How Much Is Enough? Statistics with Small Sample Sizes

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How Much is Enough?
How many candidates do we need for “reliable” item statistics?

- Small volume programs use classical statistics to evaluate item performance
- Goal of an examination is good measurement
- Want good level of difficulty — $p$
- Want good discriminating power — $r_{pb}$
Why does it matter?

What do we do with $p$ and $r_{pb}$?
- Item pre-testing (or “tryout” or pilot testing)
- Scrutinizing items for flaws
- Setting cut scores (pre-equating or post-test equating)
- Validity of pass/fail decisions!

How much does it matter?

An example:
- After 12 candidates, $p = .5$ — hard item?
- Next 4 candidates get it wrong, $p = .38$
- Next 4 candidates correct, $p = .63$
- Hard item, or quite reasonable?
- Effect on cut score?
- Same situation when $n = 100; .48 \leq p \leq .52$

How many candidates needed?

- Simulation study - looking at variation in values for different group sizes
- “True” $p$ and $r_{pb}$ based on $n = 1525$ - actual candidate responses
- 140 items on examination
- Simulated group sizes of 10, 15, 20, 25, 50, 75, 100, 125, and 150 candidates
- Looked at difference between sample statistics and “true” statistics
What to do with all that data?

• For each group size
  - Select \( n \) sets of candidate responses
  - Calculate \( p \) and \( r_{pb} \) for those \( n \) candidates
  - Record difference between sample stat and “true” stat
  - Repeat 100 times

• Criterion: want average error of .05 across iterations

Results? Difficulty

Results? Discrimination
What do we see?

- Smaller sample sizes have more variability.
- More difficult items (low $p$) have more variability than easier items.
- Differences reach criterion with 50 candidates.
- $r_{pb}$ values are less stable than $p$ values.
- Differences failed to reach criterion even with 150 candidates.

What did we learn here?

- Difficulty estimates are not stable with $n < 50$.
- Discrimination indexes are particularly unstable with $n < 150$.
- Interpret statistics cautiously when sample size is low.
History

- 1970’s - problem-based approaches
  - patient management problems (PMPs) or simulations
  - used to assess decision-making skills.
- PMPs can have substantial evidence of content validity, and reliability.
  - Must be carefully developed and scored.

History

- PMPs are designed to test a specific content area in great depth.
  - Must carefully select group of problems to sample the content domain.
  - many PMPs must be included
    - To properly sample a complete content domain
    - To achieve sufficient reliability
  - Results in increased test administration time

Sample PMP

- [Image of a sample PMP question]
- [Image of a sample PMP question answer sheet]
PMP Issues

- Validity - Samples the content domain at great depth, but not breadth.
- Reliability - because of smaller number of items (problems) traditional reliability measures underestimate true reliability

Key Feature Problems (KFPs)

- Designed as an alternative to PMPs in the medical professions starting in the early 1990’s.
- Designed to assess examinee ability to evaluate:
  - the critical features of a clinical situation, AKA
  - the unique, essential elements of the situation that result in resolution of the problem.
- Requires that decisions be made at specific decision points (key features) during the assessment and management of the case.

KFPs - Characteristics

- Requires candidates to:
  - apply knowledge to resolve a problem
  - Use knowledge to guide decisions
  - Formulate diagnostic/management impressions
  - Recommend investigative or follow-up procedures
  - Acquire data to monitor a course of action
  - Evaluate the probability of an outcome
  - Select a management course for the problem
KFPs - Benefits

• Problems are relatively short and focus on a few critical elements.
• Allows more problems to be included on an examination within a fixed period of time.
  – 10 key feature problems worth 90 points
  – 2 simulation problems worth 40 points
• More KFPs lead to broader sampling of the content domain
  – Potentially improving reliability and validity of test scores.

KFPs - Benefits

• Flexible on question formats and the number of responses to questions.
• Can use either selected response (MCQ) or constructed response.
  - (MCQs easier for computer based testing)
• Can have multiple correct answers for each question.

A 10-month-old male, who was born at 28 weeks gestation with short bowel syndrome, is admitted to the hospital with lethargy, fever, and weight loss. The infant has a history of necrotizing enterocolitis and is status post-partial resection of the jejunum and majority of the ileum. The infant receives a combination of enteral, parenteral, and oral feedings at home.

Which of the following are MOST important to have upon starting initial assessment? Select FOUR of the following options.

A. blood pressure
B. blood omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids
C. bone age
D. fecal elastase
E. growth history
F. serum amylose and lipase
H. nutrition history
I. small bowel biopsy
J. stool output history
K. tissue transglaminase levels (TTG)
L. triene:tetraene
M. stool pH and reducing substances
**Standard Setting**

- KFPs can have items with multiple correct answers.
- Traditional standard setting techniques (e.g., Modified Angoff) need modifications to be applied to these alternative item types.
- Similar to Extended Angoff (Hambleton and Plake, 1995)

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**Standard Setting Options**

- Option 1 - Judges estimate the % of MCPs who will answer each correct option correctly
- Option 2 - Judges estimate the average score that 100 MCPs will obtain on each question (one or two decimals)

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**Standard Setting - Option 1**

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Judge Mean SD: 78, 74.0, 72.0
Psychometric Comparisons: PMPs vs. KFPs

- Validity - both based on Job/Practice Analyses
- Reliability
  - PMPs: vary from low 70’s to low 90’s
  - KFPs: vary from mid 70’s to mid 80’s
  - note: comparisons based on small number of candidates and limited KFP data

Converting Paper Exams to CBT

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General Thoughts

- Paper Advantage
  - Fixed time frame
  - Expense
  - Large groups
- CBT
  - Security
  - Convenience
  - Unique item types
  - Instant Scores

CBT Considerations

- Candidates
  - Access
    - More locations
    - Less travel costs
  - Scheduling
    - Take it close to home
    - Take it when you want
  - Scoring
    - Instant Scores

Organization

- CBT-Administrative Headaches relieved
  - Shipping
  - Facilities
  - Staff
  - Delayed scores
  - More Secure
- Some Providers will close certain months
Converting-Exam Type

- Linear Versus Adaptive
  - Bank requirements
  - Test Development requirements
  - Test Length
    - Adaptive shorter (less time and cost in the long run)
  - Content coverage

Studies adaptive transition

- Equivalency
- Assure same pass/fail decisions are made when going to adaptive
- Assure content bias does not creep in (e.g., content areas under representative)
- Exam will be challenging for both high and low ability candidates

Psychometric considerations

- Randomization of questions
  - Does this impact statistics or candidate anxiety
  - Traditional spiraling techniques
- Randomization of options
  - Literature has suggested that this can impact item difficulty
- Unique item types can create psychometric scoring challenges (e.g., item dependency, violations to test theory assumptions)
- Data—it can be very messy
Costs

- Paper considerations
  - Printing
  - Shipping
  - Staff resources
  - Rental costs
  - Administrator/Proctor Expenses
  - Exam day surprises (bands, medical, etc.)

CBT

- Get rid of the paper headaches, but have some unique considerations
- Publication fees (need for the QC)
- Seat time Fees
- Data handling

- International
  - Seat time
  - Availability of staff (time zones)

Cost Benefit analysis

- Identify all paper costs including potential threats
  - Administrative (staff time, printing, shipping, etc.)
  - Threats (cost of losing an exam book)
- Identify all CBT costs
  - Initial setup
  - Publication
  - Seat time
  - Initial psychometric investigations of transition
Decide

- Access and score reporting for candidates
- Amount of strain on the budget
- New programs or program with small numbers may not be able to afford
- Be realistic and base assumptions on the lowest realistic candidate volume

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