Translating psychometric tests for use in different countries and cultures

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Adapting psychometric tests across cultures

With the demand and need for psychological tests increasing in various different cultures and countries, there has been much greater awareness regarding some of the issues that are associated with the development or adaptation of tests to be used in contexts and situations that may be different from which the test was developed for. This article focuses on one of the key aspects of translating tests, the types of bias that can occur.

When utilizing the test in a new cultural group, it is not quite as simple as directly translating the test, administering it and then comparing the results for its validity. There are a number of issues that need to be considered such as whether the area assessed with the test applies to the new culture or whether is may be biased towards that group and whether what is assessed by the test also has similar behavioral indicators?

These are just some of the potential areas where bias can be found in the translation of tests and affect the validity of the test being utilized in the new context. Van der Vijer & Hambleton (1996) differentiates between three distinct types of bias that may affect the validity of tests that have been adapted for different cultural contexts and these are construct bias, method bias and item bias.

Biases

Construct bias occurs when the construct (e.g. personality) that is measured by the test displays significant differences between the original culture for which it was developed and the new culture where it is going to be utilized. These differences can occur in the way that the construct was formulated and developed as well as in the relevant behaviors that are associated with the construct. It is critical to examine whether the underlying theory of the test is subject to construct bias and this

can be examined through the studies examining the construct and its associated behaviors in the context that it will be utilized in. If there are significant differences found in these studies, it may indicative that there is construct bias. Major revisions may be required to overcome this bias. If not, the validity of the test will be affected.

Method bias refers to factors or issues related to the administration of the test that may affect the validity of the test. Examples of areas that method bias can occur include social desirability, acquiescence response styles, the conditions in which the test was conducted and the motivation of the respondents. Across cultures, there potentially can be differences that can occur in these areas and these can affect the way that the respondents answer the items in the test. This potentially may lead to differences between found that can be erroneously attributed to cultural differences when in fact, these differences are the result of differences in the administration procedures. As a result, it is threat to the validity of tests that have been adapted for use in new cultures. Test developers also not only need to focus on the adaptation of the test itself but also need to be aware of issues regarding the implementation of the test in a new context.

Item bias is another source of bias that can occur in the translation of tests and these refer to biases that occur with the items in the test. This is usually the result of either poor translation choices for items or due to culturally inappropriate translations. For example, the phrase “kick the bucket” is essentially a phrase that referring to passing away in the Western context and is commonly known by most people in that culture; unfortunately, this phrase would have no meaning for people from cultures without any prior experience with that phrase. In this manner, a literal translation of that phrase would be a poor translation as it does not convey the correct meaning of the item. The items in the test need to be culturally equivalent, where the meaning of the items needs to be correctly translated so as to maintain the validity of the test in the new cultural context.

These are some of the biases that may occur during the translation of tests. Test developers will need to be aware of the sources of bias and take the appropriate measures to avoid these biases.

Reference

Van der Vijer, F. and Hambleton, R. K. (1996). Translating tests: some practical guidelines. European Psychologist, 1, 89-99.

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