Ethical Standards and Best Practices in Using Newly Revised Tests

By Stefan C. Dombrowski

The psychology community is presently witnessing the periodic release of updated versions of commonly used intelligence (IQ) tests for children and adolescents. This started with the release of the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, 3rd Edition (WPPSI-III) in spring 2002, the Stanford-Binet 5 (SB 5) in February 2003, and continued into summer 2003 with the release of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 4th Edition (WISC-IV). APA/AERA/NCME test standards (1999) maintain that psychologists should use the most recent version of an assessment instrument when conducting an evaluation of a child’s abilities. The NASP Principles for Professional Ethics (2000) speaks to this mandate as well: “School psychologists...[choose] instruments and techniques...that have up-to-date standardization data and are applicable and appropriate for the benefit of the child.”

Limited Guidance and Noncompliance

Beyond this general statement, there is limited guidance at the national level for professional psychologists (APA/AERA/NCME, 1999). Likewise, various state boards of psychology and departments of education across the country either do not address this issue or address it only vaguely in their regulations. For example, several states’ special education regulations, such as Connecticut, Georgia and Tennessee, do not have an explicitly codified regulation, but allow for a one-year transition period (B. Lichtenstein, personal communication, June 27, 2003; F. Smith, personal communication, June 27, 2003; NASP Leadership Listserv, personal communication, June 26-30, 2003). Similarly, within state boards of psychology, such as Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey, a standard addressing this issue is unavailable (Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey State Boards of Psychology, personal communication, July 8, 2008). In general, and with a few exceptions such as the state Department of Education regulations for Kentucky (J. Batts, personal communication, June 30, 2003), the psychology community lacks explicitly codified ethical and legal guidance on this important topic.

The profession has instead established a community standard for the transition to newly revised IQ instruments: Ranging from 6 months to one year, this transition period has been tacitly agreed upon by trainers of school psychologists and other leaders in the field (B. A. Bracken, personal communication, June 30, 2003; T. Fagan, personal communication, June 29, 2003; R. W. Kamphaus, personal communication, June 29, 2003; C. R. Reynolds, personal communication, June 30, 2003). However, the lack of more formal or precise guidance could potentially lead to poor practice and inadequate programming for children, particularly in states that more rigidly adhere to mandatory cut-off scores. When standards are loosely defined and predicated upon a tacitly agreed upon heuristic, this could ultimately impact the services children receive.

What is the impact when some psychologists remain unaware of, ignore, dismiss, or inconsistently apply this community standard? During my training of school psychologists, I have observed that some psychologists, school systems and agencies are either unaware or disregard this standard by relying upon outdated IQ assessment instruments (e.g., WPPSI-R) when more recent editions (WPPSI-III) are available. I have even witnessed a school system that continues to use the 1972 McCarthy Scales (and scores) instead of using updated assessment instruments with more recent norms. This practice is clearly unsuitable and arguably unethical.

Granted, there may be numerous excuses for using outdated IQ assessment instruments. The most obvious is ignorance of the need to switch. Another factor is convenience. Psychologists who continue to use outdated instruments avoid the time and effort necessary to become competent in the use of the new instrument. Finally, and perhaps of primary influence, budgetary constraints might hamper school systems’ ability to replace older versions of an instrument.
Toward the Establishment of a New Ethical Standard

Considering the arrival of newly updated intellectual assessment instruments, and the lack of an explicit standard guiding their use, the fields of psychology and education would benefit from the codification of a new professional assessment standard that is adopted universally at the national and state level. For instance, both the National Association of School Psychologists and the American Psychological Association, along with various state boards of psychology, state psychological associations and state departments of education, would benefit from the adoption of an explicit ethical standard. The following recommendation could potentially serve as the foundation for future discussions of this topic. It is hoped that this discussion sparks the interest of readership, promotes insightful commentary and ultimately leads to the adoption of a more explicitly codified standard for the use of newly revised intelligence tests.

The proposed standard is really quite simple. However, to be effective in serving the interests of children, this standard should be expressly incorporated into state and national licensure/credentialing laws, department of education regulations (e.g., IDEA), and within state (e.g., New Jersey Association of School Psychologists) and national organizational (e.g., NASP, APA) ethical regulations. Following is the core concept of the proposed ethical standard, followed by the rationale for its adoption:

Psychologists should adopt and use the most recent version of an intellectual assessment instrument within one year of its publication.

