

# ERAC Q&A series: What is validity, and why is it important?

Credentialing organizations are expected to provide evidence of “reliability and validity” for any tests or assessment used in the credentialing process. Validity is considered of paramount importance—but what is it?

The concept of validity has been a topic of hot debate among psychometricians in terms of how it should be defined, conceptualized, communicated, and used. These issues bring a sparkle to the eyes of many psychometricians, but the eyes of others tend to glaze over as the discussion ensues. Fortunately, one does not need a psychometrician’s level of expertise in order to embrace the basic concept of validity. Validity has to do with whether a test serves its intended purpose effectively.

In a 1972 book, Ebel stated that “the term ‘validity’ means the accuracy with which a set of tests scores measure.” (Ebel, p. 409)

Cronbach was a major figure in describing a perspective on validity. Cronbach (1971) described *validation* as the process by which a test developer or a test user collects evidence to support the types of inferences that are to be drawn from test scores. To plan a validation study, the desired inference must be clearly identified. Then an empirical study is designed to gather evidence of the usefulness of the scores for such inferences. Three types of validation studies are

1. Content validation, for situations where the test user desires to draw an inference from the candidate’s test score to a larger domain of items similar to those on the test itself;
2. Criterion-related validation, for situations where the test user desires to draw an inference from the candidate’s test score to performance on some real behavioral or practical importance; and
3. 3. Construct validation, for situations where no criterion or universe of content is accepted as entirely adequate to define the quality to be measured. . . (Cronbach and Meehl, 1955), but the test user desires to draw an inference from the test score performances that can be grouped under the label of a particular psychological construct. . . Crocker and Algina, 217-218)

“Content based validity evidence is closely tied to test development. The proposed interpretation and use of test scores guides the development of the test and the inferences leading from test scores to conclusions and decisions. This process typically involves the specification of a target domain of observations that either defines the object of interest or an indicator to be used in estimating an object of interest. In either case, it is necessary to draw samples from the target domain or a subset of the target domain for inclusion in the test.” (Kane, p 131)

## A Validity Argument

In 1990, Kane introduced a different focus to validity concepts, and it proved to be quite useful to practitioners in the measurement field as well as being somewhat easier to understand for the lay public. This is the concept of the *validity argument*. Here is a quote from a paper that Kane presented in 2000.

“The interpretive argument provides a framework for developing a validity argument. Ideally, we would start with a clear statement of the proposed interpretation in terms of explicitly stated interpretive argument. Evidence and analysis would then be brought to bear on the inferences and assumptions in the interpretive argument, paying particular attention to the weakest links in this argument.”

## References

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