Intelligence Testing: Criticisms

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It has been more than 100 years since Charles Spearman observed the correlations between different cognitive test results and introduced the world to his general intelligence factor, *g*. Today, most people consider the construct of IQ as valid and believe that intelligence testing does indeed tap into a universal cognitive capacity. However, intelligence testing has not escaped criticism.

Is intelligence testing VALID?

Many critics have argued that IQ tests ignore or underestimate the contribution of factors like emotion, social skills, motivation or even morality. However, the response to this is that *g* is only a measure of *cognitive* ability, and so it cannot be judged as invalid for excluding *non-cognitive* abilities.

A more serious criticism lies in the question of whether IQ testing does in fact test human cognition in the way it claims to. The work of Kahneman and Tversky won the Nobel Prize for showing that real-world human judgment is prone to irrational errors of reasoning. What's more, some researchers have discovered that some people are more prone to this irrationality than others – but this difference is something that is not measured by any current IQ test.

Many today have shifted their focus from mere cognition to a broader question of rationality: the ability to act in ways appropriate to the available evidence, to achieve one's goals and

create a successful life. Adaptive, appropriate intelligence is something that IQ tests simply do not capture, raising serious questions of their validity.

Courtesy Robert Fludd

Is intelligence testing RELIABLE?

Scores on IQ tests have been shown to have high error margins and can vary considerably depending on the day, the testing conditions, and even the rapport with the person administering the test.

Is intelligence testing BIASED?

Since the dawn of IQ testing, critics have resisted the application of tests to populations other than those they have been developed and normed for. Robert Sternberg showed how culture-dependent cognition is, and how definitions of intelligent behavior in modern IQ tests have an implicit Western bias.

He argued that Eastern, African or other more collectivist cultures may place more value on an individual's ability to harmonize with social rules and act responsibly. The Western conception, however, heavily emphasizes the individualistic computational power that comes with reasoning and problem-solving. This Western conception of intelligence is a little more egocentric, and lacks the more "common sense" elements of wisdom, conscientiousness or correct comportment.

Besides cultural considerations, criticisms of bias in intelligence testing more generally questions which worldview is being promoted and measured through their use, and which worldview is ignored. Criticism either focuses on whether such tests are fair (i.e. incorrectly giving lower scores to some groups compared to others) or whether they are inherently biased (i.e. group differences are present but for more complex and nuanced reasons than it would appear).

Is intelligence testing USEFUL?

Perhaps the most frequent objection levelled against IQ testing is the ultimate use of the results. Though many tests are predictive of academic success, most are poor at predicting overall life accomplishment beyond purely cognitive realms. Though IQ tests have useful application in educational contexts, the unfortunate truth is that they are also the tool of choice for discrimination.

Because of the reductive nature of tests, they can be used to perpetuate stereotypes or rationalize judgments that are ultimately unfair or invalid. Alfred Binet originally created his first "IQ test" simply to identify children who would benefit from remedial education. Many psychologists today argue that any application of IQ tests beyond this is an overextension.

IQ testing can be used to determine school readiness, ascertain legal culpability in criminal trials, determine policy on benefits programs for those with intellectual disability and help neurologists gain insight into brain injuries. But outside these practical uses, the popularity of IQ testing as means to rank and sort "normal" people remains a controversial topic.