● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● **CHAPTER 1** ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Reflections on Changes, Trends, and Current Issues in the Psychological Assessment of Youth

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According to a report of the U.S. Surgeon General, there is a mental health crisis among youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Many hypothesized reasons are cited in this report, including declining mental health, pandemic stressors, and shortages of school-based mental health providers. The need among youth in underserved schools and rural communities is even greater (Fontanella et al., 2015). For many youth, schools are the only place where they can access mental health resources, but unfortunately, only about half of U.S. public schools offer mental health assessments, and even fewer offer treatment services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). School-based mental health providers are now ramping up efforts to better equip schools to support student well-being on-site (Schaeffer, 2022), with schools being the most common location where children receive mental health services.

When challenges related to mental health and wellness arise, we hope youth and their caregivers can access culturally responsible mental health services. Psychological assessment for youth is an opportunity to provide insight, access, advocacy, and empowerment. This opportunity can only be actualized with an individualized approach to understand the whole child in their context, including their strengths. The psychological assessment process requires vulnerability from youth and their caregivers, and often plays a pivotal role in providing access to the appropriate support services. For psychological assessment to be helpful, it must be valid, accurate, and able to answer the referral questions. Moreover, the steps and methods of the assessment must be equitable, inclusive of diverse perspectives, and culturally responsible, and it must include socially just approaches.

Just as the language surrounding culturally responsible practice has evolved over time, so have psychological assessment methods and approaches. There is an expanding landscape of behavioral and social–emotional assessment in the fields of psychology and education. This introductory chapter will first explore major changes and trends in culturally responsible approaches to the psychological assessment of youth.

MAJOR CHANGES AND TRENDS IN THE FIELD

Although the field of education has been criticized for slow progress, some notable and exciting changes within the field of behavioral and psychological assessment have taken place in the last decade. As you will read about throughout this text, an impressive amount of conceptual thinking and applied research informs how to engage in assessment practices that will lead to effective

interventions to best support children and youth. Similarly, scholars featured throughout this text have outlined needed directions for continued progress and research, all with the common aim of enhancing assessment services and related outcomes for children and youth.

We highlight five major areas of change impacting the evolving landscape of behavioral and social–emotional assessment of children and youth. First, we recognize the essential move toward providing culturally responsible and equity-focused assessments. This major emphasis is explicitly stressed in each chapter and is critical in considering how to improve our assessment practices with children and youth. Second, we describe the paradigm shift away from traditional categorical approaches to assessment toward dimensional and transdiagnostic approaches. This shift recognizes the need for more accurate classification systems that go beyond "all or nothing" categorizations and can better inform prevention, early intervention, and treatment decisions for children and youth. Third, we discuss the departure from an overreliance on deficit-focused approaches of psychological assessment to embrace a holistic approach to assessment through the inclusion of strengths-based assessment. The resulting framework emphasizes the need to employ more comprehensive approaches to assessment. Fourth, a shift toward school-based social and emotional competencies emphasizes the role of schools to support youth creating positive relationships and transferable skills. And finally, we highlight some technological and data analytic advances. Recent advances have provided an opportunity for innovation in the field of psychological assessment. Taken together, these five major changes provide examples of trends, current issues, and promise that the field of assessment can and does evolve as we learn more about how to best support children and youth.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIBLE AND EQUITY-FOCUSED ASSESSMENT

One of the significant challenges in assessment is addressing issues of fairness in testing. Significant ongoing efforts are underway, and they are continuing to develop to ensure that the assessment tools and approaches used are fair and responsive to the individuals being assessed within the testing contexts that are employed. The need for these efforts is emphasized in the jointly developed American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement Education (NCME) *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (2014) test standards that describe fairness as encompassing:

> the multiple functions of testing in relation to its many goals, including the broad goal of achieving equality of opportunity in our society. It would consider the technical properties of tests, the ways in which test results are reported and used, the factors that affect the validity of score interpretations, and the consequences of test use. A comprehensive analysis of fairness in testing also would examine the regulations, statutes, and case law that govern test use and the remedies for harmful testing practices. (p. 49)

Although the *Standards* acknowledge the inability to adequately address each of these issues, the point is well-received that fairness is a critical matter to any psychological and educational assessment of children and youth. There is an ongoing need to develop, continually evaluate, and use assessment tools and practices that are fair and unbiased and that fully consider the diverse sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds of children and youth. This emphasis is present and emphasized explicitly and intentionally throughout this book.

