

The Process of Psychological Assessment: A Critique of Non-Participatory Observations Within Educational Psychology Practice and the Process of Psychological Assessment

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According to the *Professional Practice Guidelines for Educational Psychologists* (EPs), psychological assessment in education is a continuous process, aiming to improve effective and inclusive education for children and young people (CYP) (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2002). Within this process, information about CYP can be gathered through consultation; curriculum-based assessment; psychometric and dynamic assessment; measures of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH); and observation. Regarding observation specifically, it can be considered that this method of information gathering is frequently used not only by EPs but also by special education teachers, teacher trainers and Ofsted, regarding quality of learning, teaching, and interventions (Bowles et al., 2016).

In this sense, it may become necessary for EPs to be mindful of their role in, and purpose for, conducting observations within the process of assessment, not just watching behaviour but formulating and testing hypotheses about why behaviours occur (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Additionally, while EPs' frequent use of observations could be considered positive due to various advantages (Tilstone, 2012), its prevalence within the profession also makes it necessary to consider and be aware of any potential limitations. This paper will, therefore, evaluate the use of observations within the process of psychological assessment, particularly regarding the legal, ethical and moral principles of EP practice; different observation techniques and related psychological frameworks; and the potential impact of individual differences between professionals.

The Process of Psychological Assessment Within EP Practice: An Overview

Bowles et al. (2016) identifies the process of psychological assessment as a key function of EP practice, in which EPs work directly with service users, educational providers, policy development and research specialists to find solutions for overcoming CYP's barriers to learning. As discussed, this process may be informed through consultations — with teachers, parents/carers or other professionals — meeting with CYP, and further supplemented by analysis of pupil work, psychometric/dynamic testing, SEMH measures, and/or observation, wherein the approaches chosen depend on the purpose of EP involvement and situational context (BPS, Scottish Division of Educational Psychology [SDEP], 2014). According to Frederickson, Webster, and Wright (1991) and the *BPS Professional Practice Guidelines* (2002), psychological assessment should involve creative investigation of a broad range of hypotheses, building on research from all areas of psychology. In this sense, it could be understood that the way in which EPs can use an array of approaches and theories for gathering information about CYP — before considering this information holistically — is a valuable aspect of the EP role; similarly, Frederickson et al.

(1991) suggest that this is the most significant factor in the distinctive contribution which EPs make to the assessment of CYP's needs.

However, it could also be considered that this variety in applied theories and approaches could reduce consistency and unity within EP practice, in addition to the reliability and effectiveness of the process of psychological assessment (Kelly, Marks Woolfson, & Boyle, 2008). EPs may, therefore, use frameworks to provide scaffolding to the process of psychological assessment, wherein “executive frameworks” may be particularly useful, as they do not specify an approach or theoretical orientation to use (Kelly et al., 2008). Executive frameworks are those which can be applied to “any area” of EP practice at “any level”, and “do not stipulate the methods or theoretical orientation that should be employed by the EP” (Wicks, 2013, p. 153). This means EPs are still able to consider a variety of approaches and theories within the process of assessment — which as previously discussed, can be considered a valuable asset of their role — while the framework itself offers structure to the process and consistency between practitioners. Another advantage of using frameworks in the process of psychological assessment is that other stakeholders involved with the CYP can also have access to, and be engaged in, the process. This is particularly

significant, as the revised Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (COP) (2015) emphasises the importance of involving the CYP's family, teachers and other professionals within EP practice.

One example of an executive framework is The Common Assessment Framework (CAF), wherein the assessment process follows a cycle consisting of discussions; gathering information; investigating; planning interventions; and reviewing and evaluating (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Other examples of executive frameworks used by EPs in the process of psychological assessment include the Interactive Factors Framework (Frederickson & Cameron, 1999; Frederickson & Cline, 2002), the Problem-Solving Framework (Monsen, Graham, Frederickson, & Cameron, 1998), and COMOIRA (a constructionist model of informed, reasoned action) (Gameson, Rhydderch, Ellis, & Carroll, 2003). While each framework differs in terms of specific structure and "steps", each is presented as a continual process, wherein steps can move in various directions as necessary. In this sense, the process of psychological assessment can be understood as a continual and flexible cycle, as even when — if considering the CAF specifically — an intervention is planned and implemented, the effectiveness of the intervention itself is assessed, and monitored through the "review and evaluate" step. This evaluative step is similarly featured in each framework, implying that intervention, or any other part of the assessment process, is not necessarily an end point.

