


Metaphors and the psychometric paradigm

Conference abstract

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AEA-Europe 3-5 November 2021



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How to cite this publication:

Bramley, T. (2021, November 3 - 5). *Metaphors and the psychometric paradigm*. [Paper presentation]. Annual conference of the Association for Educational Assessment – Europe (AEA-Europe), Dublin, Republic of Ireland (online).

Abstract

A recent book (Baird et al., 2018) introduced the idea of different ‘paradigms’ for understanding the variety of standard-setting practices in educational assessment encountered around the world. This presentation explores the psychometric paradigm especially in terms of the underlying philosophical position(s) taken on the nature of psychological attributes, the definition of measurement and the conceptualisation of standards on tests of educational achievement. First I discuss the extent to which the concept of measurement is a metaphorical one when applied to educational and psychological attributes. I then take the position that the targets of educational and psychological measurement belong to the philosophical category of ‘powers’ and discuss what this means for our understanding of whether and how they can be measured. I then discuss the psychometric definition of a standards - that they are points on an abstract line that divide the line into segments to which we wish to apply verbal labels such as ‘distinction’, ‘merit’, ‘pass’ and ‘fail’. I conclude that the attraction of the psychometric paradigm is the conceptual clarity it brings through its use of the measurement metaphor, but also that when it comes to standard-setting it cannot solve all our problems.

Full paper available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2020.1731421>