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Testing for Competence Rather Than for “Intelligence”

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***Summary***

But what’s funny about it, when the public took us more seriously than we did ourselves and used the tests to screen people out of opportunities for education and high-status jobs? And why call excellence at these test games intelligence? Even further, why keep the best education for those who are already doing well at the games? This in effect is what the colleges are doing when they select from their applicants those with the highest Scholastic Aptitude Test scores.

To be sure, the teachers want students who will do well in their courses, but should society AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST allow the teachers to determine who deserves to be educated, particularly when the performance of in- terest to teachers bears so little relation to any other type of life performance? Do Intelligence Tests Tap Abilities That Are Responsible Jor Job Success? Most psychologists think so ; certainly the gen- eral public thinks so (Cronbach, 1970, p.

Kohlberg, LaCrosse, and Ricks ( l9?0) , for instance, in a recent sum- mary statement concluded that Terman and Oden’s ( 1947 ) study “indicated the gifted were more suc- cessful occupationally, maritally, and socially than the average group, and were lower in ‘morally deviant’ forms of psychopathology (e.g., alcoholism, homosexuality).” Jensen (1972) agreed: One of the most convincing demonstrations that I.Q. is related to "real life" indicators of ability was provided in a classic study by Terman and his associates at Stanford University.... Terman found that for the most part these high-I.Q. children in later adulthood markedly ex- celled the general population on every indicator of achieve- ment that was examined: a higher level of education com- pleted ; more scholastic honors and awards ; higher occupa- tional status ; higher income ; production of more articles, books, patents and other signs of creativity ; more entries in Who’s Wha,’ a lower mortality rate ; better physical and mental health ; and a lower divorce rate.

In case this sounds like special reason- ing, consider the fact, not commented on particu- larly by Anderson, that the same correlation be- tween “intelligence” test scores and adjustment in girls was an insignificant .0d. Are we to con- clude that intelligence does not promote adjustment in girls? It would seem more reasonable to argue that the particular ability tested, here associated with scholastic success, is more important to success (and hence adjustment) for boys than for girls.

Can we assume that intelligence promotes better ad- justment to life as has been often claimed? It sounds reasonable until we reflect that the “intel- ligence” test is a test of ability to do well in school (to take academic type tests), that many of Ander- son’s sample were still in school or getting started on careers, and that those who are not doing well 4 in school or getting a good first job because of it are likely to be considered poorly adjusted by them- selves and others.

Since we also know that social class back- ground is related to getting higher ability test scores (Nuttall & Fozard, 1970) , as well as to having the right personal credentials for success, Ohr correla- tion bettr een intelligence test scores and job suc- cess oJten ma y be an artiJact, the product of their joint association with class status.

They include skills like “measures angles,” “sharp- ens tools and planes,” and “identifies sizes and types of fasteners using gauges and charts.” This ap- proach has all of the characteristics of the new look in testing so far proposed: the tests are criterion samples; improvement in skill shows up in the tests; how to pass them is public knowledge; and both teacher and pupil can collaborate to improve test performance.

While the six principles just enumerated for the new testing movement may affect occupational testing, the fact remains that testing has had its greatest impact in the schools and currently is doing the worst damage in that area by falsely leading people to believe that doing well in school means AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST J4Df44fy 1973 that people are more competent and therefore more likely to do well in life because of some real ability factor.

McNemar remarked that “the manual of the Differential Aptitude Test of the Psychologi- cal Corporation contains a staggering total of 4,096, yes I counted ’em, validity coefficients.” \Vhat more could you ask for, ladies and gentlemen? It was not until I looked at the manual myself (Mc- Nemar certainly did not enlighten me) that I con- firmed my suspicion that almost every one of those “validity” coefficients involved predicting grades in courses—in other words, performing on similar types of tests.

Why should intelligence or aptitude tests have all this power? What justifies the use of such tests in selecting applicants for college entrance or jobs? On what assumptions is the success of the move- ment based? They deserve careful examination be- fore we go on rather blindly promoting the use of tests as instruments of power over the lives of many Americans.

Just look at those test scores.” Testers may shudder at this, and write public dis- claimers, but what practically have they done to stop the spread of this blind faith in test scores? In Ethiopia in 1968 we were faced with the prob- lem of trying to find out how much English had been learned by high school students who had been taught by American Peace Corps volunteers.

Are there no studies which show that general in- telligence test scores predict competence with all of these other factors controlled? I can only assert that I have had a very hard time finding a good carefully controlled study of the problem because testers simply have not worked very hard on it: they have believed so much that they were measur- ing true competence that they have not bothered to try to prove that they were.

I do not want to repudiate civilization as we know it, or even to dismiss intelligence tests as irrelevant or unimportant, but I do want to state, as em- phatically as possible, that Terman’s studies do not demonstrate unequivocally that it is the kind of ability measured by the intelligence tests that is responsible for (i.e., causes) the greater success of the high-IQ children.

It seems wiser to abandon the search for pure ability factors and to select tests instead that are valid in the sense that scores on them change as the person grows in experience, wisdom, and ability to perform effectively on various tasks that life pre- sents to him.