However, although intervention may not be considered the "end" of psychological assessment, informing intervention is still considered a significant goal of the process (BPS, SDEP, 2014). The BPS, therefore, suggests the process of psychological assessment should investigate a wide range of factors, including the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social factors which could affect CYP. In this sense, the variety of methods and contexts from which EPs can gather information is again particularly valuable, while observations specifically could be considered a significantly informative approach. For instance, classroom observations — which as will be discussed, are often used by EPs in the assessment process — may provide information on CYP regarding cognitive factors, such as their engagement with learning; behavioural factors, such as actions in class; emotional factors, such as those presented in observable behaviours; and social factors, such as interactions with teachers/peers. Therefore, observations have the potential to inform the process of psychological assessment on numerous levels, and can hence be considered a significantly helpful tool. It is perhaps for this reason, amongst others, that observations are so widely used; however as previously discussed, this also means the approach should be appropriately considered and evaluated.

Defining Observations Within EP Practice and the Process of Psychological Assessment

Observation is a term commonly used both generally and specifically by psychologists and other professionals, and is open to a wide range of interpretations (Tilstone, 2012). For instance, general connotations of observation can vary in intensity and complexity, ranging from informal associations such as "looking" or "glancing", to implications of analysis, such as "scrutinising" or "investigating" (Tilstone, 2012). While the meaning of observation can be widely interpreted, the most common definition of the term can be understood as "watching"; this can also, therefore, be considered the most common understanding of the term by professionals working with CYP. In terms of psychology specifically, observations can generate quantitative or qualitative data, be structured or unstructured, and are conducted in natural or controlled settings, with either participatory or non-participatory observers (Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007). For the purposes of further discussion, this paper will consider and evaluate the use of observations in terms of natural, non-participatory observations, conducted in the CYP's natural environment, such as their home or educational setting, when the EP does not (generally) engage with the CYP. It may be useful to evaluate this type of observation specifically, due to the frequency of its use in informing the psychological assessment process (Tilstone, 2012). As various structured and unstructured techniques are used to conduct such observations, these will also be considered further.

In terms of the literature reviewed to inform the paper, the reading sought to identify research and practice by EPs relating to observations and the process of psychological assessment. A comprehensive search was completed on the following online databases: EBSCO, PsycINFO, Wiley online library, PsycARTICLES, Google Scholar, ProQuest Ebook Central, Academic Search Complete, Science Direct and Education Research Complete. An initial search filter was set to "educational psychology and observation and assessment", but few results were produced. The following keywords were then used in all possible combinations, without time limiters: observation*, psychology, assessment, children, young people, individual-differences, culture. References of retrieved papers were considered for relevant sources, and the reading snowballed. As there were fewer results than anticipated from EP practice/research specifically, much of the reviewed literature is sourced from research in education, psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology and physics. The paper aims to apply and consider this literature in relation to the process of psychological assessment, by referring to the legal and ethical guidelines for EP practice, the practicalities of the assessment process and my personal experiences as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP).