One-year timeline. Why a one-year time period, rather than an immediate transition to the newly updated instrument? This time period will allow for consideration of several factors when transitioning to the most recent version of an instrument. First, it is recognized that psychologists and systems must allow sufficient time for practitioners to learn about and become competent in the use of the new instrument. In fact, state and national regulatory agencies ought to consider establishing a standard that outlines the amount of training and educational experience required to be considered competent to use and interpret a new or newly revised instrument. Second, a year-long transition will provide sufficient time for additional research to substantiate the technical adequacy of the instrument and uncover any overlooked glitches. Finally, the specified time period will provide school districts additional time to budget for and then acquire new instruments. For many school districts, particularly those experiencing budget constraints, the acquisition of new instruments may be a costly undertaking that requires advanced planning.

Guidance for test publishing companies: The proposed ethical standard should also provide guidance to test publishing companies on the marketing and sale of outdated tests.

One only needs to scan the websites or catalogs of publishing companies to see advertisement for outdated instruments such as the WPPSI-R, SB IV and even the McCarthy Scales. This marketing practice is misleading and could potentially contribute to unethical practice among psychologists. It is akin to a government allowing the sale, but then not the consumption, of rotten fruit by its citizenry. Following is a proposed standard for test publishing companies:

Test publishing companies should cease selling outdated versions of an intellectual assessment instrument when a new edition of the instrument has been published.

It is recognized that there may be the need to sell replacement items or additional test protocols within the one-year transition period. In such cases, test publishers should provide psychologists with a warning about the potential limitations of using the older version of an instrument.
Research evidence: The Flynn Effect. The IQ testing research community provides empirical evidence that substantiates the need for a proposed ethical standard. According to a phenomenon known as the Flynn Effect, individuals improve their IQ test score performance by about three standard score points per decade in the U.S (Flynn, 1984). This phenomenon has implications for practicing psychologists and children. Consider a child who was assessed for giftedness or mental retardation using the SB IV in January 2003, just before the release of the new SB V. According to the Flynn Effect, the child might be expected to score approximately five points higher on the 1986 normed SB IV, since gains of approximately 3 points per decade are common. When mandated cut-off scores govern eligibility for special services, this difference could determine whether or not the child qualifies for appropriate services. Such IQ score gains are not just relegated to the U.S. Rather, the Flynn Effect spans the nearly two dozen countries for which data are available. In some countries, such as France or East Germany, the gains are even more impressive, with nearly a full standard deviation increase over a ten-year period (Flynn, 1987).

What is the explanation for the Flynn Effect? Research has suggested an environmental, rather than genetic, explanation. Factors such as improved prenatal care, nutrition and greater emphasis on education at all levels of development appear to contribute to IQ gains (Neisser, 1998). The Flynn Effect also lends support for the malleability of intelligence test scores: genetic effects are unlikely to occur over the span of just one generation (Flynn, 1998).

Summary
Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to use the most current version of an intellectual assessment instrument. It is proposed that there is a year-long transition period for the adoption of the newly updated instruments. Perhaps this year-long transition standard should even be extended to achievement, adaptive behavior, or any measure that is dependent upon current norms? Further, this standard should be incorporated into various regulations and guidelines at the state and national level. A year-long transition period is crucial for many of the reasons discussed in this article, and especially because psychologists need time to train and become competent in the use of the new instrument. It would be unreasonable to assume that every psychologist must switch to a new instrument the very day it arrives on the marketplace. This action would risk violation of a different but equally important ethical standard: competence to use and interpret the assessment instruments.

Related to this discussion, the field might even consider developing a detailed standard on what it means to be competent to use and interpret a new or newly revised intelligence measure. For instance, is there need to attend workshops or complete online courses? How might competency be demonstrated?

Finally, the field ought to consider the codification of an ethical standard that addresses the marketing and sales practices of test publishing companies. In totality, standards of professional practice have been codified to serve the interests of children and society. This article describes a proposed ethical standard that provides specific guidance to psychologists and test publishing companies on the appropriate use of newly revised intellectual assessment instruments. Reactions to this proposed ethical standard from researchers and practitioners alike are welcomed.
References


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