

Psychology
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Why IQ tests don't test intelligence

The task of trying to quantify a person's intelligence has been a goal of psychologists since before the beginning of this century. The Binet-Simon scales were first proposed in 1905 in Paris, France and various sorts of tests have been evolving ever since. One of the important questions that always comes up regarding these tools is what are the tests really measuring? Are they measuring a person's intelligence? Their ability to perform well on standardized tests? Or just some arbitrary quantity of the person's IQ? When examining the situations around which these tests are given and the content of the tests themselves, it becomes apparent that however useful the tests may be for standardizing a group's intellectual ability, they are not a good indicator of intelligence.

To issue a truly standardized test, the testing environment should be the same for everyone involved. If anything has been learned from the psychology of perception, it is clear that a person's environment has a great deal to do with their cognitive abilities. Is the light flickering? Is the paint on the walls an unsettling shade? Is the temperature too hot or too cold? Is the chair uncomfortable? Or in the worst case, do they have an illness that day? To test a person's mind, it is necessary to utilize their body in the process. If everyone's body is placed in different conditions during the testing, how is it expected to get standardized results across all the subjects? Because of this assumption that everyone will perform equally independent of their environment, intelligence test scores are skewed and cannot be viewed as standardized, and definitely not as an example of a person's intelligence.

It is obvious that a person's intelligence stems from a variety of traits. A few of these that are often tested are reading comprehension, vocabulary, and spatial relations. But this is not all that goes into it. What about physical intelligence, conversational intelligence, social intelligence, survival intelligence, and the slew of others that go into everyday life? Why are these important traits not figured into intelligence tests? Granted, normal standardized tests certainly get predictable results where academics are concerned, but they should not be considered good indicators of general intelligence

because of the glaring omissions they make in the testing process. To really gauge a person's intelligence, it would be necessary to put them through a rigorous set of real-life trials and document their performance. Otherwise the standardized IQ tests of today are testing an extremely limited quality of a person's character that can hardly be referred to as intelligence.

For the sake of brevity, I will quickly mention a few other common criticisms of modern IQ tests. They have no way to compensate for cultural differences. People use different methods to solve problems. People's reading strategies differ. Speed is not always the best way to tackle a problem. There is often too much emphasis placed on vocabulary. Each of these points warrants individual treatment, and for more information refer to *The Triarchic Mind* by RJ Sternberg (Penguin Books, 1988, p18-36).

It is possible to classify all the reasons that IQ tests fail at their task into two main groups.

The first grouping is where the tests assume too much. Examples of this flaw are the assumption that speed is always good, vocabulary is a good indicator of intelligence, and that different test taking environments won't affect the outcome. The second grouping comes because the tests gauge the wrong items. Examples of this are different culture groups being asked to take the same tests as everyone else, and the fact that the tests ignore so many types of intelligence (like physical, social, etc). These two groupings illustrate where the major failings of popular IQ tests occur and can be used as tools for judging others.

IQ tests are not good indicators for a person's overall intelligence, but as their use has shown, they are extremely helpful in making predictions about how a person will perform in an academic setting. Perhaps the problem comes in the name intelligence tests when it is obvious this is not what they really are. The modern IQ test definitely has its applications in today's society but should be used to quantify a person's overall intelligence by any means.