Legal and Ethical Considerations

Regarding the SEND COP (Department for Education, Department of Health, 2015) and BPS, SDEP (2014) — particularly in terms of specifications concerning Educational Health and Care Plans, and as previously discussed, requirements for EPs to investigate cognitive, behavioural, emotional and social factors affecting CYP — it could be understood that, from a legal perspective, EPs should consider various aspects of CYP's situations throughout the assessment process, including environmental contexts. In this sense, since observations can be conducted in various settings — including the classroom, playground, home or otherwise — their use can be considered not only useful for comprehensive information gathering but also relevant to the COP, SDEP and hence the legalities of EP practice. This can also be seen regarding the COP (2015) specifications to involve CYP's family, school and other relevant professionals throughout the assessment process as, although EPs consider observations from a psychological perspective and formulate hypotheses, it can be suggested that, generally speaking, the concept of observations is accessible. This means that teachers, families and other professionals involved with the CYP may be familiar and able to engage with the concept of observations — particularly when compared with other approaches to information gathering such as psychometrics — and hence feel more able to contribute to the assessment process.

In other respects, however, it could be considered that some methods of observation are less congruent with the COP (2015) and may, therefore, be problematic regarding the legalities of EP practice and the process of psychological assessment. For instance, in covert observations — often used by practising EPs (Tilstone, 2012) — the observed CYP is not informed that they are being observed; in contrast, overt observations involve the practitioner being open about their presence, ensuring the observed CYP is aware of their intentions (*Code of Human Research Ethics [CHRE]*, 2010). Although the BPS state that, in some instances, EP research may involve work with CYP such as classroom observations, wherein consent may not be necessary if those being observed would “reasonably expect to be observed by strangers” (BPS, 2009, p. 13), in terms of the COP (2015) and the Children and Families Act (2014), use of covert observations could still be considered problematic. For instance, these documents specify that local authorities (LAs) must ensure CYP are provided with all the information necessary to participate in discussions and decisions about their support. In this sense, using covert observations in the process of psychological assessment and not informing CYP of the situation may be considered inappropriate regarding the COP.

This could be particularly significant regarding older CYP, as the Children and Families Act (2014) gives significant new

rights to YP once they reach the age of sixteen. At this point, LAs and other agencies should normally engage directly with the YP rather than their parent, ensuring that the YP identifies the people/professionals involved in their assessment, as part of the planning process. In this sense, conducting covert observations of YP aged sixteen or over could be problematic from a legal perspective, as the YP will not have been involved in the planning part of the assessment process or have elected such EP involvement. Another potential issue with conducting covert observations of CYP — particularly regarding the process of assessment — is that if an EP were to meet the CYP at a later stage in the process, the pupil may recognise the EP and realise they have been observed without their knowledge/consent. Depending on the situation, this may not be an issue; however, for some CYP — perhaps those with prior involvement or negative experiences of professionals — this realisation could negatively affect them and their relationship with the EP. This relates to an experience I had as a TEP when meeting a child whom I had previously observed covertly:

When observing a year 6 child in class at a Pupil Referral Unit, although I sat at the back of the classroom, I felt my presence was quite obvious, due to both the small room and class size, and my entrance being made from the front of the classroom after pupils were settled.

Later that morning I met the child to elicit his views; he seemed happy talking to me and engaged in our conversations, until he realised he had seen me in class. He asked if I had been watching him, and, as I felt it inappropriate to lie, I tried to normalise the situation by saying I watch lots of CYP to see how school is for them. The child went very quiet and said that I “didn't have [his] permission to watch [him]” and “everyone always watches [him]”. Following this, the child seemed far less engaged in our previously comfortable and seemingly open conversation.

This experience showed me not only how the use of covert classroom observations can potentially upset CYP but also how this can then affect pupil–EP interactions. As well as being concerning for the individual's wellbeing, this could also be problematic from a legal perspective, as the COP (2015) states LAs should work with CYP to establish the aims of their participation and, most significantly, build trust between them and the EP. Furthermore, regarding the process of psychological assessment, risking the trust/relationship between pupil and EP could significantly reduce CYP engagement in, and contribution to, the process — which, in addition to being potentially damaging to its effectiveness, is also legally problematic regarding, as previously discussed, the COP's

(2015) emphasis on including CYP participation. However, this particular situation and experience could be avoided with planning; had I known the classroom layout before my observation, for instance, I could have ensured I arrived before the pupils to avoid an obvious entrance or met with the child a few days after the observation to lessen his chances of remembering me.

