The art of the judgment-based decision making in assessing learners

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Rationale: There is growing interest in how assessors make decisions when observing learners performing authentic tasks. In vocational degree programs, assessor subjectivity has meant that, for high stakes decision-making, several observations need to be made. This has significant impacts on resources particularly where remediation and re-assessment needs to be offered to the learner. By understanding assessor reasoning processes, novel training strategies may impact assessor subjectivity, provide a more precise assessment of student, with fewer assessors. We explored the underlying factors which shaped assessors’ thinking when making judgments about the suitability of trainee doctors wishing to enter a specialist training program for general practitioners.

Methods: Within an assessment centre, to determine entry into specialty postgraduate training, interviewers met to discuss candidates’ performances following each circuit of a multiple mini interview (MMI). We explored interviewers’ talk about their judgments. We used ethnography from the perspective of rater cognition theories to explore the social phenomena of an interviewer meeting in which they discussed how they had: made their own judgments on candidates, explored the judgments of other interviewers, and evaluated their own judgment-based decisions.

Results: Interviewers readily socialise into the expected behaviours set by the organising institution. They tend to make decisions on gut feelings most of the time but are more analytical in complex cases. They readily acknowledge that judgments can be flawed, and find training around principles of bias helpful. They express a need to judge capability for growth in candidates. In making their decisions, they are most informed by their own experience as a professional, the outcomes of their previous decisions, and their shared understanding of the expected behaviours of the candidates.

Conclusions: An ethnography of MMI interviewers gives rich insights into judgment-based decision-making. Interviewers are highly expert and often constrained in making good judgments by the limitations of the tools that they have at their disposal. Understanding how interviewers make decisions in the MMI could improve the design of marking rubrics and interviewer training, and lead to more precise decisions in the MMI.

Round Table issues

• To what extent are the findings of this study generalisable to other settings e.g. trainee teachers, students from other vocational courses e.g. social work, law, the health professions?
• What theoretical frameworks form the general educational research literature might be explanatory for understanding how judges think in judge-mediated assessment?
• What methodological approaches from the general educational field might provide further insights into assessors’ reasoning when making judgments about the
• What can we learn about the developments in asking the right questions through marking rubrics used for observing and giving feedback to learners?

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