
ETS SENSITIVITY REVIEW PROCESS

An Overview



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The ETS Sensitivity
Review Process:
An Overview


Acknowledgment

The original procedures for the ETS sensitivity review process were developed by Ronald V. Hunter and Carole D. Slaughter.

Substantial contributions to the process have been made by other writers of earlier documents dealing with the issue of sensitivity. Many of these pioneering efforts, such as the *ETS Guidelines for Testing Minorities* and the *ETS Guidelines for Sex Fairness in Tests and Testing Programs*, provided much of the creative thought and detail contained within this document.

Finally, many ETS staff members have taken the time to review drafts of this document. In so doing they have provided a wealth of helpful suggestions and productive insights on this complex issue.

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Introduction

Educational Testing Service is committed to the development of tests and other publications that reflect a thoughtful and humanistic consideration of all people and that acknowledge the multicultural nature of our society. In the 1970s, ETS broadened the review of all tests to ensure that: 1) they contained questions recognizing the varied contributions that minority members have made to our society and 2) there was no inappropriate or offensive material in the tests. In 1980, the corporation, building on the review procedures, formally adopted the ETS Test Sensitivity Review Process. In 1986, this process was extended to all publications, including audiovisual materials and art work. The purpose of the process is to ensure that the guidelines, found in the ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness, are met.

One such test development guideline instructs test developers to prepare for each test, with appropriate advice and review, specifications that cover several critical areas, including requirements for material reflecting the cultural background and contributions of major population subgroups.

Another test development guideline requires the review of individual items, the test as a whole, and descriptive materials to assure, among other things, that language, symbols, words, phrases, and content that are generally regarded as sexist, racist, or otherwise potentially offensive, inappropriate, or negative toward major subgroups are eliminated.

Finally, an accountability guideline demands the review of publications and other materials to eliminate language or material generally regarded as sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive or inappropriate.

Although a substantial portion of the process consists of general criteria that can be applied to any population group, experience has shown that a particularly vigilant effort must be made to evaluate our publications from the perspectives of the following groups: Asian/Pacific Island Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, individuals with disabilities, Native Americans, and women. The process, therefore, specifically addresses areas of special concern to these population groups.

Background

Sensitivity review, required by Educational Testing Service for all its tests and publications, attempts to eliminate offensiveness from all ETS materials. Such offensiveness could obstruct the intent of a publication -- whether a general publication or a test. In the area of test development, for example, the impetus to avoid offensive material comes from a desire to ensure that each test is indeed asking all test takers to perform the same task under the same conditions, insofar as it is possible to do so.

The importance attached to sensitivity review does not imply a measurable relationship between material considered offensive by some test takers and the scores of test takers. However, material that candidates consider offensive may produce negative feelings that may affect their attitudes toward tests, and hence, their test scores. Recognizing both the negative feelings that a test taker may have when dealing with test material and the possible effect that offensive test material may have on the test taker's performance, ETS has instituted a sensitivity review process for tests and other publications.

The sensitivity review guidelines specify six groups that are to be given special consideration in sensitivity review: Asian/Pacific Island Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, individuals with disabilities, Native Americans/American Indians, and women. The guidelines, however, are general; they can be,

and are, extended to cover materials that are potentially offensive to the elderly and to members of other groups, including men, not specifically mentioned in the guidelines.

The sensitivity review promotes a general awareness of and a response to:

- the cultural diversity of the United States;
- the contributions of the various ethnic and minority groups and women to the history and culture of the United States as well as the achievements of individuals within these groups;
- the diversity of background, cultural tradition, and viewpoints to be found in the test-taking population;
- the force of language in setting or changing attitudes toward various groups and toward women; and
- changing roles and attitudes in United States society.

Factors Guiding the Sensitivity Review Process

Cultural Diversity

Since the 1960s, the United States has become much more aware of the diversity of its population. Both the civil rights and feminist movements have helped increase the visibility of women and people from minority groups. Further, this representation has moved away from stereotypes and has emphasized the occupational diversity and cultural contributions made by all groups.

Consistent with these advances in society as a whole, the ETS sensitivity review guidelines specify that all ETS publications must include material that reflects the diversity of the test-taking population. By underscoring the contributions of all groups to United States history and culture and by highlighting the individual achievements of women and minority groups in fields such as science, literature, and business, ETS tests and publications attempt to maintain a balance that acknowledges the cultural diversity of the test-taking populations. The sensitivity review process requires the demonstration of such a balance.

