

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Goals

During their lives, people are often confronted with important decisions which are difficult for them to make because each of the alternatives involves serious consequences. In such cases, they have the option of seeking psychological advice as an aid to making the decision. Judges, doctors, teachers, parents or couples do indeed seek such advice, and expect responses which will aid their decision-making. The most detailed form of response is a written psychological report. It is usually left to the readers of such psychological reports to judge for themselves whether the report actually achieves what it was supposed to achieve and whether it is as good as it could be. This is a challenging task even for the majority of qualified psychologists, let alone for non-psychologists! In view of this problem, our intention in this book is to describe the characteristics of good psychological reports. After working through our suggestions, readers of psychological reports will be adequately equipped to decide where the report is helpful and where it could be better.

Readers of psychological reports often ask themselves: What should the report contain? What should it not contain? How can I tell if the psychological report was prepared in a professional way? We intend to answer these and other questions which non-psychologists have about psychological reports.

Psychologists required to prepare psychological reports are initially faced with the same questions as the readers of such reports. But there are also other questions they have to answer: How do I translate the client's question into "psychological questions"? How do I plan a psychological assessment? What sources of information can I use? Which features of tests, questionnaires, certificates, files, interviews and behavioral observations are important? How can I plan and prepare a psychological report? What must I pay attention to while carrying out the psychological assessment? What possible sources of error are there? How might these affect the psychological assessment? How can I avoid errors? How do I report the information in a clear and appropriate way? How do I combine information into useful statements? How do I formulate recommendations for further action? What is the correct linguistic form for a psychological report? How do I know whether I have thought of and done everything that was required?

These are just a few of the questions to be answered, and thus decisions to be made, by psychologists when preparing psychological reports. Our intention in this book is to assist them in this process.

1.2 Overview

After this introduction, we describe in Chapter 2 the fundamentals of our approach, explaining, amongst other things, the basic ideas behind decision-oriented assessment and presenting general criteria for the evaluation of psychological reports.

The client's question determines what we, as psychologists, investigate. In Chapter 3 we describe how we decide for or against a particular client's question, and which assumptions we have to make. We also explain the importance of knowledge and a profile of requirements.

Which of the variables that determine individual human behavior might be useful in answering the client's question? How do we find such variables, and how do we decide which of them should be taken into consideration during the further course of the assessment process? In Chapter 4 we will present a simple but effective search procedure for this.

After selecting the variables, we explain in the psychological report which of these we will consider in the form of psychological questions, and why. Why do we speak of psychological questions rather than of hypotheses? How do we formulate these psychological questions? How many psychological questions should be included in all? These issues are addressed in Chapter 5.

The information which has been presented up to this point is illustrated in Chapter 6 by means of three examples of clients' questions from different assessment areas: aptitude assessments, psychological assessments for family law courts regarding rights of custody and access; and assessments of witness credibility.

The assessment plan not only tells us what we should do next during the assessment; it also explains our procedure to the readers of the psychological report. As explained in Chapter 7, the cost-benefit ratio of a particular procedure is always a fundamental criterion for deciding whether a particular information source is used or not.

An a-priori strategy is the assessment approach that was used to answer the client's question up to the point when the task of writing a psychological report was put in the hands of the assessor. In Chapter 8, we show that an analysis of the a-priori strategy may yield useful information for an optimal treatment of the client's question.

The characteristics of information sources we suggest in Chapter 9 will make it easier to decide about the value of a particular source of information. At the same time, these characteristics will also help in the planning of the assessment process.

Tests and questionnaires are the "classic" tools which can be used as standardized instruments in assessment work. In Chapter 10, we deal with the central characteristics of objectivity, reliability and validity of these tools in relation to their importance for the psychological assessment we are planning.

In Chapter 11, we return to the first example of a client's question and present the first part of the assessment plan for this example. Here we note that, as is often the case, most psychological questions cannot be answered with standardized psychological instruments, but only with partly-standardized instruments, particularly diagnostic interviews.

