Constitutive and regulative conditions for the assessment of academic literacy

Albert Weideman
Necessary and sufficient conditions for language testing

- avoided by Messick (1980: 1019)
- perhaps not adequate, but to some extent useful to explain “constitutive” and “regulative”
“... sometimes something is so transparency that one needs no evidential proof”

(the Colin Firth character in the film [Jamie] proposing in broken Portuguese to his beautiful Aurelia).
Regulative conditions for test design

- indeed include love and care for others, but also
- transparency, appropriateness (relevance), utility, accountability
- complement and disclose constitutive technical reliability and validity, theoretical defensibility of the design.
An outline of the argument

- Language testing is a “central area of applied linguistics” (McNamara & Roever 2006: 255).
- Applied linguistics is a discipline of design.
- If so, what unitary or overarching notion is appropriate and desirable for language testing?
- An emerging foundational framework can help us
  - develop a robust systematic account for fundamental concepts in testing
  - provide an alternative conceptualisation of such concepts.
Context: trade-offs in testing

TiaPlus Factor Analysis: Subgroup 0 - Subtest 0
Two “most fundamental” considerations for testing

1) **Validity** is … the most fundamental consideration (AERA 1999: 9)

2) The most important consideration in designing … a test … is its **usefulness** (Bachman & Palmer 1996: 17; Bachman 2001: 110)

1) and 2) are both divergent and congruent
Divergence masked

by inclusion of validity under usefulness:

**Usefulness** = Reliability + Construct validity + Authenticity + Interactiveness + Practicality

*Bachman & Palmer’s model of test usefulness*
Congruences

- Validity as judgment / interpretation of test scores (Messick, Kane)
- Usefulness echoes Messick’s test utility, efficiency, instrumentality
- A unified/unitary view of language testing is desirable
# Validity reconsidered: reinterpreting Messick

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>adequacy of...</th>
<th>appropriateness of...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inferences from scores</td>
<td>multiple sources of evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design decisions based on inferences</td>
<td>reflected in utility, relevance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>relates to impact / consequences</td>
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<td>anticipate public justification of test use</td>
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Validity reconsidered (cont.)

- = coherence / systematic fit of fundamental considerations?
- Consider exhibits (3) to (6).
- Why subsume everything under validity?
- Distinguishing what is conceptually distinct.
Subjective & objective components of validity

- Help from the neighbours (jurisprudence)
- Result of process of validation?
- Subjective technical interpretation achieved on the basis of objective measurements.
- Fear underlying orthodox view: modernist belief in scores having meaning on their own.
- Validation as process and validity as function.
Terminal functions of an applied linguistic design

qualifying function

technical

analytical

foundational function
We need technical fantasy as well as theoretical analysis …

… and, contrary to modernist belief, the technical fantasy of the designer of an applied linguistic product has primacy.
Phases in the design process

1. Identify language problem
2. Bring together technical imagination and theoretical insight
3. Begin formulating imaginative solution
4. Justify solution theoretically
4. Blueprint finalised
Constitutive concepts in language testing

Foundational direction

Technical

Analytical

Validity

Consistency

Multiplicity of evidence

Constitutive concepts
## Technical consistency / reliability of TALL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version of test</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004 (Pretoria)</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005 (Northwest)</td>
<td>0.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006 (Pretoria)</td>
<td>0.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006 (Stellenbosch)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008 (Pretoria)</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.94</strong></td>
</tr>
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Regulative conditions for test design

design is disclosed by articulation

constitutive concepts

technical
analytical

validity
consistency
utility
alignment
transparency
accountability
care

regulative moments

multiplicity of evidence
Disclosing the meaning of design

- Designs need both theoretical and social accountability, public justification.
- Trade-offs in design (between technical means and ends) analogical economic idea.
- Designs are imaginatively conceived.
- Designs are made to demonstrate love, care for others.
Constitutive conditions enriched

- Validity reconceptualised as theoretical defensibility (construct validity)
- Further enhanced by technical articulation: interpretation (meaning) of scores
- Redefined in social terms as impact
- Political and juridical concerns added
- Yet enrichment not = reason to conflate
Systematic fit: constitutive and regulative conditions
The function of a theoretical framework

- “… break down the walls” – relate field to others
- Messick’s example: clarification sought from Leibniz, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Singer
- Our field is related to both natural and human (cultural) sciences
- Conceptual conflation leaves the discipline poorer
Full text available

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- and on
  http://www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/weideman.htm
  or
  http://www.up.ac.za/ual/