

Guidelines for the use of psychological tests

1. Psychological testing

These Guidelines for the use of Psychological Tests emphasise that testing is a professional activity that is subject to the principles of the Society's *Code of Ethics* (1997). The principles of responsibility, competence and propriety have been the primary influence in the formulation of the Guidelines. The use of tests by psychologists involves a duty of care to those who are tested. This includes obtaining informed consent and specifying limits of confidentiality. The purpose of the Guidelines is to remind us of that duty and the conditions that foster it.

1.1. Definition of psychological tests

A psychological test is a set of standard items or stimuli, the responses to which form the basis for an inference that goes beyond item content, and for which psychologists accept ethical responsibility in professional use.

This definition:

- is in accord with the requirements for construction of psychological tests (Clause A3 of the *Code* states: *Psychologists responsible for the development and standardisation of psychological tests and other assessment techniques must use established scientific procedures and observe relevant psychometric standards. They must specify the purposes and uses of the assessment techniques and clearly indicate the limits of their applicability*);
- recognises that some tests might have multiple uses or purposes, and that other professionals might have equal claim to their use in particular contexts (e.g. psychiatric, educational, human resource management);
- recognises that some tests used by psychologists are not always created by psychologists (but psychologists are responsible for using them in an ethical way);
- limits the concept of a psychological test to those which are used for psychological purposes (professional use); and
- makes clear that psychological testing implies ethical responsibility, including competence (General Principle II(b) of the *Code* states: *Psychologists shall refrain from offering or undertaking work or advice beyond their professional competence*).

1.2. Levels of skill and training required for the use of tests by psychologists

Tests may be used only by psychologists with appropriate training and experience to satisfy Section A1 of the *Code* which states: *Psychologists must ensure that assessment procedures are chosen, administered and interpreted appropriately and accurately*. The level of skill and training required for the use of a particular test has to be sufficient for the user to assume full ethical responsibility. In general terms this might include:

- that test use by psychologists is subject to the *Code of Ethics* and its requirements for professional competence and the maintenance of professional standards;
- that the use of any test in psychological practice requires competence in the use of that test;
- where competence is doubtful, questionable or questioned, the psychologist has an ethical responsibility to demonstrate competence;
- where psychologists are required to use tests for which they are not able to assume ethical responsibility on the grounds of inadequate training, they should seek appropriate training;
- appropriate training in test use includes supervised experience in administration, scoring and interpretation;
- ensuring interpretation and reporting of tests and feedback to clients is provided by psychologists; and
- ensuring any test is culturally appropriate (refer to General Principle III(b)) and administered and reported in a language the recipient can understand (Clause A2).

1.3. Classification of psychological tests

The level of skill and training required by psychologists for the administration, scoring, interpretation and reporting of tests varies according to the type of the test, the method of administration and scoring, the nature of interpretation, and the purposes for which the test report is used. While the psychologist retains full responsibility for the interpretation and reporting of test scores, the administration and scoring of some tests may be delegated to suitably trained persons. Examples are noted in the selection of candidates for employment or staff development purposes, by computerised testing

services and in the referral of a client record of test results to a colleague for a second opinion. The psychologist must be satisfied that any non-psychologist to whom delegation is made is aware of, and abides by, all relevant ethical and procedural considerations to ensure proper administration and scoring and the maintenance of confidentiality. Interpretation and reporting of the test results and the giving of feedback remain the responsibility of the psychologist. Any subsequent reports should indicate the extent of contact with the client and should be expressed in appropriate terms. In general, delegation of test administration should be avoided; otherwise, all the principles of best practice in psychological testing apply.

2. The use of tests

2.1. Basic standards for test use

Use of tests should be based on accepted standards of test use.

Test users should ensure that any test used, the scores of which are represented and reported as part of a formal psychometric assessment:

- has an adequate manual, which includes clear directions for administration and scoring, and adequate information about the properties of scores derived from the test;
- is valid for the purpose for which the test is used, and is also differentially valid for any sub-population of the total population to be included in the particular testing program (for example, sub-populations defined according to gender, ethnicity, language background or social class);
- has adequate evidence of the reliability of test scores; and
- has appropriate normative or reference group data to allow for the interpretation of scores in relation to a clearly defined population: this requires adequate information on the sampling procedure, the characteristics of the norm sample, and the date(s) when the normative data were collected. In cases where norms are based on an indirect standardisation, relevant information is also necessary.

Where tests are in the process of development, are being applied outside their empirically established purposes or populations, or are used informally to generate hypotheses, these features should be mentioned in any formal report and taken into account when making inferences or decisions from the assessment.

2.2. Acquisition of tests

Tests should be made available only to persons able to assume ethical responsibility for their use. Where purchases of tests for psychologists are made through a central agency within an organisation, professional authorisation of the purchase by a psychologist is essential. Tests will be acquired and used with full regard for the rights of authors, publishers, distributors and copyright holders. In particular, unauthorised photocopying of copyrighted tests is unethical.

2.3. Security of tests

Test materials should be stored and accessed in accordance with their requirements for administration, scoring and interpretation. Policies for storage and access should be such as not to compromise the ethical purposes of testing, in particular the introduction of error into scores and their interpretation.

Where test materials are used for teaching or demonstration purposes, students or trainees must be made aware of the full, delegated ethical responsibilities they assume, particularly in relation to the non-disclosure of secure test materials and the confidentiality of results.

In deciding how long to keep assessment records, the psychologist should consider factors such as requests of clients, the need to maintain professional accountability, and any relevant legislation.

2.4. Confidentiality and release of test results

It is the ethical responsibility of the psychologist to indicate, to those tested, the limits on confidentiality that exist in the testing situation. Access to psychological test protocols should at all times be controlled by a psychologist. Psychologists are responsible for the records of their testing. Psychologists in employment have only the rights agreed with their employer at the time of employment as part of their conditions of work or when testing is introduced or varied. Where these do not include the right of the psychologist to safeguard confidentiality of test materials and results, either while they are employed or once they leave that employment, no such right can be claimed.

In a government facility, the release of test results may be sought under Freedom of Information legislation. Conditions of application and grounds for release of documents vary from system to system and are available from the relevant authorities within each system. Test documents may be deemed exempt documents on the grounds that disclosure would be contrary to the public interest, where:

- disclosure would invalidate the utility of the test or tests in the practice of psychology;
- disclosure would impair the ability of psychologists to perform their duties properly; and
- disclosure would constitute a breach of the contractual arrangements under which psychologists are supplied with test materials.

References

Australian Psychological Society (1997). *Code of Ethics*. Melbourne.

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