In Chapter 12, we go on to deal with the fundamentals of decision-oriented interviewing. We explain not only how to plan and prepare psychological interviews, but also which important points need to be considered during interviews in order to ensure

usable results. The plan for an interview is summarized in an interview guide. This set of guidelines is the definitive aid for conducting psychological interviews.

Then, in Chapter 13, we present an interview guide for our aptitude assessment example, using this example to illustrate the important features of interview guides for psychological interviews.

Amongst other things, the assessment judgment depends on the perception which the assessor has of the persons he/she is assessing. This gives rise to such questions as: To what degree can the ability to form judgments about people be learned? How relevant are differences between assessors? These questions are addressed in Chapter 14.

Within psychology, a large number of judgment errors and judgment tendencies have been identified. We describe these briefly in Chapter 15 and indicate how they may affect a psychological assessment. However, we not only point out which judgment errors and tendencies are important, but also make practical suggestions about how to avoid judgment errors and minimize judgment tendencies in Chapter 16.

Once the results of tests, questionnaires, interviews, behavioral observations and other information sources have been gathered, we have to decide which information will be useful for answering the psychological questions, and thus ultimately the client's question. In Chapter 17 we suggest criteria for evaluating interviews and behavioral observations and also deal with psychometric calculations for single-case analysis of tests and questionnaires. The data section of our example psychological report is presented in Chapter 18.

In the results section, all the information which was previously reported in the data section for each procedure is collected together in order to answer the psychological questions, and ultimately the client's question. In Chapter 19 we describe the aims of the assessor in the results section, explain a practical method for writing the results section, and discuss linguistic form.

In many cases, clients also explicitly request suggestions or recommendations as to how to proceed further. We therefore also describe how to formulate such recommendations in line with our decision-oriented approach.

Chapter 20 presents the results section of our example psychological report.

This brings us to the final part of a psychological report, the appendix, which, in addition to the references, usually contains a range of further information which, although it is not directly necessary for an understanding of the report, will ensure that the report can be validated.

In Chapter 21, we explain the foundations of our theory of decision-oriented psychological assessment. After describing the necessary assumptions, we focus on the importance of beliefs and expectations as cognitions directing actions during the planning of a psychological assessment. Then we go on to explain how our theory can be empirically tested, followed by reports on first published results of empirical tests of the theory of decision-oriented psychological assessment. Finally we demonstrate that decision-oriented assessment is a useful tool for everyday psychological assessment in all fields of application in psychology.

Chapter 22, „Aids for the evaluation of psychological reports by non-psychologists“, will enable non-psychologists to evaluate the intelligibility and verifiability of a report. So that non-psychologists are able to evaluate the way a psychological report is presented, we systematically describe all aspects of the presentation of a psychological report

that are open to evaluation. For psychologists, this summarizes all the accounts about the presentation of information in psychological reports to be found in various previous chapters.

Chapter 23 contains checklists to support the psychological assessor in writing a psychological report.

After numerous requests from non-psychologists who often work with psychological reports, in Chapter 24 we have now provided checklists for the evaluation of psychological reports. With their help, non-psychologists can also check the central methodological features of a report.

Psychological reports which are written according to our suggestions meet the *Guidelines for writing psychological reports* of the Federation of German Psychological Associations (1994) as well as the „Guidelines for the Assessment Process” developed by a taskforce of the European Association of Psychological Assessment (EAPA) (Fernandez-Ballesteros et al. 2001), published in German as „Richtlinien für den diagnostischen Prozess” (Westhoff, Hornke & Westmeyer, 2003).

1.3 Notes on using this book

With the help of this book, it is possible for both non-psychologists and psychologists to evaluate the quality of a psychological report. Non-psychologists will be enabled to evaluate the intelligibility and verifiability of a report by means of the explanations in Chapter 22 and the relevant checklists in Chapter 24. Moreover, psychologists can use the book to evaluate the theoretical, methodological and substantial aspects of psychological reports, something which non-psychologists are normally not in a position to do systematically or comprehensively.