For example, Chapter 3 describes an approach to engaging in culturally responsive behavioral assessment that centers youth voice. Complementing this culturally responsive approach to assessment, Chapter 5 describes a culturally responsible assessment approach that emphasizes the need for those engaged in any assessment practice to take *responsibility* to ensure fairness for the clients they are serving. This culturally responsible term is described as encompassing and extending upon culturally responsive, culturally relevant, and culturally sensitive practices (Moore et al., in press). Further, each of the subsequent chapters describes ongoing needs and specific efforts made to ensure that the assessment approaches and specific assessment tools for various disorders are used in ways that promote fairness and equity.

We are encouraged by the significant shift toward culturally responsible assessment practices, and we appreciate the continued push for equity-focused assessment practices. A few examples of current trends and progress being made with the goal of fairness in testing include the increased emphasis on context (see Chapter 7), the need for diverse representation in norm-referenced groups

(see Chapter 11), examination of the differential item functioning in assessment tools (see Chapter 13), and inspection of the cultural loading of items (see Chapter 16). We anticipate that efforts to address bias, ensure fairness, and promote inclusivity in assessment tools, procedures, and interpretations will be ongoing and crucial to the field of psychological and educational assessment.

DIMENSIONAL TRANSDIAGNOSTIC APPROACHES

There is a growing paradigm shift away from the current use of taxonomies and toward transdiagnostic assessment. The current system for categorizing mental disorders, which utilizes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5 TR; now in its 5th edition with a text revision; American Psychiatric Association, 2022) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD; now in its 11th edition; World Health Organization, 2019), has been criticized for heterogeneity within diagnoses, poor symptom discrimination between disorders with overlap resulting in comorbid diagnosis as the rule not the exception, and lack of life course developmental considerations (Dalgleish et al., 2020; Lahey et al., 2022).

Dimensional assessment represents a departure from traditional categorical approaches using psychiatric nosology by considering behavior and social–emotional functioning along a continuum rather than assigning individuals to discrete diagnostic categories. Instead of viewing mental health or behavioral challenges as dichotomous (i.e., yielding a diagnosis as either present versus absent, or simply stated, diagnosis vs. no diagnosis), dimensional assessment acknowledges the multidimensional nature of psychological functioning and recognizes that individuals may exhibit varying degrees of symptoms or functioning across different domains and symptoms. This decreased emphasis on diagnosis highlights the impact of unitary symptoms on an individual's well-being and symptoms (e.g., suicide, anhedonia, impulsivity) that cut across diagnostic categories and disorders resulting in a "transdiagnostic" approach to assessment and treatment of behavioral and social–emotional functioning. By focusing on an individual within their ecological context, a personalized profile can inform culturally responsible supports. Moreover, school-based practitioners are already familiar with this type of assessment. School-based assessment is presently not provided

for diagnostic purposes; rather, comprehensive assessment provides the opportunity to identify clinically significant symptoms across domains of functioning in order to create individualized support plans for students.

Dimensional assessment provides a framework that aligns with current research and advances in understanding mental health and behavioral functioning. It supports the integration of research findings into assessment practices and fosters collaborations between researchers and practitioners in refining assessment tools and interventions. For example, one such collaboration was created by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) through Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) to offer a structure for investigating the biopsychosocial factors contributing to mental health challenges. However, few interventions and mostly cognitive behavioral therapies have come from RDoC. This attempt to translate dimensional approaches results in a "translational gap" demonstrating significant challenges in creating clinical interventions based on RDoC research findings (Dalgleish et al., 2020, p. 189). In another example, the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiToP; Kotov et al., 2017) is a consortium-based, research-driven effort to reduce problems with the current taxonomies (e.g., comorbidities, heterogeneity within diagnosis, diagnostic instability). HiToP uses a dimensional framework to further group symptoms into spectra. Although not yet fully mapped out, HiToP research is advancing quickly, has evidence of clinical utility in practice, and appears to be a promising model (Kotov et al., 2021).

