A Rejoinder to Thomas Oakland
To WISC-III or Not to WISC-III, That Is the Question
By Stefan C. Dombrowski

The decision of whether to switch to a newly revised intelligence (IQ) test can have serious consequences for society. It has implications for mental retardation diagnosis and can be the determining factor in whether or not a child receives special education services. It has even graver implications for capital punishment decisions, and can be the determining factor between life and death for some prison inmates (Kanaya, Scullin, and Ceci, 2003). (Please see the October 2003 issue of the American Psychologist for a timely discussion of this topic).

Within a September 2003 Communiqué article, I proposed two new ethical standards regarding the use of newly revised intelligence tests. The first was for consumers of intelligence (IQ) tests and recommended transitioning to a newly revised IQ test within one year of its publication. The other encouraged test publishing companies to stop selling older editions one year after a revised edition becomes available. This discussion was prompted by several factors: 1) present ethical standards, e.g., NASP (2000); APA (2002); AERA, APA, & NCME (1999) provide limited guidance on when to transition; 2) a tacit and potentially inconsistently applied community standard, rather than an explicitly codified standard, has been guiding transition practice; and 3) research on the Flynn Effect, particularly as it relates to mental retardation diagnosis. Thomas Oakland commented on my proposal in a November 2003 Communiqué article entitled, “Standards for using revised tests: A different opinion.” The purpose of this article is to continue a discussion of these important issues by presenting a rejoinder to Oakland’s article.

Proposed One-Year Timeline

Considering numerous data sources including feedback from leaders in the field of school psychology, current practice among school psychologists, existing state department of education regulations in states that have adopted a transition regulation, and discussion with several state boards of psychology (see Dombrowski, 2003), I proposed the ubiquitous codification of a one-year timeline as a sufficient time period for switching to a newly revised test. This transition period seems tenable from a practical, ethical and economic perspective. It would allow psychologists time to attend workshops and seek training on the instrument, allow school systems and agencies time to budget for the acquisition of new materials, and allow time to uncover any potential glitches overlooked by researchers working for test publishing companies.

In a reply, Oakland presented a different perspective to the one-year transition period. Highlighting the importance of independent research, Oakland claims that the proposed timeframe would not allow sufficient time for independent scholars to evaluate the revised instrument. Supporting this position, Oakland asserted that independent research “can take years,” and
that the “few scholars who regularly conduct research on this topic” are “professors for whom research is secondary to teaching and service” (p. 10). Oakland maintains that attempts to analyze the data are further hindered by a test company’s reluctance to release proprietary test data and by the difficulty of independent researchers to obtain a nationally representative sample that approximates the quality and depth of that collected by test companies.

Oakland’s perspective on the requirement for independent research raises several important questions. Is independent research apart from that provided in the test manual needed before switching to a newly revised test? If so, how long should the field wait on the small cadre of scholars to attest to the theoretical and psychometric soundness of the instrument? If not a one-year time period, as I proposed, then what sort of time frame might be appropriate — 2 years, 5 years, or 10 years? I assert that leaving open the transition period until independent research can verify the soundness of the instrument seems unrealistic. If one were to extend this line of thinking, then the field might not transition to the new instrument until halfway through a test’s useful life. This is simply implausible.

I would further assert that intelligence tests are rigorously constructed and their qualities are sufficiently documented in the test manual. The IQ test construction process is thorough and requires extensive documentation of a test’s theoretical and psychometric soundness. It is unlikely that the depth or quality of independent research surpasses that contained in the manual. Test publishing companies have the resources to collect extensive data that sets the stage for quality research. Test publishing companies also have the expertise to assure the quality of the instrument via the hiring of teams of test construction researchers. Therefore, I maintain that independent research on newly revised intelligence tests, while valuable, is an unnecessary prerequisite to transition.

**Standard for Test Publishing Companies**

I recommended that test publishing companies stop selling outdated intelligence tests one year after the publication of a newly revised test. Oakland objected to this proposed standard from several angles. First, Oakland asserted that test publishing companies have a right to sell old versions and cautioned against “prohibiting” test publishers from doing so (p. 10). If such restrictions were imposed, Oakland indicated that test companies “would be less inclined to revise tests” and that there might be FTC and legal ramifications (p. 10). This point requires further clarification. Oakland may be correct in asserting that imposing an external standard upon test companies is perhaps beyond the scope of various psychology regulatory authorities. However, it is not beyond the scope of test companies themselves to create an internally imposed standard.

My initial proposed standard might be more appropriately received as a recommendation
to test publishing companies, rather than as a standard that is enforceable by psychology regulatory bodies. The recommendation that test publishing companies adopt an internally imposed standard should be seriously considered. As noted, the cost to society is high for using outdated versions of IQ tests for such decisions as mental retardation diagnosis for special education placement and capital punishment. Thus, test publishing companies may contribute to poor practice through the sale of anachronistic versions of a test. Perhaps even consulting psychologists or full-time psychologists within the test publishing organization should educate company executives about the potential public peril of selling outdated versions? While a valid argument can be made for continued use of outdated IQ tests for research purposes, test publishing companies should consider limiting the sale of older versions when a newer one becomes available. At the very least, test publishing companies ought to consider warning consumers about the pitfalls of using an older version when a new one has arrived.

Finally, Oakland asserts that “test publishing companies will be less inclined to revise” if older versions of a test are not sold beyond the year’s transition time period (p. 10). I am in disagreement with this perspective. When a company produces a new test, the marketing and profitability emphasis would seemingly shift from the old to the new version. Otherwise, what is the incentive to create a new test? It is likely the profit motive.

Conclusion

The codification of an ethical standard regarding newly revised intelligence tests is critically important. Oakland discusses many important considerations regarding the establishment of standards within his article; however, his position on newly revised IQ tests is too open-ended, leaving the field exactly where it presently rests — without explicitly codified guidance on when to switch. The stakes are high for children, particularly those with borderline intellectual abilities. The stakes are even higher for individuals on death row. Therefore, the psychological community is encouraged to recognize recent research (e.g., Flynn Effect) and establish a standard for the use of newly revised IQ tests. I believe test publishing companies have a similar responsibility.

References


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