For psychologists who wish to write a psychological report, we assume basic knowledge of psychology and basic training in assessment methods. We therefore provide only selected references and refrain from justifying every statement with as many references as possible, since, in our experience, this does not deepen understanding but merely discourages readers.

At the start of each section, we list the points dealt with in that section. In the subsequent text we then discuss each point in more detail. This structure provides the reader with an overview of what will be dealt with in each section, and also a clearly organized summary of the main points.

When we speak of “behavior” in this book, we always mean both behavior and experienced thoughts and feelings. The term behavior therefore denotes behavior which can be observed externally and also behavior which can only be described by the persons themselves.

To keep the text as simple as possible, we use terms like „the psychologist”, „the assessor” or „the test person” in a generic sense.

Chapter 2

Fundamentals of our approach

2.1 Decision-oriented psychological assessment

The assessment process

1. Client's question
2. Assumptions
3. Profile of requirements
4. Psychological questions (= hypotheses)
5. Assessment plan
6. Carrying out the psychological assessment
7. Reporting the data
8. Results section: answering the psychological questions and therefore the client's question
9. Suggestions and recommendations as to how to proceed

Our primary orientation in the assessment process is the client's question, since our task is to help the client with a difficult decision. A psychological report therefore always serves to prepare for and support important decisions, for example whether someone should receive an invalidity retirement pension, what kind of therapy someone should receive, which type of school would be most appropriate for a child, or which custody arrangements would be least detrimental to a child. In this sense, our assessment work is decision-oriented.

Producing a psychological report involves a series of decisions which must be made by the psychologist. Each stage on the way to the psychological report also requires a series of decisions to be made by the assessor. Let us first get an overview of all these stages. Later in the book, we will then deal with each stage of the process in more detail.

Client's question

At the beginning of a possible psychological assessment, someone contacts the psychologist and expresses a question, e.g. whether he/she can hope to be successful in a certain training program. As soon as the psychologist is confronted with such a question, several decisions must be made, e.g. whether a psychologist is the appropriate professional for the task, rather than a representative of some other scientific discipline; or whether the question is at all possible to answer. We will discuss these individual decisions in more detail below. In all events, however, the client's question should always be expressly stated in the psychological report, in exactly the way the client expressed it or in a form agreed on between the assessor and the client.

Assumptions

Before the psychologist can begin to carry out assessment work, he/she must make several fundamental assumptions about human behavior. One fundamental principle of daily behavior and of scientific psychological work is the assumption that human behavior is in some way “ordered” or “regular”. Otherwise, it would not be possible to explain, predict or influence behavior. Several such basic assumptions must always be made in psychological assessment. We will therefore deal with these in more detail later. These assumptions are not expressly stated in a psychological report. Nevertheless, it is important to be able to name, explain and justify them.

Profile of requirements

When decisions have to be made, we need criteria with which to compare the available alternatives. This is just as true for the question of person’s suitability for a particular profession as it is for the question of which form of psychotherapy has the best chances of success for a particular set of behavioral problems. So we need to know something about the “requirements” that apply to a person in each of the available alternatives. Occupational psychology has a term for the sum of these requirements, namely a “requirement profile”. Since decision criteria are also necessary for all other assessment questions, we also adopt this term in educational, clinical and forensic psychological questions. In the case of clinical questions about whether a test person exhibits the symptoms of a particular disorder, this disorder corresponds to the requirement profile. The requirement profile is not a separate part of the psychological report, but we need to have a requirement profile in order to be able to work in a logical way.

Psychological questions

The client’s question is usually expressed in such a general form that it has to be transformed and broken down into several “psychological questions”. These psychological questions help us to structure our assessment work and at the same time give the reader of the psychological report a clear and easy-to-follow basic structure for the information presented. This structure also helps the reader to retain the information. These psychological questions therefore appear in the next section of the psychological report, directly after the client’s question.

Assessment plan

As with every complex process, producing a psychological report requires a carefully drawn up plan which can be referred to throughout the whole process. In this section of the report, we describe the psychological procedures used and other sources of information in a way that the reader can easily follow. It would exceed the scope of the psychological report to include a written account of all other planning information for the client. However, we will show how to work efficiently using these parts of the assessment plan.