However, even if this situation were better managed, or the child had not realised/minded my observing him, covert observations could still present issues ethically regarding informed consent. For instance, according to the *CHRE*, psychologists should inform participants of the investigation objectives wherever possible, as well as aspects of the investigation which might affect willingness to participate (BPS, 2010). In this sense, the use of covert observations within the process of assessment could be considered problematic both legally and ethically for practising EPs. On the other hand, the *CHRE* states observational research is acceptable when those being observed would expect to be observed by strangers. In this sense, as CYP are generally familiar with being observed — such as by teacher trainers or Ofsted inspectors — it can be suggested that covert observations are, therefore, ethically acceptable in EP practice (BPS, 2010). The *CHRE* also specifies covert information gathering is acceptable, if doing so is essential to achieve the required results — similarly to previously discussed in *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (BPS, 2009) regarding consent. Therefore, it could be understood that conducting covert observations during the process of psychological assessment is acceptable both legally and ethically in EP practice, if the EP feels pre-informing the CYP would decrease the validity of the observation and information gathered.

Practical Applications: Considerations of Validity and Reliability

Considering, as discussed, the differences between covert and overt observations, it can be suggested that, although covert observations present potential ethical issues regarding deception and consent, the information gathered could be considered higher in validity than that from overt observations. For instance, informing CYP that they are being observed may decrease the validity of information gathered — and hence affect the overall assessment process — due to potential observer effects and/or demand characteristics, wherein demand characteristics can be understood as participants making inferences about what an experimenter might expect/desire to see and subsequently altering their behaviour (Smith, Mackie, & Claypool, 2015). This concept and effect of demand characteristics can be further considered through physics, particularly regarding the “double-slit” experiment by Wheeler (1978). In this study — aimed to determine whether light behaves like particles or waves — individual atoms were fired at a screen containing two

slits, to assess whether they passed through one slit at a time (like a particle), or both simultaneously (like a wave). Results showed not only that the atoms could exhibit both behaviours but, more significantly — and arguably relevant to EP practice — that they behaved differently depending on whether or not they were being observed. More specifically, when the screen was monitored, the atoms passed through one slit; however, when the screen was not monitored, the atoms passed through both slits simultaneously.

In this sense — if even at a quantum-physics level, the behaviour of atoms can differ depending on whether or not they are observed — this implies that in terms of EP practice and the process of assessment, it is important to be aware that the mere act of observing (even in covert observations) may significantly alter CYP’s behaviour, hence impacting on the validity and value of the information gathered and its contribution to the assessment process. It could, therefore, be suggested that the only way to control for demand characteristics and improve the validity of information gathered from observations is to remove the observer completely by using remote video observations. However, as well as presenting further ethical issues regarding consent and confidentiality, such approaches may deny the EP opportunities to reflect on potentially useful emotional reactions/feelings, which are more accessible through being physically present in the observation (Bick, 1964). Therefore, in terms of acquiring valid and meaningful information for the purposes of psychological assessment, covert observations may, again, be considered an effective technique, provided the observer remains as inconspicuous as possible.

This can also be considered in relation to anthropology, as Morris (1995) suggests that to be an effective observer one should be an “invisible witness”, remain objective and unaffected by natural prejudices and embody a “watcher rather than an experimenter” (Morris, 1995, p. 7). However, if analysis and psychological formulations are considered a distinctive element of the EP role — and hence significant in contributing to the process of psychological assessment — it could also be suggested that, as an EP, watching behaviour without analysis is of little value (Tilstone, 2012). In this sense, it could be considered useful for EPs to analyse CYP’s behaviour whilst observing it, meaning it may be beneficial to conduct observations after the consultation stage of the assessment process. For instance, as consultations provide an opportunity for teachers and families to voice specific concerns regarding CYP — and for EPs to consider and ask questions regarding this information — conducting observations after consultations may assist EPs in simultaneously observing and analysing behaviour, as there may be initial hypotheses on which to reflect and specific behaviours to monitor. Equally, it may also be useful to have prior knowledge of the CYP being observed, regarding any sensitive family, cultural or mobility issues of which the EP should

be aware.

