

**A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE USE OF COGNITIVE
ABILITY TESTING FOR SELECTION INTO GRADUATE AND
HIGHER PROFESSIONAL OCCUPATIONS**

Prof Steve Woods and Prof Fiona Patterson

Internationally, there is intense scrutiny of how best to address social justice in selection. Participation in higher and professional occupations is an important indicator of social mobility which reflects the capacity of people to move from lower to higher socio-economic status (SES) groups, through for example attaining higher educational outcomes, subsequently facilitating access to higher and professional employment. Despite various interventions, people from under-represented groups (e.g. ethnicity and/or low-income backgrounds) continue to experience disadvantage in selection for many professions (such as medicine, law, finance) and across many 'blue-chip' graduate entry occupations (Friedman, Laurison & Macmillan, 2017).

Historically, selection into these higher occupations has tended to rely heavily on indicators of prior academic attainment (Salvatori, 2001), which research has shown puts individuals from lower SES backgrounds at a disadvantage (Patterson et al., 2018). Alongside recruiters have tended to rely on 'efficient' cognitively-oriented screening tools to assess applicants, including cognitive ability testing, to 'level the field' (see e.g. Pollard, Hirsh et al., 2015). In practice, cognitive ability tests used in recruitment typically measure numerical, verbal, abstract and logical reasoning ability, for example. However, examining common practices in how such tests are used with a fresh critical lens, in light of more recent research evidence, reveals key problematic, unintended consequences.

The article by Prof Stephen A. Woods and Prof Fiona Patterson presents a critical review of the use of cognitive ability testing for access to graduate and higher professional occupations to promote further debate and reflection in both the academic and practitioner community. The main contentions in this critical



review are summarised in two parts. First, that the practice of applying cognitive ability testing in such contexts results in a

strong potential to both maintain and exacerbate social inequality, and reduce inclusivity, in access to higher occupations and professions. Second, weighting cognitive ability testing heavily in screening applicants is not justified by validity evidence to the extent that has previously been presumed. The article argue that these points are sufficiently significant to prompt psychologists and practitioners to re-examine this practice area.

Woods and Patterson discuss evidence of adverse impact in selection that can result from cognitive testing and highlight the problematic tendency to position (and thus 'overweight') cognitive ability testing early in selection processes in high volume recruitment. Against this context they further highlight how the supporting evidence for using tests in this way may be weaker than previously presumed. Recent large-scale evidence challenges the meta-analytic validity of cognitive ability tests, and these are discussed alongside further methodological problems underlying the evidence base.

Although there is no simple solution for practitioners working in the context of selection into graduate and higher professional jobs and the challenges of managing multiple demands will remain in selection system design, the article suggests immediately adjusting the undue weighting of cognitive ability test scores as a short-term action. This could pave the way for a more revolutionary approach proposed by Woods and Patterson of removing cognitive ability test scores from these contexts and finding suitable alternatives.

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