



Caution: Internet-Based Assessments May Be Hazardous to Your Career

by Lawrence K. Jones

Invalid measures are a threat to the public and the counseling profession. Career counselors are urged to take action.



In the past several years, there has been a profusion of new career tests, quizzes, sorters, finders, and profilers marketed on the Internet, complete with convincing endorsements by people in the career services field. You have probably wondered, “How good are they? Do people benefit from taking them? Can I recommend them to my clients?” Professional caution increases when further investigation reveals that most of these measures are not accompanied by the psychometric information necessary to answer those questions. Given the harmful effect of indiscriminate use of career assessments, and at risk of sounding self-serving, authors and developers of standardized career measures need to encourage professional counselor self-reform and public advocacy in the selection and use of career measures.

THREAT TO THE PUBLIC

Example: A popular online and paper-pencil career measure sponsored by the U.S. government is a self-described “valid” measure of Holland’s six personality types. However, the available user’s manual and online research reports that it often gives people who most closely resemble the Enterprising type a high score on the Investigative scale. A question arises as to whether this “test result” or “misclassification” is specific to the Enterprising dimension, or does it occur as well on the remaining personality types? The answer, according to their reports, is that a large number of individuals classified as primarily Social are misclassified as Conventional, Enterprising, or Investigative. This example illustrates the result of lack of adherence to a hallmarks of a good “test” --it must be valid; in other words, it measures what it purports to measure.

The extent to which the above misclassification is harmful, and to what extent it typifies other Internet-based measures is undetermined for two reasons: a) counseling research has focused on the benefits of valid career measures, and b) studies of the harmfulness of career measures of unknown validity would raise questions about the ethics of doing this research on humans. Consequently, we may never know empirically the extent of harm resulting from use of career assessments of unknown or invalid career assessment.

For some individuals, invalid or questionable career “tests” will have little or no impact. But those who are highly motivated are likely to have strong, negative reactions. Career practitioners are all too familiar with them: clients who are full of anticipation, looking forward to the results, eager to learn about themselves, and to explore their educational and career options. Disbelief, confusion, or frustration are what they likely experience when presented assessment results contrary to self-knowledge. These negative reactions may intensify when the client attempts application of the assessment results to career exploration activity, like identifying the occupations that match their high scores.

For some people, questionable results are going to lower their motivation to continue being proactive. Others will accept the erroneous results as true and proceed accordingly -- exploring occupations or educational options that do not fit them. Finally, others may make important decisions based on these incorrect results. Thus, those who are confused, stressed, immature, or low in self-confidence can be the most vulnerable and most likely hurt by misinformation.

THREAT TO PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING

The most significant potential harm to career practitioners is that the public--parents/caregivers, teachers, and others--may become frustrated by the practitioner’s efforts to help guide individuals in their career development and problem solving. Consumers may rightly question the ethical standards of professional counselors and demand accountability for the scientific basis of career interventions. The counseling profession suffers as these frustrations affect the public’s perception of our field. Another major threat is that it discourages researchers and test developers from developing effective

career assessments. Why spend the time (often years) and money on developing empirically sound measures in a commodities-driven economy where virtually anyone can create a "career measure" in a few hours time for the Internet?

ADVOCACY TO PROTECT THE PUBLIC AND OUR PROFESSION

Professional career tests have their limitations, but reliable and valid career measures have much to offer. They will always be a vital part of our heritage and profession. They deserve our vigilant and strong advocacy. There is much that can be done.

➤ **Request a professional manual** for any instrument you recommend or use in your practice; study it closely. Does it contain research studies published in respected professional journals? Does it meet the standards of validity and reliability expected in our profession? Some websites claim their test is valid, and even offer a "scientific report", but a careful reading finds the evidence missing. Similarly, the same may be true for career services "certified" by industry and professional groups, as well as the blandishments of "experts" or testimonials. Be skeptical and appeal to the highest professional standards in making your informed judgment about a tool.

➤ **Support those who offer valid career measures**, and fight against those that mislead and are potentially harmful. Be wary of hubris. Recognize that we live at a time when government services are being cut back or privatized. The desire for self-preservation can lead to deception, denial, minimizing, and a variety of rationalizations. In the competitive corporate world, profits and competition are the hallmarks of practice.

➤ **Strengthen your knowledge and skills** in the area of tests and measurement by participating in test and measurement-related continuing education opportunities.

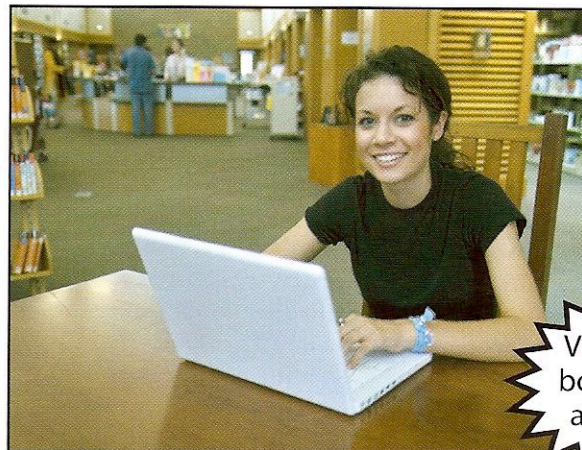
➤ **Practice good ethics:** "Counselors [shall] carefully consider the validity, reliability, psychometric limitations, and the appropriateness of instruments when selecting tests for use in a given situation or with a particular client" -- American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

➤ **Work with your professional associations** -- local, state, and national -- to inform the membership and the public about the potential hazards of using invalid career measures and how to protect themselves and others.

Professional counselors' lack of knowledge and timidity create a fertile field for exploitation. Be an advocate! Join with other colleagues and communicate your concerns to influential individuals within professional organizations, publishing entities, and the public. ■

Lawrence K. Jones, Ph.D., NCC is Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University is the author of several professional career measures and has served on the editorial boards of the CDQ and JCD. Larry received ACA's Professional Development Award in 2001. Larry is President of Career Key, a philanthropy and business devoted to helping people make good career decisions. His work is primarily Internet-related: The Career Key™ (www.careerkey.org) and Self-Employment Key™ (www.self-employmentkey.org). He can be reached at lawrencejonesphd@earthlink.net

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