Despite the current shortcomings and needs for further research, transdiagnostic approaches have a future potential to better capture the complex intricacies of behavior and social–emotional functioning, leading to improved identification of individual needs, targeted interventions, and a more personalized approach (Dalgleish et al., 2020) to support youth in their development and well-being. Before transitioning away from more common-place categorical systems to a dimensional model using a transdiagnostic approach, significant implementation challenges will need to be overcome. We look toward the future to better understand dimensional approaches through cultural responsiveness, shifting mindsets, transitioning existing systems, training implications, demonstrated reliability and validity of assessments, established norms and benchmarks, integration of assessment and intervention, ethical

considerations, and managed healthcare limitations (e.g., time constraints, reimbursement, standardization vs. individualization, limited coverage for certain dimensions, challenges in explaining complexity to payers, managing treatment and intervention approvals, and balancing quality with cost efficiency). For further guidance on measurement selection for transdiagnostic approaches, see Stanton et al., 2020. For practitioners who would like to explore the use of HiToP in clinical practice, see the HiToP website (*https://hitop.unt.edu*).

STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES

Traditional psychological assessment practices often focus on the presence or absence of psychopathology, with diagnoses linked to behavioral symptoms and associated levels of impaired functioning. The last three decades have seen growing recognition in the field of psychological assessment of the importance of assessing children's strengths (e.g., positive qualities, dispositions) along with their challenges and needs. These strength-based approaches have focused on more holistic assessment procedures that can promote increased engagement from children and create interventions that build upon a child's strengths (Bozic, 2013; Furlong et al., 2014; Jimerson et al., 2004). For example, proponents of positive psychology have discussed new assessment models that integrate risk and pathology with aspects of human adaptation and development (Masten, 2001) and that are associated with optimal human functioning (Keyes, 2005).

An emerging trend in the field is the creation, use, and promotion of assessment measures that include factors that evaluate children's strengths and needs. The dual-factor or dual-continuum model has been proposed as a way to conceptualize factors that contribute to overall mental health functioning, which includes the co-occurrence of symptoms of mental illness paired with indicators of mental wellness. Several studies have used assessments of positive indicators of wellness with negative indicators of psychological functioning to demonstrate that some individuals with varying levels of low and high dysfunction also experience low and high levels of well-being; these studies have examined the impact that the combinations of positive and negative symptoms can have on behavioral and academic outcomes (e.g., Eklund et al., 2011; Keyes & Lopez, 2002; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Additionally,

these studies have demonstrated that psychological flourishing is more than the absence of behavioral and emotional symptoms and that it also includes positive affective experiences and dispositions that contribute to the full range of human functioning. Chapter 5 provides an in-depth review of dual-factor assessment.

Unfortunately, the development and use of psychometrically sound and age-appropriate assessments of positive psychology constructs for children and youth lags far behind measures that assess psychopathology (Furlong et al., 2014). Schools in the United States often focus on identifying and remediating student weaknesses while often ignoring the identification of strengths and the integration of student competencies in the development of interventions and supports (Gordon, 2006). Additional work is needed to promote the idea that assessment measures that integrate a dual factor of human functioning can lead to more positive outcomes for children. Certainly, more information can be learned from the assessment of concepts such as mindfulness (see Chapter 24) and when assessing strengths in children with neurodevelopmental disabilities (see Chapter 14) that very clearly demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive understanding and perspective of student well-being and strengths.

FOCUS ON SOCIAL–EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

Aligned with a focus on strength-based approaches, assessing the social and emotional well-being of our youth is gaining increased attention. Psychologists and schools are recognizing the importance of evaluating not only academic achievements but also students' social skills, emotional regulation, and social–emotional competencies. Comprehensive assessment tools and practices that address these domains are needed. Social–emotional learning (SEL) is one term used to describe programs that many schools have implemented to help students build the necessary skills to effectively manage their emotions and navigate their social environments (Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2024). CASEL further defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and

show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2021, p. 6). As the demand grows for future-ready skills, assessments will increasingly focus on evaluating transferable skills and competencies, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving, rather than solely emphasizing content knowledge.