Carrying out the assessment

The assessment situation requires the assessor to make many decisions on the spur of the moment. It is therefore advisable to go into assessments well-prepared. We will show how thorough planning and careful preparation can enable everyone involved to collaborate effectively and with ease.

Reporting the data

All information which is important for answering the client's question is presented in the "data section" of the psychological report, ordered according to the source of information. This is where we make a clear and intelligible presentation of the results of tests, questionnaires, interviews, behavioral observation and other information sources such as certificates, files or medical reports.

Results section

In the "results section", the assessor combines all the information to answer the psychological questions, and in this way answers the client's question. Later, we will show that, in order to avoid judgment errors, it is essential for the assessor to be aware of the rules with which he/she combines the available information and with which he/she makes decisions about the answer to the client's question.

Suggestions and recommendations

Many client's questions expressly request recommendations as to how to proceed –yet another good reason for following a decision-oriented approach. In this case, the available alternatives should be presented and their possible consequences described. Once again, our task is to help the client and any other persons involved to make the best possible decisions.

The assessment process outlined so far usually takes place linearly, in the order presented here. However, it may be necessary at some point in the course of assessment to negotiate a new question with the client, or to formulate additional psychological questions which were forgotten during the initial planning or which only revealed themselves as important once the process had started. The further course of the assessment must then be planned and executed according to these new psychological questions. In this sense, the assessment process is recursive in principle, as described by Kaminski (1970).

Structure of a psychological report

Title

Table of contents

Details of persons involved

1. Client's question
2. *Possibly here:* analysis of information from files according to psychological criteria
3. Psychological questions (hypotheses)
4. Assessment methods: description of procedures and justification for their application in this particular case
5. Data section (presentation; *poss. here for first time:* analysis of information from files according to psychological criteria)

6. Results section: combination and weighting of individual data; answering of the psychological questions and thus of the client's question (*assessment*)
7. *If requested*: suggested solutions and/or recommendations for further actions; possibly: results of (partial) attempts at solutions (*intervention*)
8. Date, signature(s)
9. Appendix: references
 - possibly: tables with summarized test results;
 - possibly: supplementary reports,
 - possibly: other documents
 - affidavit (only if requested)

2.2 Our view of psychology

Definition

Psychology is a theory-driven, empirical science. Its goals are to

1. describe,
2. explain,
3. predict and
4. influence or modify individual behavior (intervention).

Amongst psychologists, there is widespread agreement that psychology is a theory-driven, empirical science. For many areas of individual human behavior, there are now theories which are very helpful for practical purposes and which have been successfully tested empirically. In the following, we will only refer to approaches such as these. Purely speculative, empirically unproven or untestable views of human behavior will not be discussed here.

The aims of psychology are (1) **to describe**, (2) **to explain**, (3) **to predict** and (4) **to influence or modify individual behavior**. The first three aims are also part of psychological assessment. In addition, psychological assessment contributes indirectly to the modification of individual human behavior. Psychologists directly influence the behavior of others when they provide training or therapy, for example.

Description

The precondition for achieving these goals is objective, reliable and appropriate observation of concrete behavior. If such observations are replaced by ambiguous statements about the subject, this will result in unusable psychological reports. Later, we will describe the conditions which enable usable observations to be made. In addition, we will show how to describe the observations with as little distortion and as few errors as possible.

Explanation

In order to explain individual behavior in a scientific way, it is necessary to describe the conditions under which it occurs. The idea is therefore not merely to give a plausible explanation, but to provide a testable explanation which can withstand critical objections.

Prediction

As a theory-driven, empirical science, psychology is characterized by its ability to predict individual behavior successfully. However, this generally requires the combination of the empirically tested knowledge of several theoretical approaches.

Modification

Psychology provides a wide range of practical and useful approaches for influencing and modifying human behavior (intervention). Clinical and educational psychology can help when the goal is to learn new behavioral patterns or to change existing ones. With the help of occupational psychology, the conditions under which people work can be designed in such a way that the work is not only safer and more efficient, but is also more enjoyable.

