

Book Review: “Is Assessment Fair?”

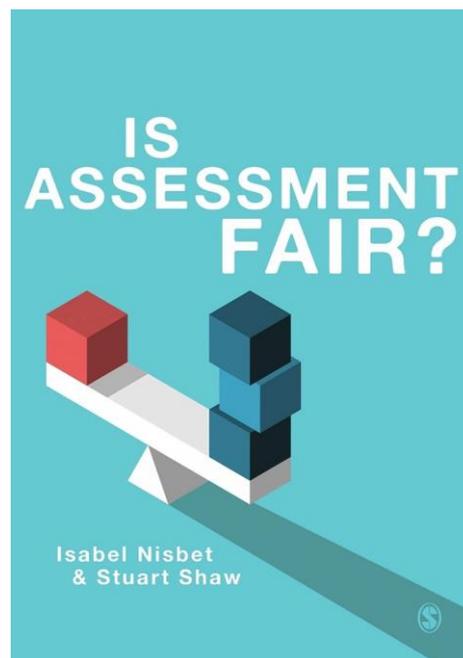
“Those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances” (Rawls, 1971)

This excellent book (*Is Assessment Fair?* by Isabel Nisbet and Stuart Shaw, published by Sage, 2020) seeks to unpack what we mean by assessment fairness.

It is easy to recognize when something is unfair, but much harder to clearly express what we mean by fair assessment. The book presents fairness in an interesting and readable way.

Challenges the book deals with

Fairness is one of three foundations alongside validity and reliability set out in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. Everyone I have met in the assessment industry all want and expect assessments to be fair. And from earliest childhood, humans have a strong sense of what is fair and unfair.



But what do we mean by fair assessments and how do we make assessments more fair?

Is an assessment fair if it is fair to a demographic group or to individuals or to both? Is there even such a thing as fairness, or is it simply the absence of unfairness? And how does fairness tie into the social inequality and levelling up issues being discussed in many countries?

And is fairness an absolute or a continuum? And how can you determine if you have achieved fairness? And is fairness possible without considering wider society and context issues? For example, if a test simply measures that people are different, and people are truly different, is that a problem in the assessment?

Sometimes the assessment community looks at fairness primarily from a psychometric or

legal perspective, but this book while looking at it from these lenses, also looks at fairness from other perspectives including that of philosophy. It is a comprehensive introduction to fairness in assessment, at least from an Anglo-Saxon perspective.

What the book covers

The core of the book is five chapters looks at fairness through five lenses:

1. The chapter on the measurement theory lens takes a psychometric view of fairness, primarily that fairness is the absence of construct-irrelevant variance in assessment outcomes. It raises some interesting questions about fairness to groups and/or individuals, and introduces the concept of “felt fairness”, i.e that it is important that test takers and other stakeholders feel the assessment process is fair.
2. The next chapter looks at how standards and guidelines approach fairness, considering at The Standards and other documents. One point it makes it that procedural fairness in how assessments are administered is not sufficient for full fairness, but it is important for it.
3. The legal lens chapter takes a brief look at legal cases in relation to fairness in assessment. The authors suggest that legal disputes have helped assessment become more fair, by allowing unfairness to be challenged, and by encouraging fairer practices. But of course, fairness is more than just following minimum legal requirements.
4. The philosophical lens chapter takes a look at assessment fairness through the perspectives of Aristotle and Rawls (see quote above). This was an unfamiliar area to me and thoughtful. There is also a suggestion that true fairness may be impossible – or would only be possible if other important things are reduced.
5. The last of the five lens looks at social justice. Broadly speaking, how do assessments fit into attempts to make society fairer. There is lots of relevant commentary here including that

“assessment alone cannot bear the burden of reversing social inequality. A test that is fair may be a good thing, ... but it is not a silver bullet for social justice.”

How the book might help

The authors write well. They know about assessment and they have thought deeply about fairness. They share some important and interesting ideas well.

The book is not perfect. It focuses more on educational assessment than assessment in recruitment or other use cases. It comes at fairness from the English/US perspective and doesn't address other languages and cultural approaches to it. It ignores the emerging issue of AI assessment and how that can be fair. And at 168 pages, it inevitably gives a briefer description of some of the issues than one would like.

But it's a great analysis of some key issues around fairness in assessment, it gave me some perspectives I hadn't had before and shared some ideas I was unfamiliar with. If you are interested in assessment fairness, it's a powerful study by some knowledgeable authors – recommended!

The book concludes that fairness is a bit like health – one can never have perfect health, but one can strive to be healthier and in a similar way one should strive for fairer assessments.

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