Emerging SEL programs are designed to teach youth how to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others and develop the necessary social skills to establish positive relationships with peers and adults (Weissberg et al., 2015). SEL programs aim to create more positive school climates in which students feel supported and respected and where they can learn additional coping strategies to address adversity (Yeager, 2017). Although much has been done to advance SEL programs, policies, and state level standards that support the development of student competencies (Eklund et al., 2018), less research exists to support assessment tools and methods that assess student social and emotional competence (McKown, 2019). Chapter 25 provides a unique focus on culturally responsive assessment practices that include how fairness-related data may be considered in SEL assessments and provide future recommendations for culturally fair assessment practices. Additional lists of available SEL assessments, along with information about their psychometric properties, can be found at the CASEL assessment guide (*https://measuringsel.casel.org/assessment-guide*).

TECHNOLOGICAL AND DATA ANALYTIC ADVANCES

Another trend we are watching in the assessment field is related to advances in technological and data analytics. The rapid advancement of technology has created tremendous opportunities for innovative assessment methods. Online and computer-based assessments, adaptive testing, and data-driven approaches are being explored to enhance the efficiency, accessibility, and accuracy of assessment processes. For example, assessments of cognitive abilities (see Chapter 17 for description of their use in the assessment of Intellectual Disabilities), attention and neurological functioning (see Chapter 16 for description of continuous performance tasks for use in the assessment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), and behavioral and emotional functioning (see Chapter

12) are frequently completed online via computers or tablets.

Technology will continue to play a significant role in assessment. Utilizing artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data analytics can provide valuable insights into students' learning patterns, progress, and areas requiring intervention, enabling more data-informed decision-making. In a recent article describing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in practice by health service psychologists, the potential benefits, limitations, and ethical and legal considerations were described (Farmer et al., 2024). Some of the notable benefits included reducing administrative burdens (e.g., integrating assessment data, generating explanations of complex concepts, providing interpretations of commonly used assessment tools, detailing recommendations aligned with assessment results) and enhancing service provision (e.g., having virtual therapists to provide low-level interventions based on assessment results; enhancing diagnostic capabilities); however, these benefits must be weighed with the potential risks including introducing bias (e.g., AI bots trained on datasets with societal biases; search engines reinforcing oppression), deskilling (e.g., loss of clinical skills due to overreliance on technology), and privacy concerns such as potential data breaches (Farmer et al., 2024).

Importantly, AI has also been described as an innovative tool uniquely capable of addressing health equity by facilitating the use of digital, population-level assessments of mental health and early interventions with an emphasis on culturally responsive care (Cerezo et al., 2024). The proliferation of AI tools specific to the roles of psychologists who are frequently engaged in the assessment process (e.g., SchoolPsychAI, Click-report) is one of the many indicators that technological and data analytic advances are on the rise. As such, it is incumbent upon the professionals engaged in psychological and educational assessment to ensure that these tools are used wisely and to the benefit of the communities and clients we serve.

CONCLUSION

Herein, five trends, issues, and potential major changes are highlighted as ones to watch. It is imperative that practitioners remain committed to culturally responsible and equitable approaches as emerging practices are being adopted and evalu-

ated. We are encouraged to see many trends emphasizing holistic frameworks, strengths, ecological variables and context, and the uniqueness of the individual. However, current practice remains largely focused on DSM-5 TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) and ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2019), which emphasize diagnosis, with symptom counting, deficits, and categorical models. Researchers are investigating the shift toward dimensional models and the incorporation of technology into practice; we may possibly experience a large shift in the field during our lifetimes. These trends and changes reflect a growing recognition of the importance of cultural responsibility, equitable assessment practices, and cultural context in understanding and supporting youth, no matter where technology guides the field.

The increasing use of technology and data-driven assessment methods aimed at practitioners further indicates this emerging trend may become a major shift in the field. Although efficiency and accessibility are noble pursuits, new tools must be carefully examined for accuracy and bias and interpreted within the context of the individual. Practitioners must advocate for fair and inclusive assessment methods, many of which are detailed in the following chapters. If practitioners utilize a lens of cultural responsibility and equity, strengths-based assessment can be an important support tool for youth and their families.

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