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What's Wrong With Content-Oriented Validity Studies for Individual Psychological Assessments?

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Practitioners of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology, especially those who provide individual psychological assessments (IPA), must base their work on the extant research and the tools available to them as well as adapt their methods to the conditions that their clients present. The article by Silzer and Jeanneret (2011) raises a number of important issues, either explicitly or implicitly, that the profession of I–O psychology needs to consider carefully. Many of these questions arise from the problems presented when trying to conduct validation research in the real world. The job is not well defined, the population on which the assessment is used is too small for criterion-related validation, and a useful criterion is not obtainable. Nevertheless, for legal reasons as well as business needs, the I–O psychologist has the obligation to establish the validity of IPA and ensure its usefulness to the organization being served.

The research summarized by Silzer and Jeanneret has used only criterion-related approaches (including meta-analytic research) to accumulate evidence of validity. Yet, criterion-related validation studies of IPA are extremely difficult to execute in corporate settings for a number of reasons:

- *Small sample size*. Even in large organizations, the number of executives is relatively small, and many of them hold unique positions, although typically all are expected to fulfill a leadership role with similar requirements. Usually only a selected few executives or candidates for executive positions are invited to participate in assessment programs for either development or selection purposes. A small sample, predictive study that is not cross-validated is fraught with peril. Therefore, many practitioners face a dilemma of how to ensure that the assessment program measures what it is intended to measure. Even over a period of time, the numbers of executives assessed in one organization are not sufficient for the statistics used in establishing evidence of validity through a criterion-related study.
- *Varying job requirements*. Varying job requirements can exacerbate the small sample size problem. Most I–O psychologists recognize common expectations of leadership positions while acknowledging the differences in requirements for different situations. For example, the leadership requirements for turning around a poor

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performing facility may be different from those necessary for starting up a new one. Consequently, particular aspects of leadership may be more important than others depending on the context. In addition, one of the advantages of IPA to organizations is the adaptability of the IPA to its needs. Thus, the I–O psychologist must ask the question of whether or not jobs can be legitimately combined for the purposes of validation research.

- *Criterion*. A usable criterion measure is often impossible to obtain. If the sample size problems were overcome, collecting a reliable criterion is at least as difficult to do for executives as it is for incumbents in lower-level jobs and perhaps more difficult, given the reluctance of private corporations to share executive evaluations publicly. Because of the extreme sensitivity of executive-level data, many organizations are not likely to share results and contribute to meta-analytic studies. Another dimension of the criterion problem is the question of what is predicted. Although it is true that an assessor is sometimes asked to make an overall recommendation about an individual, it is also true that many assessors avoid making one if at all possible. Most assessment programs do not evaluate expertise in a particular field, and that expertise is usually one of the critical factors in selection decisions. In addition, most clients realize that making a recommendation based on one sample of behavior alone when a much more detailed sample exists is unnecessary, regardless of the standardization and objectivity of third-party assessors.

Alternatives

The difficulty of conducting a criterion-related validity study highlights the need to consider alternative ways of establishing the job relevance of assessment predictors. It does not eliminate the need for validation research; instead, the challenges around criterion-related studies suggest that alternative approaches to acquiring evidence be considered.

Interestingly, there is no mention of a content-oriented strategy for establishing validity in the focal article or in much of the research on IPA. Yet, there are many times when a well-done content-oriented study provides a better justification for the inferences made from an assessment tool than a poorly done criterion-related study on a small sample. Moreover, content-oriented approaches are particularly useful for establishing the validity of tools based on realistic work samples, such as business cases, role plays, and in-baskets. There is no doubt that a criterion-related validity study can assist the user not only in establishing the job relevance of the assessment process but also in determining the accuracy of prediction and appropriate cutoff scores; however, there are other approaches to accumulating evidence of validity such as content-oriented strategies that may be more accessible to a practitioner.

In many situations, a practitioner is more likely to be able to analyze carefully the requirements of executive positions and assemble a panel of experts to evaluate the extent to which various selection tools tap required competencies than to gather assessment data from enough participants and then collect criterion data for them. Turning our attention to effective ways of collecting job-analysis information on small incumbency jobs and conducting efficient content-oriented validity studies can help to ensure that assessments are useful predictors of behavior and guides for individual development.

A content-oriented validation strategy for IPA combined with the extensive research on the validity of some types of instruments (e.g., cognitive ability measures, personality inventories) can provide evidence that the IPA is measuring job-related competencies accurately. In addition, other research provides guidance on ways to increase the reliability and validity of tools (e.g., assessor training, anchored rating scales). Although

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a content-oriented validation study will not indicate the accuracy of one's predictions, a carefully done content study can establish job relevancy, and incorporation of best practices into IPA programs can enhance the reliability of the measures.

Reference

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