

Testing and Older Persons: A New Challenge for Counselors

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Abstract:

This article discusses factors affecting test selection, client needs and characteristics in future test construction, and assessment research needs in relation to older persons.

Article:

From a historical perspective, older persons have been "the forgotten and ignored" of APGA (Blake, 1975). Further, change and growth within the profession has occurred in a nonsystematic and uneven fashion. The result is an emerging specialization in gerontological counseling based on perceived needs of older persons, not supported by extensive counseling research, substantive theory, and specific counseling techniques. An additional problem, and one that contributes to those listed previously, is the lack of attention within the profession to appropriate assessment methods for use with older persons.

As is true of the counseling profession in general, assessment has been targeted toward younger persons. We lack sufficient instruments to use with older persons, not because we cannot assess this population, but because we have not really attempted to do so. While some of our available instruments, specifically those developed for use with adults, may be validly used with older persons, many of these may be unsuitable for such use.

Research has shown us that older persons are different in some ways from younger persons—by virtue of age, or having lived more years, having a greater number and variety of life experiences, and having a greater number of physical and mental impairments. It follows that counseling with older persons is also different in some ways, including the goals of counseling and some of the specific techniques used. Another area that differs is that of assessment. The use of tests with older persons has not been systematically explored; therefore we are unsure of the extent to which assessment with older persons differs from assessment with younger persons.

It is not our purpose in this article to review available instruments, as that is the focus of other articles in this special issue. Rather, we will look at factors affecting test selection with this population and criteria for selecting tests for use with older persons. A brief overview of needs and characteristics of the older population forms a background for this discussion. The article concludes with a discussion of future needs for test construction and assessment research in relation to older persons.

ABOUT OLDER PERSONS

For the purposes of this article, older persons are those age 60 and above. Historically, counselors have not dealt with older persons because there were not many of them. There also were not many counselors and most of them were school counselors. The impact of our changing population demography and the emergence of life span development concepts has been substantial.

In 1900, only 3,000,000 persons or 4% of the U.S. population were older persons. By 1980 the numbers had grown to more than 24,000,000 representing 12% of the population or every ninth American (Brotman, 1980). It is estimated that more than 50% of the population will be over 50 years of age by the year 2000. Knowledge

of demographic characteristics of subgroups of the population of older persons is also important for counselors, especially those interested in assessment. For example, Blacks comprise 8% of the population of older persons though 10% of the general population, and older women outnumber older men by more than 150 to 100.

The sheer increases in numbers of older persons due to better medical care, increased life expectancies, lower death rates, and so forth, have created a variety of problems. Social agencies and programs, such as the Social Security System, are unprepared to deal effectively with these changes. Our society has become age biased, age denying, and oriented toward a youth culture or a "Pepsi generation." The problems for older persons, as the objects of bias, are obvious. Less apparent, but equally important, is the impact of internalization of negative attitudes toward older persons by individuals who must themselves grow old.

Counselors can have an impact on negative attitudes and can help older persons deal with the problems and changes that arise as a function of increasing age in our society, Counselors can provide older persons with information about the aging process, the changes they are experiencing that may be normal or pathological, and means of adapting to these changes. Counselors can provide information about available community resources to help older persons meet their changing needs, They can assist in the processes of adapting to rapid social and personal change, and personal loss. Counselors can help older persons find new meaning in life and new roles (Riker, 1980).

A prerequisite for counselors who work with older persons is a belief in development and growth potential for persons of all ages. Research established the fact that developmental task accomplishment occurs throughout the life span (Erikson, 1950: Havighurst, 1972). For older persons, the demands of daily living may be more difficult to meet, not because of any inherent inability to cope, but because of diminishing resources available to meet an ever increasing array of needs.

Counselors who work with older persons will find that their needs differ mainly in degree, not in kind, from persons of other age groups. They may encounter less need for career and educational counseling and more in the areas of a vocational choice and life satisfaction, Older persons may have more leisure time to pursue new or long submerged interests. Whatever concerns are brought to the counseling relationship, some form or combination of formal or informal assessment of the client's needs is necessary. Some suggestions for this assessment of older persons follow.

