Test Validity

Edited by
Howard Wainer and
Henry I. Braun

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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

To Laurent, Ilana, and Nora,
whose validity needs no testing

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Preface

On May 28–29, 1986, a conference entitled "Test Validity for the 1990s and Beyond" was held at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. The purpose of this conference was to provide an assessment of the current state of research and practice in test validity and to indicate future directions. With testing expected to undergo significant changes in the years ahead, driven in part by demands of users and in part by advances in technology, we felt it would be useful to bring together some eminent scientists closely involved with test validity and ask them to contribute their views on the subject.

In our opinion, the conference was very successful with a broad range of interests and opinions expressed. This volume is intended to make the conference presentations available to a wider audience.

The chapters contained herein were prepared especially for this volume. The talks given at the conference were based upon the papers but were not necessarily identical to them. At the conference we were fortunate to have Professor Donald B. Rubin to discuss the presentations. An edited transcription of his remarks is appended to Section IV. We decided to include his comments because his wide-ranging remarks often provided both context and generality for the invited contributions.

The volume contains all the proceedings of the conference with one notable exception. One afternoon was devoted to an abbreviated mock trial based on an actual court case that focused on the validity of pre-employment tests used in screening applicants for places in a firefighter academy. Although tests have been increasingly involved in litigation, few of those attending the conference had actually participated in or viewed legal proceedings of this kind. Presenting this trial allowed a close-up view of the nature of the legal argument, as well as

contrast between the notions of scientific evidence and those of legal evidence. Posttrial comments by the presiding judge as well as the two attorneys were particularly informative. Although this volume could not include the trial, a videotape of it is available from the editors.

Acknowledgments

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H. W.
H. I. B.
Princeton, N.J.
July 1987

Introduction

Testing plays a critical role in all our lives. Beyond its formidable presence in our schools, it is widely employed both by government and industry as an aid to making decisions about people. Thus, testing affects us both directly as individuals who are tested and indirectly through its influence on the welfare of the nation. As befits a practice of such importance, the scrutiny of professionals, national policymakers and the courts has become ever more intense. Their concern centers on whether a particular test properly accomplishes its specified goal and whether it does so in a fair and equitable fashion. This is the core of test validity.

More formally, the *Joint technical standards for educational and psychological testing* (APA, AERA, NCME, 1985) states: "Validity is the most important consideration in test evaluation. The concept refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness and usefulness of *the specific inferences made from test scores.*[1] Test validation is the process of accumulating evidence to support such inferences. A variety of inferences may be made from scores produced by a given test, and there are many ways of accumulating evidence to support any particular inference. Validity, however, is a unitary concept. Although evidence may be accumulated in many ways, validity always refers to the degree to which that evidence supports the inferences that are made from test scores."

Not surprisingly the practice of testing antedates concern with its validity. One of the earliest references to testing is described in *Judges* (12:4–6). It seems

[1]Note that it is not the test that has validity, but rather *the inferences* made from the test scores. Thus before we can assess a test's validity, we must know the purposes to which it is to be put.

that the Gileadites developed a short verbal test to uncover the fleeing Ephraimites that were hiding in their midst. The test was one item long. Candidates had to pronounce the word "shibboleth"; Ephraimites apparently pronounced the initial "sh" as "s." Although the consequences of this test were quite severe (the banks of the Jordan were strewn with the bodies of the 42,000 who failed), there is no record of any validity study. Consequently, even though history records all the punished as interlopers, we really do not know how many were Gileadites who spoke with a lisp.[2]

In 1115 B.C., at the beginning of the Chan dynasty, formal testing procedures were instituted for candidates for office. This appears to be the first documented example of a rigorous mental testing program. The Chinese discovered the fundamental tenet of testing; that a relatively small sample of an individual's performance, measured under carefully controlled conditions, could yield an accurate picture of that individual's ability under much broader conditions for a longer period of time. The procedures developed by the Chinese are quite similar to many of the canons of good testing practice used today.[3]

The Chinese system developed over many centuries. By 1370 A.D. it had arrived at a reasonably mature form. A person aspiring to hold public office had to pass three competitive examinations. The first one, given annually and locally, required a day and a night. The passing rate was from 1% to 7%. Those passing were named "budding scholars." The second stage was given every 3 years and was held in each provincial capital. Here all of the "budding scholars" were assembled for three sessions of 3 days and 3 nights each. These examinations were scored with independent readers and the examinees were anonymous. Successful candidates (reported as 1% to 10%) were considered "promoted scholars" and were eligible for the third tier of examinations given the following spring in Peking. In this third set of examinations about 3% passed and became eligible for public office.

Although there is no record of any formal validity studies held as part of the Chinese program, few would doubt that those who succeeded in surmounting the third tier of the rigorous program[4] were highly qualified individuals. Why is it that the results of the biblical test seem obviously questionable, whereas the Chinese program yielded results that no one would question—at least in terms of errors of the first kind?

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[2]One is reminded of baseball umpire Bill Clem's response when he was asked, "Bill, did you call 'em as you saw 'em? Or did you call 'em as they were?" He answered, "The way I called 'em was the way they were."

[3]The Chinese testing program was used as a model for the British system set up in 1833 to select trainees for the Indian Civil service—the precursor to the British civil service. The success of the British system influenced Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Representative Thomas Jenckes in developing the examination system they introduced into Congress in 1860. A fascinating description of this is found in Têng (1943) and the interested reader is directed to that source.

[4]There were a number of deaths recorded during the testing process.