Exploring Personality

Practitioner Profile: Richard Levak, PhD

Ask Richard Levak, PhD, how he first got interested in personality assessment, and he begins by describing events that took place before he was born.

When Germany invaded Poland in World War II, Levak’s well-to-do family was separated: His father spent six years in a German prisoner-of-war camp; his mother and grandparents found themselves in Kazakhstan and then Iran. His older brother spent time in Africa. When the family reunited in England after the war, says Levak, it was a mess.

“They all hated each other,” says Levak, citing his father’s suspicions of his mother, his grandparents’ dislike of his mother and his brother’s feelings of abandonment. “From the time I was a child, I just seemed to have an understanding of each of their stories and personalities.”

Now a psychologist in private practice in Del Mar, CA, Levak has expanded his interest in personality far beyond the tense family dinners of his childhood. Today he has a successful practice devoted to assessing the personalities of individuals, couples, business partners and even reality TV candidates. “My practice focuses on understanding personality and how understanding personality can help people get the best out of themselves and each other,” says Levak.

A passion for the MMPI

Levak discovered his most trusted assessment tool during undergraduate work at the University of California, San Diego.

In an abnormal psychology course, the professor—a Minnesotan who had done his graduate work with the developers of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)—assessed a student and offered feedback in front of the class. “It was so accurate and so helpful,” remembers Levak. “I told myself, ‘I really want to do that!’”

He worked with more MMPI experts during his graduate work at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego. He also worked with a psychiatrist, helping him administer the MMPI and delivering feedback to patients.

Struck by the negative language in feedback reports written by psychologists, Levak developed what he calls an “empathic feedback model” that is based on the science but non-judgmental. The result was a co-authored book called Therapist Guide to the MMPI and MMPI-2 (Routledge, 1990). “It was my language on how to give people feedback on their personality profile in a helpful, therapeutic way,” says Levak. His latest book about the MMPI-2 will be published in 2011.

Personality feedback

Levak now puts that model to use in an exclusively fee-for-service practice that began with very wealthy, successful residents in Del Mar and has spread far beyond. No matter who the client is, Levak begins by taking a full history, administering the MMPI-2 and offering feedback about the person’s personality.

Individuals, for example, might come in to get to know themselves better. Couples might see him before getting married to get to know their future spouses better. “I would never tell people whether they should or shouldn’t marry,” says Levak. “I’d say, ‘Given who you are and who he is, here are things to avoid and here’s what you’re going to have to do to get the best out of each other.’”

Businesses also take advantage of Levak’s insights. The board of one corporation, for instance, was struggling to choose a new chairman. One candidate was affable and charming; the other seemed cold and Machiavellian. Levak’s assessments revealed that the likeable candidate was simply a people pleaser. “The other guy didn’t care about approval, but he did have a perspective and a plan,” says Levak. Reassured by those findings, the board chose the seeming Machiavellian.

While most of his work is short-term, Levak does have ongoing relationships with some clients. Building a therapeutic alliance and achieving psychotherapy’s goals go so much more quickly when you and the client have a deep understanding of personality, says Levak.

For others, he’s more like a coach. He has monthly sessions, for example, with two business partners who came to him because they were fighting all the time. One was a big-
picture type who was sloppy with details; the other was a detail-oriented type prone to worry. “They had developed a series of bad habits, because they didn’t really know each other,” says Levak, who explained their personality types to the two men and suggested ways they could work together more effectively.

With appearances on television shows like Larry King Live, Nightline and 20/20, Levak has also worked behind the scenes. For several years, he provided his assessment services to the producers of such reality shows as Survivor, Amazing Race and The Apprentice. “They wanted a psychologist to protect them from liability,” explains Levak. “They also wanted interesting characters on the show.”

Levak used in-depth interviews and a battery of tests, including the MMPI-2, an IQ guestimate and a measure of emotional resilience, to assess candidates for the shows. He sought candidates who were interesting, had the psychological fortitude to cope with being on a reality show and represented a different mix of personality types.

“I got to meet people I would never meet in practice,” he says, adding that most candidates were so resilient and confident they would never need his help. “I’d ask them if they’d ever lost a night’s sleep because they were worried, and they wouldn’t even understand the question.”

While the work was endlessly fascinating, Levak eventually tired of regularly spending weekends in Los Angeles.

A growth area

Although Levak is concerned that graduate programs no longer teach assessment as thoroughly as they should, he sees his work as the natural outgrowth of psychology’s earliest history.

“Assessment is what psychologists started out doing,” he says, explaining that psychologists were originally adjuncts to psychiatrists in the hospitals. “They were psychometricians.”

Of course, Levak’s practice has taken him far beyond merely working with a psychiatrist. And, he says, that career has been very rewarding. “You can make a great living with this kind of work,” he says. Returning to psychology’s roots in assessment is also a smart move for those looking for a growth area, he’s convinced.

Levak noted magazines are loaded with content such as “Six attributes of this type of person” or “Know yourself using this quiz.” Levak says, “People are insatiably hungry to know themselves, to know their kids, to know their loved ones.”

* For much of his career, Levak spelled his name “Lewak.”

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

During the fall of 2009, the APA Practice Organization invited nearly 2,000 members to participate in an online survey about psychological assessment practices. The survey, done in collaboration with the Society for Personality Assessment, had a 14 percent response rate.

Among the survey highlights:

• Of those practitioners who conducted any assessment, the psychologists spent an average of 30 percent of their direct practice time conducting psychological assessment.

• Participating psychologists were asked how often they used psychological assessment/testing for designated situations. The three situations where the highest percentage indicated that they conducted testing “routinely” or “frequently” were: to assist in diagnosis (54.9 percent of respondents); to assist in making treatment, academic or vocational recommendations (46.8 percent of respondents); and to screen for or document cognitive or neuropsychological deficits (42.3 percent of respondents).

• Survey participants were asked how much various factors would increase their use of psychological testing. Slightly more than 60 percent of respondents said that higher reimbursement rates would “completely” or “very much” increase their use of testing. The second most highly rated factor with an impact on testing use was the availability of free assessment instruments, i.e., in the public domain—identified as “completely” or “very much” a factor by 26.5 percent of survey respondents.

Also during the fall of 2009, approximately 1,000 members of the APA Practice Organization responded to a web-based survey regarding satisfaction with insurance company practices. Members were asked to report their satisfaction on a variety of factors for up to three different insurance companies. Survey participants were asked about frequency of payment for psychotherapy visits as well as assessment and testing services. Respondents reported a much lower frequency of payment for recommended assessment and testing services than for psychotherapy visits. Survey findings are reported in the Summer 2010 issue of Good Practice magazine. (See “Psychologists Rate Their Experiences with Health Insurers,” page 10.)