

Chapter 38

Mental testing

Most people seem to have an unquestioning faith that a paper-and-pencil test has about the same correspondence with what is named on the cover of the booklet as the correspondence of a tape measure with the girth of your waistline. Many people (not all) may doubt the validity of a test when they fail one, and perhaps even more when a child of theirs fails one, but most seem to go on thinking that those tests are valid for *other* people.

In this chapter, I am going to say some disparaging things about standardized mental tests, and you may wonder why, on earlier pages, I have sometimes mentioned average scores on standardized tests by students undergoing various sorts of schooling. I did so because some readers will put value on test scores. For reasons I gave in Chapter 26, test scores are of very little value in dealing with individuals, but averages over several dozen people can have respectable reliabilities (no matter what the scores actually stand for, if anything), even if only temporarily, and I was writing about averages. In Chapter 37, for example, I was saying that if you care about test scores, there are some groups or circumstances in which the averages will be higher than in others. I will point out a few more groups and circumstances in this chapter. I prefer the kind of criteria used in the Eight-Year Study and in the study by Leona Tyler, both of which I mentioned in Chapter 37. Because, however, so many reformers seem to want to rest their arguments on test scores, I will use this chapter to point out some dangers in doing that.

I said a good deal in Chapter 26 about personality questionnaires, and those questionnaires are a variety of psychological (or “mental”) test. Much of what I said in Chapter 26 about personality tests applies as well to tests used to assess scholastic aptitude and progress. By “test,” I will mean here such devices as

school-achievement tests, scholastic aptitude tests, intelligence tests, and all such “mental” tests as are customarily assessed in the *Mental Measurements Yearbook* edited by James V. Mitchell (1998).

The technicalities of testing apply, too, to the test a horizontal bar can give to your high-jumping ability and the test a tape measure can give to your waistline, but those tests are not usually given the over-interpretation or the social consequences that are given the mental tests. When I write “test” here, think of the mental tests, especially tests used in schools.

HOW CAN YOU GET A HIGH SCORE ON A TEST?

Here I will again make use of the Requisites for a Particular Act.

Requisite 1

To get a high score on a test, you must first *want* to get a high score. That is, getting a high score must enable you to control a perception for which you have an internal standard. Reasons people have for wanting a high score are many: for the fun of seeing how high they can score, for the pleasure of seeing the pleasure of teacher or parent, for fear of seeing the censure of teacher or parent, to feel that they have taken another step toward (or out of) college, for the pleasure of being admired, and to maintain their pictures of themselves as knowledgeable, intelligent, or scholarly. No doubt you can think of other reasons.

Most tests are built so as to produce a wide array of scores, but not all tests are built that way. For example, almost all applicants pass the test for a driver’s license, and few care how “high” the score was.

Teachers, principals, parents, college admission officers, and others want tests to yield a wide spread of scores, or at least five gradations. Grades and tests serve important purposes for those adults, but not many purposes for children. Grades and tests are not necessary for children to acquire knowledge and skill. Out of school, children acquire knowledge and skill greedily every day. Grades and tests serve the purposes of students only to the extent that the students adopt the purposes of school and college personnel and participate purposely in the competitive movement from grade to grade. Some do, some don't.

Turning now to those students who so want to get a high score, Requisites 1b and 2a are given by the testing situation. As to 1b, you must perceive that you have not yet reached some goal such as passing the course, winning the scholarship, or getting admitted to the college. As to 2a, the suitable object (the test) awaits in the testing situation.

Requisite 2b

To get a high score, you must believe that getting a high score is a means by which you can reduce the distance to your goal.

Requisites 2c and 2d

You must believe you are capable of giving enough right answers. This belief comes easily to test-takers who have succeeded frequently in the past. For students who do not know enough answers and know that they do not, taking the test will not move them toward their goals. If the high score on the test is a necessary step, they must find some way to get a high score other than by reaching into their memory. It turns out that most of them help themselves in the ways we call "cheating."

I put "cheating" in quotation marks because it is not so much a name for what a student does as it is a name for a kind of disturbance to the perceptions of authorities. When you have forgotten how to make potatoes Patagonia and you look in a cookbook to find the answer to your perplexity, you don't call that cheating. Or when you wonder where Taiwan might be, and you look in an Atlas. Or when you want to win a scholarship, and you ask someone to help you answer the questions on the application form. What you do to answer a test question gets called cheating when somebody puts you into a competitive

situation—promises you something you want if you find better answers or find answers sooner than some other people—and tells you that getting the answers from anyplace other than your memory at this brief moment is against the rules.

The school people tell you that you are not going to find a respectable place in society unless you come to school and get good scores on all those tests. Then they tell you that you have to memorize all those details the tests are going to ask you about, *and* you have to succeed in memorizing more details than, let's say, about half the other students taking the tests. (You could get a passing grade by memorizing more than about a tenth of what the others memorize, but that, they tell you, won't get you to a really respectable place.) You might think the young people in Patagonia are not placed in such a bind, but you don't want to go there, because you don't speak the language, and you might have an even harder time finding a respectable job if you went there. The obvious thing is to bring a few helps to the testing situation, maybe too a friend who has done a lot of memorizing. Living things do what they can to reach their goals.

In October of 1994, the Office of the Dean of Students at the University of Oregon sent to faculty members a memorandum containing this paragraph:

In a recent questionnaire sent to 500 University of Oregon sophomores, juniors, and seniors as part of a survey study of 10 U.S. state universities, 91% of U of O students admitted to cheating on a written assignment or exam while attending the U of O. The mean for the total sample of U.S. state universities was 89%.

Every few years, it seems to me, a newspaper or magazine reports a cheating "scandal" at one of the nation's military academies. Turning to high schools, here is a report by Mathews and Argetsinger (2000) of *The Washington Post*, reprinted in my local newspaper:

A nationwide poll of 20,000 students released in 1998 by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Marina Del Rey, Calif., said seven out of 10 high-schoolers admitted to having cheated on a test (p. 14A).

Games such as football, basketball, and ice hockey draw millions of fans, and the players are much-admired celebrities. Several referees are posted at those games to award penalties to players who cheat—that is,