Diversity of Background Among Test Takers

Because test takers are different, a question may carry an emotional charge for one candidate or group of candidates that it does not carry for others. For example, a reading passage on sex differences in intellectual ability, a question on the problems of living in a ghetto, or data concerning the presence of certain diseases in a given population may very well be upsetting to some test takers. The sensitivity review helps to ensure that material dealing with disabilities, gender, or ethnicity is developed with care. Further, test takers may go away from a standardized test not knowing that they have given an incorrect answer or that they have misread a passage; therefore, offensive statements included as choices for the answer to a question may well reinforce the very stereotypes or bias that the rest of the test avoids. Such choices must be avoided wherever possible.

Force of Language

With changing attitudes toward various groups within the United States have come changes in the words we use. *Negro*, for example, is no longer generally acceptable as a racial group description; *Black American* is now the preferred term. At one time, people with disabilities were universally referred to as “handicapped.” The term used most frequently now is *disabled*. A term such as “settlers and their wives” is no longer used because it places women in a category apart from settlers, who are generally considered male in this construction, and because it downgrades women’s contributions to settlement. Similarly, the so-called “generic he,” though at one time considered the correct pronoun to use when referring to both sexes, is now seen as excluding women. These and other words and descriptions that exclude groups or perpetuate stereotypes are avoided in ETS tests and publications.

Changing Roles

Significant social changes have taken place in the United States in recent years: Family patterns have changed; women have entered the paid labor force in greater numbers and in positions they have not typically held; members of minority groups are making important contributions to fields from which they were largely excluded just a short time ago. ETS tests and publications reflect such changes, indicating to test takers that ETS is aware of social change and of the opportunities open to all test takers. In ETS materials, therefore, job titles that seem to restrict occupations (*firemen, businessmen, stuntmen*) are not used. Further, women and members of minority groups are portrayed as active participants in society and appear in a balanced variety of roles. Where a question in a mathematics test might once have mentioned Mary Smith's calculations for roasting a turkey, a similar question today might mention her calculations for establishing missile trajectories.

The Sensitivity Review Process

Reviewers

Reviews of ETS publications are conducted by ETS professional staff members who are trained in sensitivity issues at two-day workshops and periodic one-day refresher courses. While there are a number of reviewers who are women and/or members of minority groups, membership in such groups is not a prerequisite; and any professional interested in the process and showing concern for equity may be trained to administer it.

Test Sensitivity Review Procedures

The test sensitivity review process has three components: an optional preliminary review (required by some testing programs), a mandatory final review, and an arbitration process.

(1) Preliminary review

Any staff member who is assembling a test may request a preliminary review to screen questions and answers, reading passages, and other materials for sensitivity-related issues. The reviewer's recommendations are not binding at this stage; however, a preliminary review is an excellent means of identifying potential problems early in the test development process, when modifications can be made more easily.

(2) Final review

The mandatory final review takes place after the test has been assembled and during the regular editorial process. This review must be conducted, even if the test received a preliminary review.

The sensitivity reviewer, who is always someone other than the person who is responsible for the test (the test assembler), notifies the test assembler in writing of any sensitivity-related issues the test has raised. The test assembler must then address in writing all concerns of the sensitivity reviewer. In the vast majority of cases, the test assembler and the reviewer are able to resolve the issues satisfactorily. When the two cannot resolve issues raised by the reviewer, a sensitivity review coordinator meets with them to ensure that they clearly understand each other's position. If the reviewer and assembler still cannot reconcile their differences, they and the coordinator meet with a test development director, and the four of them discuss the problem question or passage. Most issues are resolved at this point. In a few cases, the material in question must go to arbitration.

(3) Arbitration

Arbitration is performed by a panel of three staff members who are outside the test development areas and who are not involved with the test in which the disputed question or passage appears.

After examining the disputed material, the panel must reach consensus as to whether or not the material conforms to ETS sensitivity review guidelines and procedures. The decision of the arbitration panel is binding.

Sensitivity Review Procedures for Other Publications

Sensitivity reviews of ETS publications other than tests are performed by the editors of those publications unless the editor is also the author, in which case another editor performs the sensitivity review. Editors, like test reviewers, are trained in the sensitivity process.

