

Why is intelligence testing a questionable practice?



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Intelligence testing, which is an important tool for psychological screening and profiling of subjects, has attracted much criticism from various quarters. Intelligence testing, as in standardized IQ tests, have certain limitations, which render them in-comprehensive. For example, psychologists such as Daniel Goleman have introduced a new dimension to cognitive tests by recognizing the importance of 'emotional quotient' (EQ) or 'emotional intelligence' (EI) in order to fully measure cognitive ability. Further, many scholars have identified a race/ethnic bias in the construction of conventional tests, which make dubious the validity of their results. For example, the case of examiner bias in Scholastic Aptitude Tests in American schools is widely documented now, putting at disadvantage students from ethnic minorities like African and Hispanic Americans. (Gould, 1996) The rest of this essay will elaborate these points which question the value, consistency and comprehensiveness of conventional intelligence tests and identifies scope for their improvement.

Ever since Alfred Binet and Theophile Simon created the first 'intelligence test' in France in 1905, such tests have attracted controversy. Devised to identify possible mental deficiencies in French public school students, these tests were translated in English and adapted to public schools in England and the United States by 1910. Henry Goddard who promoted it in the United States, administered it to a batch of 2000 White school children and came to the conclusion that "a child cannot learn the things that are beyond his grade of intelligence". (Franklin, 2007, p. 216) Later, he created a range of scores for 'normal' White children and started to compare across such divisions as "rural versus urban, native-born versus foreign-born, and

others.” (Franklin, 2007, p. 216) Later when Howard Odum applied the Binet Intelligence Test to black children, he concluded that there were clear disparities between White and Black children if all facets, including “ environment (home conditions), school conditions and progress, and in mental and physical manifestations” (Franklin, 2007, p. 217). Being an influential sociologists of the time, the observations of Goddard and Odum were taken seriously in government policy circles. The result was the institution of segregation, whereby black pupils were confined to exclusive public schools with a special curriculum that focussed on teaching them vocational/practical skills. One can see how this kind of institutionalized discrimination caused discontent among disadvantaged communities. They questioned the authenticity of supporting scientific evidence as well as the tests.

Further, in his book *The Measurement of Intelligence*, published in 1916, Lewis Terman made the following observation about the poor showing of African American, Native American, and Mexican children on the tests:

“ Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and [Negroes] suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew.. . there will be discovered enormously significant racial differences...which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture.” (Franklin, 2007, p. 217)

Such crude assessments of differences between races/ethnicities might come across as a shock for a contemporary reader. But such views were the accepted norm of the time, and what bare scientific evidence could be found to support these claims were fully exploited to legitimize political and social subordination of minority communities. While the case of science-backed-discrimination is better documented in American scholarship, the phenomenon was present across the globe in all imperialist nations, including the UK. It wasn't until the civil rights movement in the 1960s and public agitations by the black community to achieve equality with whites that such entrenched views about intelligence were seriously contested. Until then the results of intelligence tests were used during the first half of the twentieth century as a justification for political oppression of minorities. It is because of this chequered history of intelligence tests that they are treated with apprehension and scepticism even today. (Fancher, 1985, p. 110)

The abuse of intelligence tests to achieve political ends is only one facet of the controversy. On the scientific side, the very definition of the term 'intelligence' remains contested. There are some scientists who even question the very existence of intelligence, with an underlying belief in the deterministic and behavioural nature of human existence. Since most psychologists believe intelligence to be a fixed quantity, it could induce a sense of helplessness in those scoring low in intelligence tests, with negative implications for self-esteem. Adding fuel to the controversy are such publications as *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, which attempt to classify

society in a hierarchy, with correlations between economic class and higher intelligence. In this context,

“ intelligence tests have been used to support nativistic theories in which intelligence is viewed as a qualitatively unique faculty with a relatively fixed quantity. Historically, proponents of nativistic theories have succeeded in persuading those with political power that standardized tests reliably measure intelligence; and these tests have been used to make important decisions about vast numbers of individuals including immigrants, U. S. soldiers during the first World War, normal school children, and the developmentally disabled.” (Schlinger, 2003, p. 16)

In recent decades, Daniel Goleman’s seminal work on Emotional Intelligence has shaken up entrenched beliefs about human intelligence. In his popular original work of the same title, Goleman points out that academically brilliant students in school and college do not eventually go on to occupy positions of high office in the academia, corporate world or other professional realms. To the contrary, an individual’s success in professional life is only loosely correlated with his/her scores in school and college. Spurred by the missing factor in this equation, Goleman constructed the concept of Emotional Intelligence as a more potent and valuable aid for success in worldly affairs. The term Emotional Intelligence might seem an oxymoron at first, based on traditional views about the dichotomy of reason and emotion. But what this term suggests is that emotion, as opposed to being antagonistic to reason is in fact a vital component of it. But many standardized tests employed by psychologists and educationalists are inadequate in measuring this more

important component in a pupil's overall personality make-up. (Keith et. al., 2001, p. 89)

It is in recognition of the inadequacies in traditional intelligence tests that the Geneva Appraisal Questionnaire was conceived and drawn up in 2002. The BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory that preceded it was another testing product that was at the forefront of the EI movement. But it should be noted that since EI testing is far more qualitative than IQ tests, there is no consensus among psychologists as to what parameters should be measured and how they should be measured. Also, in addition to the two models “ there are many less well known instruments available on-line, many of which claim to produce an Emotion Quotient (EQ) for individuals engaging with the tests, though very few of the instruments include a visible scoring system or the type of information that is required to validate or give credibility to the assessment”. (Wakeman, 2006, p. 72)

Till date, the most exhaustive testing model to have come up is the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EIQu), which places “ individuals into one of twelve sectors on a polar graph and identifies their strengths and weaknesses on a range of EI factors. It is envisaged that the EIQu will become a significant means of measuring EI for the purposes of psychometric testing, recruitment and educational psychology”. (Wakeman, 2006, p. 71) Since EIQu is a recent invention it remains to be seen well how it holds up as a viable method of testing in the future. It is also unknown yet if it will plug the gaps in existing intelligence testing models. EQ tests are also vulnerable to manipulation and dishonesty on part of the examined. Identifying these potential weakness, new psychometric tests are

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incorporating mechanisms to check for consistency in the answers given by participants.