

The Need to Maintain Test Security

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Mental health professionals, because of their need to adhere to ethical principles, reinforced by various legal statutes and case precedent, as well as contractual agreements, are obligated to protect the security of psychological assessment devices.

Forensic expert Shapiro (1991) advises that many codes of ethics specifically prohibit actions that would invite the misuse of assessment results. Turning raw psychological test data over to persons not properly educated and/or trained in the administration, scoring, and interpretation of psychologists tests invites such misuse.

Experts Ackerman & Kane (1993) have written: "It would be a violation of ethical and contractual requirements... to submit to an attorney or the court raw data, answer sheets, or other information that would compromise both the validity of the test and its utility for others."

Specifically, the dangers presented by the disclosure of psychological assessment data to persons not educated and/or trained in test usage are as follows:

1. In contradistinction to the medical field, psychology typically uses "everyday" terms in its diagnostic and descriptive formulations. The danger is that in psychology these words have vastly different meanings than they have in everyday language.

2. An extensive background in statistics is needed to understand the data yielded by psychological assessment instruments. Even responses to seemingly simple questionnaire forms frequently require knowledge of specific databases for appropriate interpretation. This is an important and widely misunderstood point. The objectivity of a health science measurement tool is a product of a (knowledge) database and almost never an inherent property of the measurement device itself. Even a radiologic film, which seems so objective, depends on a knowledge database e.g., a "shadow" in one area has different implications than one somewhere else; certain views yield more measurement errors than do other views; etc. This issue is even more critical in the mental health sciences since many assessment responses give the completely false impression that they are amenable to common sense interpretation, i.e., that they can be understood without knowledge of a particular database.

3. The improper public exposure of psychological instruments compromises the future validity i.e., accuracy, and hence future usefulness, of the instruments.

4. Turning psychological assessment instruments over to persons not educated and/or trained in their use is a violation of copyright law and of the contractual agreement the test user has with the publisher of the instruments.

Since ethical prohibitions are typically incorporated into licensing board regulations, turning psychological assessment instruments over to persons not educated and/or trained in their use becomes a serious violation for the test user.