

This story, from the 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Assessment centre Study Group Conference, held in Stellenbosch 12 – 14 March, is free for your use. For more information or pictures please contact [lynne@ofcourse.co.za](mailto:lynne@ofcourse.co.za) or phone Lynne Smit at 083 299 7383

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For both the economic and the social future of South Africa it is urgent that the position of black South Africans is strengthened. Inequalities due to poor educational and work opportunities in the past and present will have to be addressed vigorously.

It is clear from the Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity laws in South Africa, that the improvement of the economic position of black South Africans and to redress past imbalances cannot be ignored.

When it comes to staff positions in South African companies, the people who are on the coal face of the implementation of these policies are often the Assessment Centre (AC) practitioners. It is the battery of tests that they administer that often determine who will get a job. The question is: are the tests fair, and are they accurately representing the calibre of all the candidates?

And, perhaps more importantly, are the job advertisements accurately representing the type of candidates the company is looking for?

When almost 200 industrial psychologists and assessment centre practitioners got together in Stellenbosch last week for the 28<sup>th</sup> annual Assessment centre Study Group (ACSG) conference [www.acsg.co.za](http://www.acsg.co.za), issues of fairness and equity in employment selection were high on the agenda.

And, as is often the case, it took an outsider's perspective to open the debate from all angles.

Dr Ype H Poortinga, an expert in cross-cultural psychology from Tilburg University in the Netherlands challenged AC professionals who, he said, are faced with a unique situation in South Africa which calls for strong action.

The question he raised was how equitable treatment can be defined in a multi-cultural society when job requirements tend to be defined in terms of existing Western constraints. Ubuntu, interpersonal relatedness and other concepts with non-Western roots are strikingly absent from the test arsenal in South Africa. Maybe these concepts should be assessed, or maybe they will not contribute to better selection, but the fact is that very little is known about the work performance relevance of indigenous concepts.

Professor Callie Theron of Stellenbosch University commented "In the South African context it does not seem unreasonable to attribute at least some part of the systematic group-related differences in criterion distributions to a socio-political system that systematically denied the members of specific groups the opportunity to develop and acquire those abilities required to succeed," he pointed out.

"The current selection procedures are just honest messengers revealing a tragic truth. The solution therefore is not to be found in strategies to convince the messenger to alter its message. The difference in criterion distributions observed between protected and non-protected groups reflect *bona fide* differences on numerous critical dispositions and attainments required to succeed in the world of work, which have resulted from the systemic denial of access to developmental opportunities. To deny the criterion differences and the differences in the underlying competency potential is to deny the history that caused it.

"The solution rather lies in affirmative development interventions aimed at developing those attainments and dispositions needed to succeed on the criterion. This puts the assessment of learning potential centre-stage," Theron said.

So what should be included in psychological testing, in the South African context?

On the basis of research across many cultures Poortinga believes that if a concept such as Ubuntu was tested for, it would differentiate between candidates from all groups in South Africa. There are important differences in behavior patterns across cultures, but indigenous concepts like Ubuntu tend to have equivalents in other societies. For example, in China the ideal of Confucian Filial Piety is strong, implying that adult children will do a lot for their ageing parents. But children all over the world would rate the care of their elderly parents highly, even if they did not bring them to live in their homes, which is still the custom in traditional China.

An important point is that if indigenous concepts are valued in the testing process, the perception of fairness of the selection procedures may be improved. Ubuntu may be equally relevant as, for example, extraversion; at least it is worth conducting research to establish whether or not that is the case.

Fairness in selection for employment and education and the perception of fairness are societal issues according to Poortinga. Fairness goes beyond individual interests and even organisational needs. There are strong political and economic factors that have to be taken into account. It's not just about the immediate needs of the company which pays for the selection of an employee. Parameters like the unemployment rate in the particular population and prior disadvantages have to be taken into consideration when the fairness of the appointment of a particular candidate is at issue. The immediate costs in productivity of recommending a less experienced candidate for example, may be higher, but the benefits to the society as a whole could be much greater. Poortinga argued that AC professionals should keep the broader perspective in mind.