materials for assessment practitioners, which provided a good platform for dialogue and has led to some positive developments. For instance, a recent survey we conducted among Polish organizations seems to indicate that things are slowly but surely changing a little bit. We see that diagnostic tools that are fun but not validated, such as colour personality tests, are still popular, but validated diagnostics such as the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R) are also gaining in popularity. So, there is some hope after all.

Diana: *What are some of the most prevalent ethical challenges you'd say that WOP practitioners working with psychological assessments face?*

Urszula: I think one of the big challenges that WOP practitioners face is to learn how to *position themselves as assessment experts within their organizations* and promote professional ethical standards. Sadly, too many WOP practitioners do not understand that they need

to actively show their added value to other stakeholders in the organization. They need to market themselves as experts in psychological assessments, promote evidence-based assessments and be able to demonstrate to other stakeholders that an integrated assessment strategy delivers return on investment. For instance, psychological tests are sometimes treated as individual products that are bought and implemented, independent of already existing diagnostic models and/or organizational policies. As a WOP practitioner it is important to consider these diagnostic tools from a broader perspective and ask questions such as: “How does this tool fit with our already existing diagnostic models?”; “How can I ensure that participants receive adequate feedback?”; “Is this the best available tool to determine a person’s fit with the organization or the position?” Once these questions have been answered, practitioners need to build a business case for the deployment of these assessment tools.

Another related issue is that WOP practitioners *need to stand their ground and educate the rest of the organization when being asked to engage in activities that might violate ethical standards*. For instance, managers might want to employ assessment results obtained for developmental purposes in order to make promotion decisions. This is unethical and a WOP practitioner should be willing and able to dissuade them from doing so. I think that this issue of educating others (e.g., managers, HR professionals) in the organization about ethical standards to be upheld when using diagnostic tools is a really important one and it might not be unique to the Polish context. One thing worth considering is to create interdisciplinary teams that are in charge of psychological testing. What I mean by this is the following: most organizations have a small number of WOP working for them, whereas they tend to have much larger HR departments. Oftentimes, diagnostic tools are implemented by HR professionals who have been certified in using that specific tool. Yet overall, they are not as experienced and have not developed the level of diagnostic competence of a trained assessment psychologist. Therefore, to facilitate knowledge transfer and competence building, it could be fruitful to have HR professionals work together with psychologists in interdisciplinary teams.

Diana: *Did the current shift to a lot more work being done digitally impact the work of psychological assessment practitioners in Poland, and if so, how?*

Urszula: The massive shift to working online has definitely impacted how we work and has brought some unique challenges with it. The first challenge we encountered in the spring of 2020, when the shift to remote online work started, was that *WOP practitioners had lost the possibility to access some of the psychological assessment tools*. Bear in mind

that most of these tools were paper-based and usually accompanied by voluminous test manuals. Clearly, this impacted their ability to continue their work. Meanwhile, a number of these tools have been digitised and practitioners have switched to largely working online. I think that these developments have likely shifted the longer-term landscape of conducting psychological assessments: from being done primarily in-person to being done online.

The second challenge was related to *procedural and ethical issues* surrounding remote online assessments. This not only required developing new processes but also acquiring new skills. For instance, practitioners had to think about creating instructions and guidelines for remote testing as well as grapple with potential data protection issues. Given the proliferation of different online applications, WOP practitioners had to determine which ones were, for example, trustworthy, which ones would protect participant privacy and store the data securely. This has led to lively dialogue in our community and we can see that new procedures and standards are emerging for conducting psychological assessments remotely. Moreover, the advent of the digital era, that has been accelerated by the pandemic, has a tremendous impact on the skills required for online psychological assessments. On the one hand, practitioners need to embrace an attitude of life-long learning and develop a variety of technical skills. On the other hand, the need for developing critical thinking skills has increased. For instance, one issue that can occur with online testing is that it becomes depersonalised. In this respect, *WOP practitioners need to think of ways in which they can still add a 'human face and touch' to this process* and treat participants with dignity and respect. Relying on technology alone to assess and provide participants with automatic feedback robs them of this basic dignity and is also unethical from a professional perspective. Therefore, I think that, as a community of practice, we need to address these questions and develop new professional standards for online assessments that safeguard participants' rights and well-being.

Diana: *What advice would you give to young WOPs entering the field?*

Urszula: Be prepared to keep learning and to *continuously update your skillset*. It is important to stay abreast of changes in the field and the world and to find ways to not only reactively adapt to them but to proactively develop skills needed in the future. Also, as a young WOP, you may not realise yet that you are part of a larger community of practitioners and that most learning happens by working with others. Collaborate with people, find a mentor, engage in dialogue with colleagues and work with others that have different backgrounds than you. Ask for constant feedback and be prepared to challenge

your assumptions. Finally, learn the language of your stakeholders in organizations (e.g., employees, managers, HR) and be able to communicate effectively with people at different organizational levels. It is not enough to be an expert in your field. Rather, you need to be able to translate your expertise into the language of business and demonstrate the value added of your expertise.

Another point I cannot stress is enough is that you need to learn to think critically and be able to integrate and synthesise data from different sources and disciplines. You need to develop the ability to determine the evidence-base of data presented to you and do so across various disciplines. It is no longer enough to be only a specialist in a specific area. Rather, you need to be an expert in your area, while also understanding enough about related areas.

In sum, be prepared to learn and update your skillset, collaborate with others, engage in teamwork, and stand your ground when it comes to your own professional standards and values.

Diana: *Thank you so much Urszula for taking the time to talk to the readers of InPractice and share your insights.*

Urszula: It has been my pleasure.