However, conducting observations after consultation could also lessen the validity of information gathered, as the EP could be at risk of forming unconscious prejudices, which may then be confirmed through seeing what is expected to be seen (Tilstone, 2012). Equally, such prejudices could influence how EPs feel towards the observed CYP, which, in turn, may affect interpretation of behaviour. For instance, when observing a YP as a TEP, although aware that I should not necessarily be influenced by others' opinions of him, I could not entirely control an emotional response had before the observation, which may have affected my approach:

When reading the case files for a YP prior to observation, I learnt he had been in care for a number of years and moved foster placements several times due to his behaviour becoming "unmanageable". His most recent foster carers reported various dangerous and concerning behaviours regarding their younger children and referred to the YP as "evil".

Not only did this raise concerns regarding the attitudes of the foster carers themselves, but I felt anxious observing and meeting this YP, despite knowing I should not be influenced by this information, and attempting to ignore it. When I conducted the observation I did not witness evil behaviour but was aware that my feelings may have influenced my outlook.

On reflection, this shows that, even if an EP is aware of being influenced by background information or the opinions of others, it is not always possible to ignore potentially obstructive feelings or emotional responses. This could, therefore, be something of which to remain aware when conducting an observation at a later stage in the assessment process, or with prior knowledge of the CYP. Another potential issue to consider is that, if an observer tends to "look for what is already known", additional factors which may also be useful to the process of psychological assessment could be missed as a result (Fawcett, 1996). In this sense, systematic methods for conducting and recording observations could be considered useful, as they can offer a means of ensuring various potential factors are investigated, irrespective of EPs' prior knowledge. There are various observation methods available; however, it is suggested that there is a lack of consensus regarding the most appropriate and feasible techniques (Himle et al., 2006).

Observation Technique: Strengths, Limitations and Associated Psychological Principles

In order to make sense of observations, Tilstone (2012) suggests they should be conducted and recorded system-

atically by using structured techniques, increasing consistency between EPs' practice and hence the reliability of information gathered for an assessment process. One commonly used observation technique is the Classroom Environment Observation schedule, in which EPs record various factors separately, including classroom environment, teacher-student interactions, CYP-peer relations, CYP learning styles and individual behaviour. This could be beneficial for the process of psychological assessment, as it necessitates EPs to consider various potential factors, as specified by the BPS. Additionally, as this technique involves classification and hence interpretation of observed behaviours, this may advance hypothesis formulation. In terms of psychological theory, this technique can be seen to relate to the principles of Systemic Psychology, as it emphasises the potential effects of various external factors, similarly to the principles of macro- and micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, it could be suggested that recording observations in this way may risk subjective interpretation of CYP's behaviour and that details could be missed whilst considering in which category to record information.

In this sense, an alternative technique such as the Narrative Observation Schedule could be useful, as this involves recording all the CYP's behaviours chronologically and noting reflections as and when they occur. However, it could be suggested that watching the individual CYP so closely could be considered a "within-child" approach, comparable to the psychological principles of the Medical Model, potentially resulting in significant environmental factors being missed and hence not being reflected on/addressed appropriately in the assessment process. Similarly, other observation techniques — such as Time, Interval or Event Sampling — could also result in significant information being missed; for instance, as these techniques involve either observing and recording CYP for a specific time period or monitoring a specific behaviour, information may be missed while the CYP is not being observed or if it is unrelated to the monitored behaviour. In this sense, although Sampling techniques could be considered useful in terms of reviewing the effectiveness of intervention — for example, by considering the frequency of specific behaviours pre- and post-intervention — their use could also be seen to affect the comprehensiveness of information gathered from an observation and hence its value to other aspects of the assessment process.

