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Trends. Subtle and Obvious Items in Psychological Assessment: The Case of Iraq

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the types of questions asked of Iraqi authorities by United Nations weapons inspectors in the process of searching for weapons of mass destruction as well as validity for the questioning process.

Theory and research in clinical and personality assessment includes an ongoing discourse on the relative merits of subtle versus obvious assessment questions. Obvious questions denote those questions with significant face validity and with content that seems to “make sense” to the assessor independent of systematic observation or controlled experimentation. An example would be asking a person whether that person is depressed during a clinical evaluation for the referral question of whether that person is depressed. Subtle questions may have substantial validity as founded by systematic observation or controlled observation but may seemingly have nothing to do with that which is to be assessed. An example would be asking a person whether he/she likes baseball during a personality evaluation for the referral question of whether that person is suitable to receive a high-level security clearance. It turns out that both subtle and obvious questions may have their place in effecting a valid assessment.

The same distinction between subtle and obvious questions is being made by Iraqi officials and United Nations (UN) inspectors searching for weapons of mass destruction within Iraq. According to The New York Times, the Iraqi officials are accusing the UN inspectors of raising questions “outside their proper mission.” As an example, an Iraqi official is cited to have stated that “it is within their [the inspectors’] mandate to inspect military installations” and ask questions about the command structure of identified processing plants, but not to ask similar questions about the command structure of military installations [that have not been identified as processing plants.] However, from the inspectors’ perspective, questions seemingly not directly addressing elements of weapons of mass destruction may have significant bearing on such weapons. In this controversy, the Iraqis are taking the obvious viewpoint, while the UN inspectors are taking the subtle one.

Although the Iraqis clearly are not arguing the fine points of validity in an honest search for something called Truth, there is some truth to their protestations about validity issues with subtle questions. Although the UN inspectors are after Truth, too much reliance on subtle questions might impede the quest. As with psychological assessment, combinations of subtle and obvious questions will pave the road to validity regarding the inspections. And as with psychological assessment, the nexus of controversy over validity and over political intentions will be ongoing and resistant to change. (See Childs, R. A., Dahlstrom, W. G., Kemp, S. M., & Panter, A. T. (2000). Item response theory in personality assessment: A demonstration using the MMPI-2 Depression scale. *Assessment*, 7, 37-54; Coenders, M., Scheepers, P., Sniderman, P. M., & Verberk, G. (2001). Blatant and subtle prejudice: Dimensions, determinants and consequences; Some comments on Pettigrew and Meertens. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 281-298; MacFarquhar, N. (January 10, 2003). Iraq says it will reply to U.N. arms queries. *The New York Times*, p. A11; Synter, C. M., & Graham, J. R. (1984). The utility of subtle and obvious MMPI subscales based on scale-specific ratings. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 40, 981-985.) (Keywords: Iraq, Psychological Assessment, United Nations, Weapons of Mass Destruction.)