That "Disturbing Little Book" Is Back!

Paul E. Meehl
Clinical Versus Statistical Prediction: A Theoretical Analysis and a Review of the Evidence
Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1954 (reprinted 1996). 149 pp.
ISBN 1-56821-831-1. $35.00 paperback

Review by
Jerry S. Wiggins

Paul E. Meehl is Regents' Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, and Member Emeritus of the Center for Philosophy of Science at the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis). Meehl is past president of the American Psychological Association (APA; 1962), a member of the National Academy of Sciences, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and William James Fellow of the American Psychological Society (APS). Meehl is author of Psychodiagnosis: Selected Papers *and* Selected Philosophical and Methodological Papers *and coauthor, with N. G. Waller, of* Multivariate Taxometric Procedures: Distinguishing Types From Continua. *Meehl has received numerous honors, including the APA Award for Outstanding Lifetime Contribution to Psychology (1996) and the APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award (1998).* ■ *Jerry S. Wiggins, National Research Council Senior Associate of the National Institute on Aging and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada), served as president of the Society of Multivariate Psychology (1981–1982) and chair of the personality section of APA's Division 8 (Society for Personality and Social Psychology; 1982–1984). Wiggins is author of* Personality and Prediction: Principles of Personality Assessment *and editor of* The Five-Factor Model of Personality: Theoretical Perspectives.

Jason Aronson publishers are to be commended for reissuing a convenient softcover edition of what is surely among the most brilliant, inspiring, original, and above all controversial books in the literature of clinical psychology of the past 50 years. The seemingly straightforward topic of this extended essay was the relative merits of clinical (case study) and statistical (actuarial) methods of combining assessment data on a single patient to forecast future performance. Actuarial methods of combining "input data" have been most notably used by insurance companies to forecast outcomes on the basis of established empirical relations between predictors (age, sex, smoking) and criteria (driving accidents, morbidity). Data combination is "mechanical" in the sense that your insurance rates are completely determined by actuarial tables, rather than by your friendly Allstate representative. Clinical data combination in psychology and medicine is also based on known relations between predictors and criteria, but the final interpretation of these data often relies heavily on your friendly psychologist or physician who has had a great deal of experience in these matters.

The initial impetus for Meehl's work was the argument of Sarbin (1944) that it was irrational to expect the clinician to improve on actuarial methods of combining clinical assessment data. As a therapist, Meehl could not accept the idea that the clinician is a second-rate computer. As a scientist and philosopher of science, Meehl's attack on this issue was two-fold: (a) to carry out a "logical reconstruction" of clinical activity that would demonstrate, in principle, that there are situations in which it is possible to make use of judgmental procedures over and above the use of actuarial tables and (b) to review the literature for studies that compared the relative accuracy of clinical and statistical prediction.

The first enterprise involved such challenging issues as the nature of clinical judgment and when we should use our heads instead of the formula, and it has inspired a vast literature in which the clinician has become a legitimate object of study in her own right (Garb, 1998). The second enterprise stimulated empirical comparisons of clinical and statistical prediction which have since demonstrated that the mechanical method is almost invariably equal or superior to the clinical method in 136 research studies to date (Grove & Meehl, 1996). The number and quality of scholars that Meehl has influenced through this book and other works is truly remarkable (Cicchetti & Grove, 1991).

And yet, in the judgment of Meehl and most of his followers, clinical practice has changed very little with respect to the clinical versus statistical issue in the 35 years following the publication of his book. Reactions to this state of affairs have ranged from baffled disbelief to reflections on what "might have been" (Faust, 1991) had earlier generations of clinicians considered more seriously the issues raised by this "disturbing little book" (Meehl, 1986).

Given the current concern with such issues as cost effectivess in managed care, one would indeed think that Meehl's findings would be relevant. So, what can our current generation of graduate students and clinicians do about this paradoxical situation? At the very least, read this book.

References

Cicchetti, D., & Grove, W. M. (Eds.). (1991). *Thinking clearly about psychology: Essays in honor of Paul E. Meehl* (Vols. 1 and 2). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Faust, D. (1991). What if we had really listened? Present reflections on altered pasts. In D. Cicchetti & W. M. Grove (Eds.), *Thinking clearly about psychology: Essays in honor of Paul E. Meehl* (Vol. 1, pp. 185–216). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Garb, H. N. (1998). *Studying the clinican: Judgment research and psychological assessment.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Grove, W. M., & Meehl, P. E. (1996). Comparative efficiency of informal (subjective, impressionistic) and formal (mechanical, algorithmic) prediction procedures: The clinical–statistical controversy. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 2,* 293–323.

Meehl, P. E. (1986). Causes and effects of my disturbing little book. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 50,* 370–375.

Sarbin, T. R. (1944). The logic of prediction in psychology. *Psychological Review, 51,* 210–228.