ASSESSMENT AND OLDER PERSONS

Assessment will be discussed in this article as:

The systematic evaluative process leading to specific judgements about a given person's (or groups of people's) current -and potential level of functioning in a variety of settings, (Gallagher, Thompson, & Levy, 1980, p, 19)

The psychological assessment of a client should contribute information to the decision making process and is broadly oriented toward issues of problem solving (Maloney & Ward, 1976). Tests are aids in the collection of data and should not be used as ends in themselves, In working with older persons as Oberleder (cited in Bernal, Brannon, Belar, Lavigne, & Cameron, 1977) stated, the responsibility of the counselor is:

To find the response behind the response, to uncover the potential of the aging individual which may be hidden not only from the examiner but from Subject as well. p. 43)

In order to accomplish this, counselors need to be aware of factors that. affect the selection of tests for use with older persons and need to utilize sound guidelines for test selection and use.

Factors Affecting Test Selection for Older Persons

There are several major factors that affect test selection for use with older persons. The purpose of the testing is the most important consideration, but there is a need also to focus on more practical, administration factors. There are several types of problems with many of the assessment instruments that are available. Often there is improper standardization (Gallagher et al., 1980). There is a lack of convincing data on the reliability, validity, and subgroup norms (Lawton, Whelihan, & Belsky, 1980). Norms frequently do not extend far enough up the age scale and are not as soundly based as for younger people. Another problem occurs when test norms have not been recently established (Miller, 1980). Many assessment techniques have low external validity when used with older persons so the application of the results of testing to everyday living is questionable (Gallagher et al., 1980).

Other problems with instruments include ambiguous instructions, inappropriate item content and the inability to discriminate at lower levels of functioning (Gallagher et al., 1980). Ambiguous instructions make the testing situation confusing and frustrating for the older person. Test items need to be designed with older persons in mind particularly since there is a:

Tendency for them to respond in a more limited manner than younger persons when addressing personal, emotional issues. (Lawton et al., 1980, p. 539)

When an assessment device lacks discrimination ability, the information needed for decision making is not obtained and the purpose of testing is not fulfilled.

Older persons also may have difficulties dealing with traditional testing situations. They generally lack the test taking set that a young person in school would have. They may be unfamiliar with the rationale behind standardized testing. Since older persons have probably not taken tests for many years and may not have been exposed to the multitude of standardized tests during their school years, they may be uncomfortable in assessment situations and may not understand the goals and purpose of testing. Their cumulative life history and life experiences may lead them to respond to testing in unique and undetermined ways, including acquiescent response sets, which may invalidate test results. These conditions may lead to problems of motivation, cooperation, and a greater cautiousness in responding (Gallagher et al., 1980; Miller, 1980).

With older persons, the counselor needs to make more of an effort to establish good rapport and to explain the purpose of assessment. The counselor also must be aware of some unique problems that older persons may bring to the testing situation. Older persons may have an increased susceptibility to fatigue factors. Thus, several short sessions may be preferable to one or two long ones. Physical changes and diseases that are characteristic of aging also may complicate the assessment process. In particular, slower reaction times may invalidate results of tests that depend on speed of responses. For example, sensory impairments can be a source of difficulty in communication. Because of the significant interaction between the physical and psychological status of the older person, counselors should make it a routine practice to check the recent physical health of clients to be tested (Miller, 1980).

Alternative Strategies

In spite of the many problems related to the psychological assessment of older persons, there are some alternatives that can be used to facilitate the process. One strategy is to involve the client in test selection. Older persons sometimes fear testing due to a lower education and reading level, the threat of school-like experiences, the perception of being time consuming for unclear purposes, and problems with interference from disabilities (Lawton et al., 1980; Miller, 1980). A complete explanation of testing should be given and time should be spent dealing with these fears as an integral part of involving the client in test selection. The client will come to understand the purpose of testing and should generally be more comfortable as a result of being involved in the selection of instruments.

Alternatives to paper-and-pencil tests can be used effectively to gather data about older persons. For example, structured interviews may be appropriate if counselors have the time to spend and the type of information needed is obtainable with this approach. Another, very flexible, approach is through the use of observational techniques. By selecting target behaviors of interest and systematically recording their frequency and duration, assessment can be directly related to practical issues in living and can be adapted to the needs of individual clients (Miller, 1980).

Guidelines for Test Selection and Use

A discussion of guidelines for selecting tests for use with older persons will be presented in this section of the article. The guidelines discussed will include the purpose, directions, items, response format, time, adaptation, and score interpretation.

