

Is assessment fair?

Isabel Nisbet and Stuart D. Shaw

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(Also available in Hardback and ebook format)*Reviewed by Jean Gordon*

'Is Assessment Fair?' starts from the premise that we need to take a long, hard look at the concept of 'fairness' in relation to assessment. The issue of fair assessment is one capable of exercising us all, whether we are children, parents, mature students, teachers, regulators, politicians or the media. Isabel Nisbet and Stuart Shaw suggest that ongoing debates about fair assessment frequently hit a wall because our understandings of what constitutes 'fairness' or 'unfairness' in relation to assessment are so often at odds. Isabel Nisbet has a background in philosophy, and has had a career in UK government and the regulation of assessment and qualifications, while Stuart Shaw is Head of Research at Cambridge Assessment International Education. Drawing on both authors' independent research into assessment, their concise book explores the fairness of assessment through a series of contrasting lenses. The authors see its content as being of potential interest to a wide readership, including educationalists, researchers and policy-makers, as well as readers with a more specialist interest in applied social, legal and political theory.

The book is structured in a straightforward way with an introductory chapter that sets the scene by explaining how the terms 'fairness' and 'assessment' are used in a variety of contexts. Successive chapters explore assessment fairness through educational, professional, legal, philosophical and social justice lenses. The final chapter consolidates these approaches to propose a model for fair assessment and a final checklist for evaluating the fairness of assessments at the design stage. One of the positive features of the book is that it doesn't assume in-depth prior knowledge of the philosophical and legal underpinnings of 'fairness', but introduces these concepts in an accessible way. There are informative illustrations of assessment practice, including some 'real-world' assessment dilemmas at the end of each chapter to stimulate readers to further reflection. Practice educators, lecturers, policy-makers and managers will be very familiar with many of the issues raised in

the book, perhaps particularly in relation to questions relating to the measurement of competency, and ethical issues of equality, diversity and social justice in the selection and assessment of learners entering and qualifying in health and social care professions. The authors' conclusion – that past paradigms of fair assessment are inadequate for the 21st century – is certainly food for thought. Their arguments for more iterative, situated assessment practices that meet individual learners' legitimate expectations is one that I suspect will chime with many educators in health and social care.

Nisbet and Shaw identify a number of limitations to their analysis of assessment fairness, including a heavy reliance on Anglophone sources. The chapters that focus on educational fairness are also heavily weighted towards educational measurement and standards in the USA. Readers from differing educational contexts may struggle to apply this knowledge to their own work contexts in a productive way. The authors also note the comparative lack of attention to professional and vocational education in the book. There is some discussion of fair assessment of competency and determination of 'fitness to practice' that is of relevance to health and social care practice, but the overall emphasis leans more towards classroom than workplace assessment.

In summary, anyone with a special interest in assessment theory and practice, including researchers, policy makers and educators with responsibility for designing or measuring educational standards, is likely to find this book relevant and thought-provoking. It is perhaps less likely that individual practice and field educators will go out and purchase the book in preference to a more vocationally-oriented assessment text. However, as I read, it occurred to me that Nisbet and Shaw's book could provide an excellent starting point for stimulating debates about fair assessment amongst practice educators. Its mission to encourage educators to look again at their 'taken-for-granted' understandings of fair assessment might well provide a useful basis for practice educator training and continuing professional development activities.

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