Another observation technique which could present issues regarding the comprehensiveness of information gathered is Bick's (1964) model of Infant Observation; in which EPs observe the CYP for one hour and notes are not made until after the observation. A potential advantage of this technique is that the EP is able to completely focus on the CYP and any environmental factors; additionally, this means the EP may be more available to experience any emotional responses to the observation, which may be useful to reflect on later in the

process (Bick, 1964). However, conducting/reporting observations in this way is dependent on memory, which is prone to response bias; this could, therefore, compromise the accuracy, validity and reliability of recorded information and hence affect what information is contributed to the assessment process (Bradley, 2008). Additionally, as this technique considers the observed behaviour in terms of psychoanalytic theory — such as Freud (1926), Klein (1946) and Bion (1962) — although such psychological principles have value, interpreting an observation in relation to psychodynamic theory may also be considered a “within-child” approach, and hence risk disregarding potentially significant external/environmental factors impacting on the CYP.

In this sense, although using a specific technique when conducting observations may be beneficial in terms of offering systematic structure — and hence consistency in EP practice — the variety of techniques and their unique strengths/limitations could mean that the same observation has the potential to produce varying information, depending on the technique used. This could then negatively affect the reliability of the information gathered and hence its usefulness to the assessment process. In terms of which technique is used, it could be suggested that this would depend on the professional judgement of the individual EP, regarding the individual CYP/situation, and the questions asked in the assessment process. However, as it can be understood that different techniques relate to different psychological approaches, it could also be suggested that an EP’s choice of observation technique may be consciously or unconsciously influenced by their preferred psychological theories. In this sense, individual differences between EPs could be seen to not only influence which observation technique is chosen — and hence what information is gathered and contributed to the process of psychological assessment — but also how an observation is interpreted.

Individual Differences Between EPs: Differing Perceptions, Experience and Culture

As discussed, the variety of explicit psychological theories used within EP practice — particularly regarding observation techniques — could impact on the process of psychological assessment, as the EP’s psychological background may influence their choice of observation technique and hence the content of information gathered. This potential issue could arguably be controlled for, therefore, if all EPs used one standardised observation technique during the assessment process, as, according to Fodor (1984), two people using the same psychology will generally observe the same things from the same stimuli, regardless of their individual theoretical preferences. However, Votsis (2015) suggests that if EPs support different theories — particularly if from differing paradigms, such as positivist and realist approaches — then individuals will systematically perceive and hence

report the world in a genuinely different manner, regardless as to the technique used. Similarly, philosopher Hanson (1958) suggests that “one does not first soak up an optical pattern and then clamp on an interpretation”, but that theories and interpretations are “there in the seeing from the outset” Hanson (1958, p. 9). This implies that the information seen itself would be affected by an EP’s individual perceptions/theoretical beliefs, even if using a specified observation technique.

This relates to Hanson’s (1958) concept of the “theory-ladenness of perception and/or observation”, suggesting that theoretical and experiential factors influence the formation of perceptual beliefs and observational reports; these may include individual differences in sensory physiology, linguistic choices, conceptual resources, prior beliefs, theories and/or environmental cues. Hanson (1958) continues to suggest that these factors can affect and distort what one believes, perceives and reports, as well as how one accesses scientific theories. In this sense, if the perceptual beliefs of EPs could be influenced in this way — the beliefs themselves potentially causing individuals to favour certain psychological theories and hence certain tools in their practice — it could be suggested that no two EPs would ever perceive the same observation similarly. In terms of the process of assessment, this means that not only the information gathered is dependent on the observation technique used but also the theoretical and perceptual beliefs of the individual EP, which, in themselves, may have been influenced by a variety of personal factors and experiences.

