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The Politics of Scholastic Aptitude Testing

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Abstract. This article describes political features of scholastic aptitude testing--some of which are infrequently addressed in educational- problem identification and in policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

In a political world, knowledge is power and formal education is a route to knowledge. Many nation-states and other political entities have developed and employed educational testing policies to assess their power through knowledge at any point in time, to evaluate the sites of formal education--viz., schools--and to select among populations for those who will be allowed to further develop knowledge based on formal education. Given that politics involves the authorization and allocation of finite resources in a world of infinite need, formal education is political both as a route to political power and as in itself a finite resource that does not meet all needs of a population.

Scholastic aptitude testing has been one development in attaining the three purposes of educational testing. However, many political factors impede this attainment. (1) The very term aptitude is used interchangeably as achieved knowledge, facility to develop knowledge, and a potential to achieve and/or a facility to develop knowledge. These interchangeable uses fuel the fires of debate about the sources of low test scores because debate is founded on differing assumptions about what the scores measure. Often interlocutors are talking by and around each other as they use identical terms with different meanings. The debate quickly attracts and conflates political discourses on comparative values based on the dimensions of race, ethnicity, geographical origins, socioeconomic class, and so on. Raw power politics becomes the be-all and end-all, educational policy merely a stalking horse or afterthought. (2) The same political discourses affect debate on the reliability and validity of scholastic aptitude testing. One school of thought is that testing cannot be reliable and valid unless equal percentages of all socially constructed demographic groups are linked to all testing scores. Another school of thought is that differences in percentages among various groups unavoidably constitute prima facie evidence of intentional or unintentional maltreatment by various external forces. Still another school suggests that group testing differences are direct or indirect expressions of intrinsic aptitude differences--i.e., inferior characteristics within the group regardless of which definition of aptitude is used. And the list keeps growing. There are different kinds of aptitude--i.e., different achievements, facilities, or potentials. Testing should better match what is measured by test item responses and specific situations in which responses occur. Here we have a politics of competing ideas--more ideas than can meet with the satisfactions of prestige, status, reward, and the mantle of truth. (3) There are changes through time of various labels and associated demographic characteristics that merit comparative analysis of test scores and special dispensation for low scores or special stigma for high scores. In the United States, the label of Asian American has been linked with special dispensation but more recently special stigma. The label of African-American still is linked with special dispensation regardless of other demographic characteristics like high socioeconomic class. The label of Jewish is linked with special stigma regardless of socioeconomic class. Other labels have more recently come to the fore--e.g., the learning disordered. Still others are no more or never yet have been. What exists is a politics of champions, contenders, has-beens, and never-weres.

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Ironically and tragically, the politics of scholastic aptitude testing seems to be impeding formal educational contributions to political power. This occurs through an aptitude in public discourse for such politics to the detriment of an aptitude for improving formal education. Almost like an abstruse and esoteric argument in the days of Scholasticism, students of all ages are left dancing on the head of a pin. (See Claassen, N.C. (1990). The comparability of General Scholastic Aptitude test scores across different population groups. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 20, 80-92; Gustafsson, J-E., et al. (1992). The dimensionality of the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude test. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 36, 21-39; Lawlor, S., Richman, S., & Richman, C.L. (1997). The validity of using the SAT as a criterion for black and white students' admission to college. *College Student Journal*, 31, 507-515; Schmitt, A.P., & Dorans, N.J. (1991). Factors related to differential item functioning for Hispanic examinees on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. In G.D. Keller, et al. (Eds.). *Assessment and access: Hispanics in higher education* (pp. 105-132). State University of New York Press.) (Keywords: Education, Political Power, Scholastic Aptitude Test.)