

Psychometric testing in a week

The purpose of this series seems to be brevity; the cost is superficiality

I believe that the authors probably know this field more thoroughly than they were able to express in this short book. It is not paginated, but using a small font it takes only about 30 pages in Amazon Kindle.

The authors correctly identify the major purposes in types of psychometric testing. They are performance oriented and self-assessment oriented. Performance is to measure how well a person will do at a well-defined task, or to measure intelligence itself. The self-assessments are used for assessing personality.

Tests of the first type would be IQ tests, SAT and ACT type tests for students, and the follow-on GRE, GMAT and similar assessments. They also include job specific tests such as those administered to firefighters, radio operators and like.

Tests of the second type include the famous Myers-Briggs test, and the myriad tests that measure the "big five" aspects of personality, abbreviated OCEAN: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. These constructs go under different names in different tests, but they have demonstrated widespread utility in psychometric testing.

The authors do not go into the shortcomings of these tests. They are careful to advise test users not to put too much weight on them, especially if they are not confirmed by other forms of evidence such as interviews, job performance assessments and the like. This is good.

Intelligence tests, and ability tests in general, suffer somewhat of a shortcoming in that test takers become test savvy. It is possible to prepare for them. Witness the huge industry in SAT preparation. It is even possible to prepare to some degree for an intelligence test. It at least helps a test-taker to be familiar with the kinds of items. Here is an example from the book: which number is the odd one out. Which of the following numbers doesn't fit with the rest? 24 63 48 10 35. My answer is that four of them are one less than a perfect square, the fifth is one more than a perfect square. I expect there is some simpler answer, but I don't see it. Am I wrong? An experienced intelligence test taker will understand implicitly whether or not the numbers should be treated as a sequence or a random collection; what kinds of tricks to look for. Should you look for common divisors? The first letters of the numbers? Inversions of digits? A person with some familiarity with the testing process will have an advantage. The authors do not go into this.

Another problem with intelligence tests is that their use has been under attack for supposed cultural bias. The test administrator has to be aware of the situations in which using such tests might give rise to a challenge, and the test-taker has to be somewhat aware of the limitations imposed on people who construct the test.

Personality tests are more of a problem. As the authors say (without using the appropriate term, Likert scale) that test items often call for answers along a five or seven point scale. They call for feelings, or personal opinions. For instance (I'm making this up) "Is honesty always the best policy?" (mark one) Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree. These problems are tricky. The test-taker has to have some awareness of what the test administrators are looking for. If he reflects that honesty is not the best in answering the question "Honey, do you think this dress makes me look fat?" he may not do to well. There is, however, a wealth of resources on the Internet that will coach a test-taker in how to approach this type of psychometric test. The authors of this book would have been well advised to at least acknowledge their existence. They can decrease the validity of the test. Which, as they accurately note, is the question of whether or not a test item measures what it is supposed to be measuring.

As short as the chapters are, each one concludes with a 10 question quiz following the summary, the self-test to see if the student absorbed the information. The tests seem to be overly specific, testing more on nomenclature than on concepts. I did not find them especially useful.

In conclusion, the major shortcoming with this book appears to be in the concept of the "in a week" series itself. In this instance it appears to have forced the authors to omit valuable information in the quest to satisfy the limited page budget. It is a useful book, but it could be more so.