And what about the public? Shouldn’t their opin- ion as to how they are served by the police be part of the criterion? The most recent careful review (Kent & Eisenberg, 1972) of the evidence relating ability test scores to police performance concluded that there is no stable, significant relationship.

But would we conclude we were dealing with a general ability factor? Many a ghetto resident must or should feel that he is in a similar position with regard to the kind of English he must learn in order to do well on tests, in school, and in occupations today in America.

And why should we be interested in such specialized skills? As we have seen, they predictably do not seem to correlate with any life-outcome criteria except those that involve similar tests or that require the credentials that a high score on the test signifies.

Lots of the celebrated correlations between so-called intelligence test scores and success can lay no greater claim to representing an ability factor.

One other illustration may serve to warn the unwary about accepting uncritically simple state- ments about the role of ability, as measured by intelligence tests, in life outcomes.

But life out- side of tests seldom presents the individual with such clearly defined alternatives as “Which dog is most likely to bite?” or “Complete the following number series: 1 3 6 10 15 ,” or “Check the word which is most similar in meaning to lexi- con .” If we refer to these latter behaviors as respondents in the sense that the stimulus situa- tion clearly is designed to evoke a particular kind ol response, then life is much more apt to be charac- terized by operant responses in the sense that the individual spontaneously makes a response in the absence of a very clearly defined stimulus.

To qualify for being a policeman you have to take a three-hour-long general intelligence test in which you must know the meaning of words like “quell,” “pyromaniac,” and “lexicon.” If you do not know enough of those words or cannot play analogy games with them, you do not qualify and must be satisfied with some such job as being a janitor for which an “intelligence” test is not re- quired yet by the Massachusetts Civil Service Com- mission.

Psycholo- gists should be ashamed of themselves for promot- ing a view of general intelligence that has en- couraged such a testing program, particularly when there is no solid evidence that significantly relates performance on this type of intelligence test with performance as a policeman.

So what about grades? How valid are they as predictors? Researchers have in fact had great difficulty demonstrating that grades in school are related to any other behaviors of importance— other than doing well on aptitude tests.

If per- formance is already high, say in mathematics, then the college probably can produce little improvement in that area and should ask itself in what other areas it can educate such a student, as shown by his lower levels of accomplishment at the outset, The profile particularly should include measures of such general characteristics as ego development or moral development (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971 ) based on thought samples, because these general competencies ought to be improved by higher edu- cational systems anyway.

Most other tests simply required the person to find the one correct answer the test maker had built into the item.

For instance, Jensen ( 197 2) wrote recently: Can the I.Q. tell us anything of practical importance 7 Is it related to our commonsense notions about mental ability as we ordinarily think of it in connection with educational and occupational performance? Yes, indeed, and there is no doubt about it... The I.Q. obtained after 9 or 10 years of age also predicts final adult occupational status to almost as high a degree as it predicts scholastic perform- ance.... The average I.Q. of persons within a particular occupation is closely related to that occupation's standing in 3 terms of average income and the amount of prestige ac- corded to it by the general public t p.

Thorndike and Hagen ( 1959) , for instance, ob- tained 12,000 correlations between aptitude test scores and various measures of later occupational success on over 10,000 respondents and concluded that the number of significant correlations did not exceed what would be expected by chance.

For ex- ample, Anderson ( 1960) reported a significant cor- relation between intelligence test scores obtained from boys in 1950, age 14—1 7, and follow-up ratings of general adjustment made five years later.

The Educational Testing Service alone employs about 2,000 people, annually administers Scholastic Apti- tude Tests to thousands of aspirants to college, and makes enough money to support a large basic re- search operation.

Rather, the test must have some indirect connection with good grades, so that doing well on it through practice destroys its predictive power: hence the high score is a “fake.” The person can do analo- gies but that does not mean any longer that he will get better grades.

My objectives are to review skeptically the main lines of evidence Io the validity of intelligence and aptitude tests and to draw some inferences from this review as to new lines that testing might take in the future.

This gave a measure of English fluency that predictably did correlate with occupa- tional success among Ethiopian adults and also with school success, although curiously enough it 10 was significantly negatively related to a word-game skill (English antonyms) that more nearly ap- proximates the usual test of English competence ( Bergthold, 1969 ) .

Vet, neither the tests nor school grades seem to have much power to predict real competence in many life outcomes, aside from the advantages that credentials convey on the indi- viduals concerned.

The score on this measure predicts very well which junior or high school stu- dents will be perceived by their teachers as more competent (even when correlations with intelligence and grade performance are removed), and further- more a special kind of education in junior high school moves students up the ego development scale significantly.

121 ) conclusions, based on a review of 50 years of research, that general intelligence tests correlate .42 with trainability and .23 with proficiency across all types of jobs? Each of these correlations is based on over 10,000 cases.

Tests Predict Grades in School The games people are required to play on apti- tude tests are similar to the games teachers require in the classroom.

He had no un- equivocal evidence that it was “giftedness" (as re- flected in his test scores) that was responsible for AMERICAN P$vcuorocisz Januar y 1973 TAB LE I Yumbers of Students in Various IQ and SES Cate- gories (birth Grade) and Percentage Subsequenlly Going to College Socioeconomic otatus High 9p to college Low 9p to college High 51 7l 57 23 Low 3J 18 96 Nole.