
When I saw that the publisher’s “reading title” for this book begins “The Truth about...” I had the sinking feeling that this was going to be yet another book revealing how some evil group of “intelligence researchers” has conspired to create an invalid testing system, for some reason that is never explained.

My fears were misguided. Ungifted is a thoughtful discussion of how standard cognitive tests can fail to identify a talented individual, and of the personal consequences of those mistakes. This is followed by a competent discussion about how different dimensions of cognition and personality, including general intelligence, interact to produce success in life.

The book is not a textbook or scientific monograph. Kaufman’s argument is based largely on anecdotes, including personal ones. Kaufman was classified as a learning disability case early in his school years, and repeatedly shunted off to special education (he subsequently studied at Carnegie Mellon University, Cambridge, and Yale). Anecdotes about other cases, including some famous ones, dot the book. The provision of data and discussions of research is informative but cursive. This style sells books, but “The plural of anecdote is NOT data.”

Nevertheless Kaufman has important things to say, and fails to say other important things. Even when I disagreed with Kaufman, he made me think about why.

Kaufman uses his own case as a theme to show how a misclassification downward (i.e. test score lower than actual ability) can damage a student’s standing in school and his/her own self-image. Kaufman is careful to say that his quarrel is not with intelligence testing itself, his quarrel is with a school system that over-relies on testing to make decisions about how a student should be educated. No intelligence researcher would disagree. The remainder of the book discusses those traits that combine to produce success. These include variables that cause an individual to interact with problems, such as a passionate interest in a topic and a mindset that leads a person to believe he or she can succeed, a willingness to practice, general intelligence (described in a reasonably good chapter), and creativity.

Kaufman’s focus on misclassification downward will reassure all those who lament, as they often do, that the tests did not properly evaluate their children or themselves. He does not consider the consequences of misclassification upward. For that matter, I have yet to hear a parent complain that “My child got great test scores but isn’t really all that bright.” Yet the way regression works both sorts of errors should be equally frequent. He also fails to consider situations in which test scores identify individuals from “non-standard” social backgrounds who, when given the chance, achieved substantial success in life. For example, he does not discuss the fact that the SAT was developed to, and did, break the stranglehold that elite prep schools had on admissions to the best universities. I have my own anecdotes. An Englishman with FRS after his name once told me “If it wasn’t for the eleven plus, I’d be shoveling coal in Yorkshire.” An American, plucked out of regular classes because he would not pay attention in the way his teachers thought he should, was rescued by a high SAT and became a distinguished biophysicist at one of the finest American universities.

Kaufman’s emphasis is not surprising. Television news producers have a slogan, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Accounts of perceived injustice are more interesting than accounts of success, or of people who received undeserved rewards. But any less-than-perfect classification system is going to produce all these types of outcomes.

The fact that Kaufman ignores classification issues is not surprising, for his focus is on the personal. On pages 302–303 he offers a definition of “personal intelligence”,

“Intelligence is the dynamic interplay of engagement and ability in pursuit of personal goals.”

followed by

“At no point is there a comparison between that person’s behaviors and the behaviors of others, because intelligence is not measured or judged relative to the behaviors of others.”

Kaufman and intelligence researchers are literally talking about different things. Kaufman’s “personal intelligence” is what I would call “cognitive competence.” When cognitive competence is evaluated the issue is whether the examinee can do a particular task, which can vary from handling arithmetic problems in grade school to being a military officer. Research on intelligence represents an inquiry into the causes and implications of individual differences in cognitive competence, for which we use the term “intelligence.” Intelligence researchers say that a person who scores at the
population median on the latest version of, say, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) has an IQ of 100. Eighty years ago, as the WAIS was being developed, a person who scored at the median of, say, the 1940 population, would be assigned the same score. However, as Flynn (2012) has documented a contemporary IQ of 100 indicates substantially more of certain kinds of cognitive competence than an IQ of 100 did in the 1940s.

In clinical and school psychology tests are used to evaluate the cognitive competence of the individual, to whom the psychologist (or the institution, such as the school) is already committed. In personnel screening the institution doing the screening, be it Stanford University or the Department of Defense, uses a test to decide whether or not to accept an obligation to the individual that is consistent with the institution’s mission, not as an aid in fulfilling an obligation already accepted. Test scores are useful if they provide a cost-effective method of obtaining information that improves the distribution of scarce resources, on a population basis. Officials responsible for personnel screening are well aware that there will be misclassifications. They are the costs of doing business in an imperfect world.

Kaufman speaks, rather eloquently, for the individual who wants to be treated as a whole person, not as a set of numbers. Psychometricians and personnel officers speak, usually rather ineloquently, for institutions that must be guided by their, not the individual’s, cost–benefit ratio.

Both sides are right, from their perspectives. That is what makes the conflict a hard one to resolve.

Reference


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