

ABSTRACT

The practice of assessing the attributes of people in relation to job and organizational requirements has long been regarded as being central to the profession of Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IO Psychology). Some have argued that it is in the area of individual assessment that the scientific training of IO psychologists is applied most extensively and that it is here where the dual role of the IO psychologist as a scientist-practitioner is most clearly evident.

Despite the emphasis on the integration of science and practice in IO Psychology and IOP assessment in particular, there is evidence to suggest that the scientific model that underpins practice does not optimally serve this ideal. It is further apparent that several influential authors within the discipline have identified concerns and dissatisfaction with the status quo in this respect. In this study it is proposed that the existence of such concerns and dissatisfaction points to the need to reflect on the adequacy of the intellectual architecture that guides theory and practice in the field.

The aim of this study is to explore the contribution of Action Science to the ideal of integrating theory and practice within the field of Industrial and Organisational Psychological assessment (IOP assessment). It is proposed that action science perspectives are particularly relevant to IOP assessment given its emphasis on the close coupling of thought and action, the enactment of scientific values in practice and the rigorous monitoring of such practice. Given that action science perspectives have not been explored in-depth in relation to IOP assessment, its philosophical and theoretical points of departure are described in detail.

From an action science perspective, all deliberate action is based on an underlying theory – a *theory of action* - that specifies how to achieve intended consequences. The concept of a theory of action therefore serves as a vehicle to capture the integrative nature of thought and action. One of its central premises is that professional effectiveness requires of practitioners not only to become competent in taking action, but also to reflect critically on the theories of action that constitute their practice. As an

epistemology of practice, action science provides abstract, normative models of action that guide such a process on the basis of *internal criticism*. In this process action is evaluated according to the values it claims to serve. At the same time these models identify pathways for transforming practice. In this study these principles are applied to the field of IOP assessment.

Detailed attention is devoted to inferring the technical and interpersonal theory of action underlying IOP assessment from the literature in order to subject it to critical analysis. Diagnostic evidence is presented to illustrate the existence of inconsistencies and incongruities in the technical as well as interpersonal theories of action. Given the non-trivial consequences of these limitations, the critique is intentionally not euphemized or softened so as to identify potential sources of ineffectiveness on a rigorous basis. The analysis further shows that if practitioners are not vigilant to the limitations of their technology, they paradoxically run the risk of acting counter to the values they stand for when correctly implementing the prescriptions of the conventional theories of action.

Drawing on action science principles as well as contributions from the organizational justice literature, an alternative theory of action for IOP assessment is proposed - the essence of which involves the reframing of validity as an action concept. A model is presented that depicts the various dimensions of validity as an action concept and guidelines are provided for operationalising it. It is argued that such an alternative theory of action provides guidelines for practice at the level of meta-praxis that will enable scientist-practitioners to act more consistently with their espoused values. Implications for practice, education and research are explored.

It is concluded that action science offers an alternative, scientifically accountable model for practice that may be more consistent with the scientist-practitioner ideal of IO Psychology than the current scientific model to which it adheres.