2.3 Goals of decision-oriented assessment

Important

The goals of decision-oriented assessment are to describe, explain and predict individual behavior in a defined area of behavior (i.e. not a personality profile).

This means that the decisive conditions for past, present and future behavior in a particular area of behavior are to be identified.

As we have already seen, the aims of psychology include the description, explanation and prediction of individual behavior. For the purposes of psychological assessment, this is understood in an even narrower way: we are always concerned with only a part of the behavior of a person. We never seek to describe “what sort of person someone is”, but rather the conditions which enable the behavior mentioned in the client’s question to be explained or predicted.

Some client’s questions are not primarily about a single individual, but about the relationship between people, e.g. in partnership counseling or in cases concerning family law. Since we consider a relationship to be when an individual adapts his/her behavior in several classes of situation to another individual, the statements made above for assessment also apply to relationships between persons.

Very often, psychologists are asked questions referring to the behavior of different people in the same situation. The problem is then to find out which conditions lead to a particular behavior, for example wrong-way driving on the freeway. It is often assumed at first that this must be due to the person and their characteristics, which is reflected in such drivers being called “ghost drivers” in Germany. However, when the situation is investigated, it may turn out that situational conditions alone or in combi-

nation with certain characteristics of a person lead to this particular behavior. For example, after corresponding investigations, freeway entrance ramps in Germany were changed so that the previous specific conditions which might lead to wrong-way driving no longer existed.

Other examples of questions concerning the assessment of situations are: “How does hostility towards foreigners develop?” and “Why do car accidents occur with above-average frequency and severity when young people are driving back from the disco (so-called “disco accidents”)?”. In such cases, in addition to situational conditions, the characteristics of persons are usually also relevant. Another example might be: “Why is our five-year-old son Hans wetting his bed?” This also starts off as a situational assessment, but during the assessment not only situational conditions will play a role. The characteristics of the person or the relationship may also help to explain the behavior.

We never attempt to give a complete description of the complex behavior of a person. We do not aim to produce a “personality profile”, and would not be able to fulfill the requirements for this anyway. Instead, we limit ourselves from the very start to the conditions which enable the behavior mentioned in the client’s question to be explained or predicted. It is therefore our opinion that there are areas of behavior which are unimportant for the explanation and prediction of other areas of behavior.

2.4 Conditions for psychological assessment

Conditions for psychological assessment are:

1. A behavior-oriented approach to
 - planning the necessary assessments,
 - collecting the required information,
 - evaluating information sources,
 - combining information in order to answer the psychological questions and therefore the client’s question;
2. Avoidance of judgment errors and reduction of judgment tendencies;
3. Explicit decisions, taking into account costs and benefits.

The main foundation for psychological assessment is a behavior-oriented approach. By this we mean that it is always concrete behavior, i.e. feelings, thoughts and actions of people in particular situations, that is considered. This means that, when describing behavior, we do not use any words that describe characteristics. However, if necessary, such terms can be used later in the assessment process to summarize or characterize a group of observations. For as long as scientific psychology has existed, it has always used the most concrete descriptions possible for individual behavior. This is not just something adopted from the psychology of learning. So when we suggest behavior-oriented assessment, we naturally include the research results from the psychology of learning, but we also include the results of all other theory-based, empirical areas within psychology.

Since psychological assessment is a very complex process, it is advisable to ease our own work and that of all involved by means of effective planning. Such planning is also behavior-oriented. When planning each stage of the assessment process, we attempt to be clear about the available alternatives and the consequences connected with each alternative.

When collecting the required information, a behavior-oriented approach is necessary in order to avoid judgment errors. In particular during interviews with the subject, it is very helpful for all involved if the assessor gets the subject to describe the behavior in the areas of interest so that he/she can literally „see it like in a movie“.

In psychology, behavioral observations are descriptions of concrete behavior. This is often not the case in the files which already exist on the person to be assessed. These often describe the subject in terms of summaries, abstractions and judgments of their behavior, e.g. with words describing characteristics. A behavior-oriented approach makes it easier to recognize such judgment errors and tendencies, and to find information which describes concrete behavior and is relevant for answering the client's question.