When evaluating tests it is important to consider several questions related to their purpose in general. Is the purpose of the test apparent? Will the information derived be helpful in making counseling or research decisions? Does the purpose of the test meet counseling needs?

Assessment is used in counseling for selection decisions, classification, evaluation of treatments, and hypothesis testing. When test data are to be used for selection decisions, the instrument must have the ability to predict success and failure with minimum risks. It also should attempt to maximize the correspondence between testing tasks and skills, abilities, attitudes, traits, and other factors required for success. Tests used for classification must be able to identify strengths and weaknesses, to obtain information about feelings and levels of distress, and to assess intellectual functioning, cognitive processes, personality, coping skills, life satisfaction, and functional capacity. When evaluation of counseling occurs, instruments need to monitor client progress and determine the effectiveness of specific counseling strategies and interventions. When testing hypotheses, tests should be oriented toward issues of problem solving and used as tools to aid in the collection of data.

The directions of a test need to be evaluated. Are they simple, clear, and easy to follow? They should not be ambiguous, difficult to understand, and likely to cause difficulties for clients with sensory problems. The reading level and content of a sample of items should be examined. They also should have the ability to discriminate and not contribute to sensory difficulties. The response format should be evaluated for the likelihood of social desirability sets and response inhibition. It also should be determined that the format of responses meets information needs.

The time needed to administer an instrument is important to consider. Factors such as reaction time, fatigue, motivation, and distractibility need to be considered for older persons. Also, the adaptability of an instrument for use with disabled clients should be considered particularly in terms of maintaining validity.

Finally, the scores received from a test need to be examined. The availability of appropriate normative, reliability, and validity data is an important consideration. Also, with the type of scores reported, thought should be given to the best way to present and interpret test results.

Future Needs in Assessment for Older Persons

In considering the factors affecting test selection and use with older persons discussed in the preceding section, it rapidly becomes obvious that assessment needs for this population are not being adequately met. Further, when the remaining articles in this special issue are read, the reader will have some idea of assessment needs in specific topical areas, such as attitude and leisure assessment. In this section, an overview of some of the major areas for development is provided.

Tests may be used for research, to learn about a group of people, for selection in relation to any number of variables, and for counseling with groups and individuals. To meet such test use needs with older persons, it is first necessary to consider the special needs of the total population of older persons and subgroups of this

population. Some excellent resources here include special issues of APGA journals (e.g., "Counseling Older Persons," 1976 special issue of the *Personnel and Guidance Journal*; "Work-Life Counseling for Older Persons," 1980 special issue of the *Journal of Employment counseling*; "Counseling the Elderly I, II, and III," three special issues of *Counseling and Values*, 1980).

Once the special issues and needs relevant to older persons have been defined, a review of the social-psychological and assessment literature will reveal the extent of our knowledge in each area and what, if any, assessment instruments are available. Test construction and research needs in relation to older persons will become readily apparent using this process.

As an example, we know that retirement is "a crisis in the meaningful use of time" (Havighurst, 1961, p. 338). Options that may be considered by older, retired persons for use of their time include leisure activities and paid work tasks. We might start by reviewing available needs assessment and descriptive demographic literature that includes surveys of how older persons do use their time (e.g., Harris & Associates, 1975). If we want to focus on leisure activities, we could review the McDowell and Clark article to determine available assessment instruments. Should an instrument appropriate to our purposes not be available, the process of test construction, validation, research, and so forth could be initiated. The article in this issue by Conte and Salmon illustrates the application of this process in the area of life satisfaction. After an extensive literature review, these authors developed a new index to assess this variable.

Other areas that may prove fruitful for assessment research relative to older persons are explored in this issue and include attitudes toward older persons, death fears, retirement readiness, counseling needs, and organic dysfunctions. Additional concerns may be directed toward issues such as the following: What kinds of interest inventories are appropriate for use with older persons? How can we control for culture bias in dealing with the current population and subpopulations of older persons? What kinds of tests may be validly used to assist older persons in decision making relative to educational and vocational pursuits. What kinds of assessments are needed to assist industry and individuals in the decision of when an older person could or should retire?

The interested reader can, no doubt, suggest many additional test construction and research needs relative to work with older persons. We have only begun to examine and meet needs in this area, and often find that more assessment issues are raised than answered by our efforts. The important point is that we become aware of these issues and focus our efforts toward their resolution.

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