As a rule, editors undertake sensitivity reviews when the manuscript has reached final draft stage, before it is put into production. However, editors are encouraged to review copy informally as early in the editorial process as possible. If a manuscript that has already received a sensitivity review is changed, the sensitivity review editor must review the additions for conformity to the ETS sensitivity guidelines. Editors are also responsible for reviewing audiovisual publications and artwork proposed for inclusion in publications, using the same procedures described above. ETS-developed software is also reviewed for sensitivity.

Editorial staff bring sensitivity issues to the attention of the project director. The editor then works with the project director to eliminate questionable or inappropriate material from the publication.

A project director who chooses not to change a manuscript must reply in writing to the editor's query. In case of further disagreement, the dispute is resolved with the same arbitration process as that used for test material.

Review Criteria

The sensitivity review training sessions teach reviewers to evaluate material in light of specific criteria:

(1) Stereotyping

All ETS publications are reviewed to ensure that their language and illustrations reflect a fair and unbiased attitude toward all people and are free of material that reinforces stereotypes. For example, women should not be portrayed only cooking, maintaining a home, or taking care of children. Sensitivity reviewers are trained to identify stereotypes specific to each of the targeted groups and are given a list of "caution words and phrases." Some of these are unacceptable, e.g., "redmen" when referring to Native Americans. Most caution words and phrases (e.g., *underprivileged*) signal that a sensitive issue is being addressed.

(2) Examinee perspective

Test sensitivity reviewers have a particular concern that does not apply often to reviewers of other kinds of publications. They must evaluate all questions from the perspective of test takers, who do not necessarily know the correct answers. If an examinee must know the correct answer in order to prevent a question from reinforcing negative attitudes or stereotypes, the question may be in violation of the guidelines. For example, a wrong answer to a question about Hispanic culture should not reinforce—for those who mistakenly think the answer is right—the stereotype of the "lazy" Hispanic who always puts off work until "mañana."

(3) Underlying assumptions

While stereotypes are often blatant, underlying assumptions can be extremely subtle. Underlying assumptions may lead one to mistake aspects of Western culture for universal norms or to misunderstand a particular group. For instance, a publication that refers to an "afflicted" person "suffering from" cerebral palsy reflects the writer's underlying assumptions about what it is like to have this physical condition.

(4) Controversial material

Highly controversial material, such as legalized abortion, is to be included in tests only when it is relevant to what is being tested. For example, a test for doctors or nurses may have to contain questions on abortion, but a test of reading ability should not include a reading passage on this controversial subject.

(5) Contextual considerations

Sometimes the use of potentially sensitive material is unavoidable. There are four main areas in which this may occur:

- *Historical domain*: In order to measure an individual's knowledge of history, it may sometimes be necessary to quote from material written during a period when social values differed markedly from today's. For example, an older passage describing members of the Black community may use the term "colored." While it is desirable to avoid such material when possible, the material must be judged in the overall context in which it appears.
- *Literary domain*: Material that is designed to measure an individual's knowledge of literature or quotes from works of literature often contains similar problems. For example, a passage may use the so-called "generic he" in referring to men and women. Again, such material must be evaluated in light of the overall purpose of the test.
- *Legal domain*: Material drawn from legal sources may sometimes deal with sensitive issues. For example, a law test question on the detention of citizens may refer to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.
- *Health domain*: Certain examinations in the health profession require knowledge that may be considered sensitive in other contexts. For example, it may be necessary to test nursing candidates' knowledge of Tay-Sachs disease in Jewish families.

Inclusion of potentially sensitive material depends on the content of the entire test or publication. Given an appropriate context, use of certain material may be justifiable.

(6) Elitism, Ethnocentricity, and Related Problems

To eliminate concepts, words, phrases, or examples that may upset or otherwise disadvantage a test taker, ETS makes every effort not to include expressions that might be more familiar to members of a particular social class or ethnic group than the general population, such as "soul food" and "trust fund," unless the terms are defined or knowledge of them is relevant to the purpose of the test. Words and sentence constructions that could have different meanings for different ethnic or geographic groups are avoided. Care is also taken to assess the appropriateness of dialect, slang, and non-English words and phrases, such as "bairn," "stickball," and "maven," which tend to be more familiar to certain ethnic, geographic, or other subgroups of English speakers.

Additional Information

The above is an overview of the sensitivity review process. If you have comments, questions, or desire more information about the process, please write to the Office of Quality Assurance, 09-D, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ 08541-0001.

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