

## Scoring errors necessitate double-checking protocols

By John O. Willis\*

Unfortunately, one good reason for attorneys and parents to subpoena protocols from independent evaluators and from school personnel is the distressingly high rate of scoring errors.

If I were an attorney, I would always subpoena protocols and have my experts check the scoring.

Recently, I saw one on which the chronological age was a year low, significantly inflating all scores. Services were denied because the scores were too high.

Not too long ago, I saw another in which the computer scoring disk apparently suffered a stroke and produced scores that made no sense at all (e.g. age equivalent well below age and standard scores well above 100).

This did not deter the independent evaluator from using the scores (using only the age-equivalent scores, the evaluator never noticed that the standard scores and age equivalents could not possibly be both correct).

As an instructor in an advanced graduate assessment course, as a former psychology department head and as a consultant to school districts, I have had the opportunity to review thousands of test protocols (including my own).

Some errors are a matter of opinion because some subtests do require judgment in scoring. I have, though, often seen cases in which a misscored response was a verbatim quotation of one of the scoring examples in the test manual. However, clerical errors and mistakes in simple arithmetic are probably the most common.

Examiners should, but do not always, carefully read aloud the titles and column headings of norms tables to make sure they are looking up the correct score in the right column and row of a dense table of numbers. Those of us with bifocals must use two straightedges to read data from those tables.

Occasionally, I see blatant errors, such as including in the total a supplementary subtest that should be excluded (on the WISC-III that error raises the score by about 20 percent) or making mistakes on the basal and ceiling rules that differ among tests. (Those are rules for halting testing below a certain number of correct responses and above a certain number of errors on tests with items of increasing difficulty. Failure to follow the rules can inflate or depress scores.) Results from computer scoring disks should at least be spot-checked, and the reliability of the disk should be assessed from time

to time by comparison with another disk. In *Issues for training professionals in assessing intelligence* (1997, p. 328) **Alfonso & Pratt** review 13 studies of examiner error and conclude "It is clear... that ... errors in administration and scoring occur at alarmingly high rates."

Clearly, prudent preparation for a case does demand that the attorney have an expert examine all test protocols from all sources.

I only hope we can prevail upon hearing officers, judges and attorneys to respect the privacy of test items. I have seen instances of parents training their children on specific test items, which is a disservice to the child.

Public disclosure of specific items destroys the usefulness of the tests that are revised and renormed only at intervals of five to 20 years.

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