This concept is further explained by Votsis (2015), suggesting that if person A and person B are presented with the same stimulus, the “inevitable” differences between the “wiring of their sensory systems” means that A and B will still form dissimilar perceptions (Votsis, 2015, p. 9). This implies that even identical stimuli do not produce the same perceptions in different individuals, suggesting that, in terms of EP practice, the behaviour of a particular CYP could be considered/interpreted differently by different individuals, either between varying professions — such as teachers, SENCOs and EPs — or between individuals of the same profession. This is something which I experienced as a TEP when observing a three-year-old, alongside a qualified EP:

The covert observation was conducted in the child’s nursery setting, requested due to staff and family concerns regarding the progress of his development in terms of speech, social interactions and independent skills. During the observation, the child played alone with coloured stacking bricks, of which he stacked nine on top of another before moving to a different activity. As the EP moved to follow the child, I noticed the nine bricks he had stacked together were in colour order of the rainbow spectrum (e.g., red,

orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet). I commented on this to the EP, who said they were unfamiliar with the colour spectrum and had therefore not previously considered the order in which child had stacked the bricks to be significant.

Obviously this difference in perception has no reflection on either myself or the EP in terms of our proficiencies in observations, but simply that the same stimulus was perceived differently between us, potentially due to our own personal experiences informing our “perceptual beliefs” (Votsis, 2015); in this instance, my individual experience studying A-level Art and consequential familiarity with painting and the colour spectrum compared with the EP and their different educational background and interests. In terms of the above vignette and the information gathered from the observation, the child’s ability to recognise, remember and apply the knowledge of the colour spectrum may have been considered noteworthy and hence had a significant contribution to his assessment process. It could, therefore, be considered that individual differences between EPs and other professionals have the potential to indirectly affect the content considered in a CYP’s assessment process, while the individual differences themselves can be understood to be significantly influenced by one’s personal experiences.

As cultural upbringing can be seen to inform various personal experiences, cultural differences specifically may also be considered to affect a person’s perceptual beliefs. For instance, Li and Karakowsky (2001) suggest that cultural differences significantly affect judgements made by researchers when making observations for data collection, implying that, in terms of EP practice, cultural differences may impact how EPs interpret information from observations and hence what is contributed to the process of psychological assessment. This could also relate to other stakeholders involved in the process — such as teachers, SENCOs and family members — wherein individuals may each perceive specific CYP behaviours differently, depending on their culture, personal experiences and beliefs. In this sense, it may be important for EPs to remain aware not only of their own cultural background — and its potential effect on their perceptual beliefs and interpretation of CYP’s behaviour — but also of those of other relevant professionals, as well as the CYP and their family, not only in relation to observations but throughout the process of assessment. This could be considered as “culturally competent assessment”, wherein sensitive attitudes, knowledge and skills are integrated into each stage of the assessment process (Páez, 2004).

Summary

In conclusion, it can be suggested that, overall, observations are a useful tool for informing the process of psychological assessment, provided they are used appropriately and

with consideration. For instance, observations can provide opportunities to gather a variety of information regarding CYP in various settings, and, although conducting covert observations may present ethical issues, their use can be deemed acceptable within EP practice, if necessary to enhance the validity of gathered information. However, as it can be considered that the technique used to conduct observations may affect what information is hence contributed to the process of assessment, this suggests EPs should carefully consider their chosen technique, particularly regarding the purpose of the observation, in relation to the individual CYP and situation. Similarly, as it can also be suggested that an EP’s choice of technique may be influenced by their preference in psychological theory — which in itself may relate to individual differences regarding personal experiences — it could be important for EPs to reflect on the possible reasons for any such preferences and remain aware of its potential to impact on their contribution to the assessment process.

Equally, it can be suggested that when conducting an observation, EPs should be aware of the potential differences between themselves and others involved with the CYP — regarding differences in perspectives related to culture and personal experiences — as such differences may lead to misunderstandings or disagreements at various stages in the assessment process, which could decrease its overall effectiveness. Furthermore, due to the discussed limitations of the technique, it can be suggested that observations should not be interpreted alone but in relation to the entirety of the assessment process, offering a more holistic and representative understanding of the CYP, to hence most effectively assess and support their needs. Overall, therefore, it can be suggested that observation use in EP practice is a complex process in itself, wherein many factors need to be considered to ensure its usefulness and value to the overall process of psychological assessment.

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