In the results section, all information for answering the psychological questions and thus the client's question is combined. Both the writing and the evaluation of psychological reports are much easier if concrete behavior is described and information is only summarized where this is possible without distortion.

Psychological assessment is full of opportunities for making errors of judgment or for falling victim to certain distortions of judgment. We have already briefly referred to the most important preventive measure: a behavior-oriented approach. We will deal with judgment errors and judgment tendencies in greater detail later, and will then make suggestions as to how to avoid or reduce these as far as possible.

The necessary complement to a behavior-oriented description of the subject is that all necessary decisions are made explicitly. What we mean by this is, firstly, that we must be clear about where decisions must be made in the assessment process. Secondly, we must be clear about the available alternatives. This implies answering the following questions: „What alternatives are available?“ and „What are the possible consequences of each alternative?“. A third aspect of explicit decision-making is the conscious application of certain decision rules. For example, „We always do it like that here“ is a decision rule of sorts, but will not necessarily lead to satisfactory decisions.

The decision for or against an assessment procedure according to the cost-benefit ratio may seem technocratic and non-psychological. In reality, we all orient ourselves according to this criterion. No one, for example, would dream of assessing a person's aptitude for a certain profession by living together with them for several years! Costs and benefits are always taken into account, if not always explicitly. Better decisions are therefore possible if decision criteria are explicitly considered in terms of cost-benefit aspects and can be justified in this respect.

2.5 General criteria for evaluating psychological reports

Criteria for evaluating scientific statements are:

1. The degree of validity. This depends on
 - the type and quality of the underlying theoretical statements;
 - whether the rules of logic were taken into account when combining statements;
 - the appropriateness of the way hypothetical constructs are put into action;
 - the central characteristics of objectivity and reliability of the empirical process; and
 - the area of application.
2. The degree of comprehensibility. This depends on
 - the transparency of the process, in all stages; and
 - the verifiability of the whole process

A psychological report is a piece of scientific work. It must therefore fulfill the criteria which apply generally to scientific statements: validity and comprehensibility.

The degree of validity

A psychological report consists of a series of connected scientific statements. It is therefore not simply correct or incorrect, but approximates to the ideal of complete validity to a greater or lesser degree. The validity of scientific statements depends primarily on the type and quality of the underlying theoretical statements. This means that a psychological report depends on the quality of the theoretical approaches used. A central criterion which every theory should fulfill is the logically correct combination of individual statements. That this is often not the case, for example in the best-known theories of aggression, has been shown by Werbik (1974).

On the way from the formulation of a theory to the proof of its validity, the central statements must be empirically tested. For this purpose, the ideas must be translated into actions, which may correspond to the ideas to a greater or lesser degree of perfection. The less perfectly the theory is translated into actions, the worse is the proof of its validity.

When testing a theory empirically, observations must be made according to the theory. The more objective and reliable the observations, the more serious the test to which the theory is subjected.

The usefulness of a theory increases with the degree to which statements it makes about its area of application are concrete. The more precisely this area of application is described, the easier it is to see when a theory and the associated empirical results can be used. Generally, however, psychological theories do not contain statements about their area of application. This can only be inferred from the empirical work connected with the theory.

The degree of comprehensibility

All scientific statements are useless if they cannot be communicated to other people. So the comprehensibility of scientific statements is a central criterion of their quality. The better other people can understand our statements, the better our communication was.

To ensure that the readers of the psychological report will be able to understand the thoughts of the assessor, it is best if the assessor describes all the steps necessary and helpful for a complete understanding. This step-by-step description is also the basis for checking and verifying the process, at least in principle. For example, it is possible to check whether observations were carried out properly and whether statements were combined with each other correctly according to the rules of logic.

Furthermore, to ensure that the statements made in the psychological report can be verified, all cited literature should be listed in the manner prescribed by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in a separate references section at the end of the psychological report. This references section is an independent part of the report.