

Testers and Testing

**The Sociology
of School Psychology**

Carl Milofsky



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*This book is dedicated to my parents,
Bernard and Ruth Milofsky*

Acknowledgments

This has been a transcontinental project. Parts of this work have been done on both coasts and in the Midwest. As a result of these journeys, I have enjoyed fruitful relationships with so many people who have taken an interest in this project that I cannot hope to tell them all how much I have learned from their help.

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This project continues work I began as a graduate student at Berkeley where, as part of the Childhood and Government Project at Boalt Law School, I worked with Gale Saliterman on David Kirp's research investigating the implementation of procedures of due process in schools, especially in special education. Peter Kuriloff of the Department of Education at the University of Pennsylvania was one of Kirp's collaborators during that time. Once I moved to the East Coast, Peter repeatedly came to my aid on this project, and he has been a good friend. Similarly, Barbara Heyns, one of my teachers at Berkeley, became a continual source of advice, help and support when she moved nearby to Harvard and New York University.

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me gain access to the National Opinion Research Center, where Celia Homans and Ron Hirsch gave me valuable help designing the survey instrument. Bob Slater and Mitch Pressman, then graduate students in the Department of Education at the University of Chicago, also provided great help with the survey portion of the study. Slater also did most of the historical research on the Bureau of Child Study of the Chicago Public Schools.

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In some respects the data collection phase of this book was the easiest part of the research. This project proved difficult to write up because I have intended it to speak to multiple audiences—school psychologists, educational policy analysts, sociologists, and practitioners with little technical training in sociology. Framing the concepts so they address issues important to all of these groups and constructing the text so that all would find it readable and valuable has been a struggle.

Fortunately, most of the writing for this book took place at Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies, an environment perfectly suited for this multidisciplinary effort. Members of the Education Group at ISPS were my intellectual "family" and their help was enormous. Working with Seymour Sarason, the person I consider the most insightful observer of the special education scene, was a dream I had as a graduate student. I cannot think of a more interested, informed colleague to have for this sort of project. Ed Lindblom, David Cohen, Judy Gruber, Dick Murnane, Ed Pauly, and Janet Weiss taught me about educational policy analysis and got me thinking about issues I had never encountered in my sociological training.

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Contents

List of Figures		ix
List of Tables		x
Acknowledgments		xi
Introduction	Intelligence Testing and Race in the Public Schools	1
One	The Role of the School Psychologist	27
Two	One Psychologist's Day	44
Three	Activism versus Formalism in School Psychology	71
Four	The Strategy of School Psychology	90
Five	Work Orientation and Testing Patterns	124
Six	How Organization Affects Psychologists' Work Orientation	146
Seven	The Diffusion of Responsibility in School Psychology	174
Appendix	Mail Questionnaire for the Illinois School Psychology Project	195
Notes		231

Figures

Figure 1.	Amount of supervision by regular program supervisors and special education supervisors received by psychologists working in Chicago and outside of the city	40
Figure 2.	Bender Gestalt Figure 5 compared to Ann's drawing	54
Figure 3.	Rorschach inkblots	59
Figure 4.	Types of strategic intervention by school psychologists	93
Figure 5.	Years school psychologists worked as teachers by geographic area in which they presently work	134
Figure 6.	Number of hours psychologists spend each month in professional development activities by geographic area	135

Bibliography	253
Index	263

Tables

Table 1.	Students served in special education programs in the United States	15
Table 2.	Correlations between testing rates and measures of race and class in psychologists' school districts	36
Table 3.	Correlations between measures of race and class in psychologists' school districts, controlling for whether psychologists work in urban or non-urban school districts	38
Table 4.	Time requirements of a child study session	67
Table 5.	Correlation matrix of measures of professionalism and measures of the amount of time psychologists devote to testing	137
Table 6.	Measures of professionalism correlated with measures of attitudes and behaviors psychologists report with respect to various aspects of testing	139

INTRODUCTION

Intelligence Testing and Race in the Public Schools

Intelligence is a valuable commodity in our society. It may be a source of status, achievement, and wealth if one has it or of profound stigma if one does not. Ours is a technological society that demands cognitive sophistication for success, if not for survival. Economists in particular have argued that our society is a meritocracy in which wealth and status are earned by those possessing the most sophisticated skills.¹ Other observers, however, argue that intelligence is more important as a cultural symbol that legitimates status and power after it is achieved than as a determinant of wealth and success.

Critics of meritocratic thinking argue that intelligence in itself is not, in fact, crucial for job success. If we control for socioeconomic background and the number of years of education people have completed, actual intellectual ability and cognitive performance make little contribution to job status. School success, furthermore, is more strongly predicted by social class background and by deportment than by IQ scores. In this perspective, IQ is important mostly as a means of selecting those with middle-class attributes and justifying exclusion of others from opportunities to achieve high status.²

Debate has raged for decades about whether intelligence really explains success or whether the primary ways we have of determining intelligence—school achievement and psychometric measures of cognitive performance—are culturally biased in favor of white middle-class people and against minorities and the poor. Oddly, most of this argument has been abstract. Economists have built elaborate predictive

models. Genetic psychologists have fine-tuned their estimates of the heritability of IQ.³ Sociologists and others have bitterly fought back, complaining about the inadequacies of twin studies and the misinterpretation of the interaction term in the heritability equation.⁴ Intelligence tests tend to be treated as fixed, unchanging, and objective. What people fight over is their interpretation.

Few people who take part in this debate ask how intelligence is actually determined in the day-to-day affairs that shape people's lives. IQ tests, as they are administered in a laboratory, may or may not be culturally biased. Whether they are "objectively" biased is irrelevant if the people who administer tests and make decisions in schools about intellectual status ignore laboratory guidelines or use tests to legitimate a foregone conclusion. Biased instruments may be used in a culturally sensitive manner, and rigorously culture-fair instruments may be used unethically. We can only know how and why tests are used if we go to the field and look at what people actually do when they give tests and how the results of those examinations are used in institutions like the public schools or the workplace.

This book is an empirical study of one group of people responsible for allocating intellectual status: public school psychologists working in Illinois. School psychologists are central actors in the process by which students are placed in special education classes, classes that serve both the intellectually talented and the intellectually flawed. School psychologists are important because they are primarily responsible for administering individual intelligence tests. Although IQ tests are not the only psychometric instruments school psychologists use and data from other specialists is also used in determining special class assignments, some studies have found that intelligence tests, of all the data used, are most predictive of what a child's special class assignment will finally be.⁵ Tests, and the testers who administer them, are pivotal to the process.

The relationships between tests, intellectual ability, and social status are the key issues in this book. This examination is worth study because decisions about when to test, how to test, and how to interpret and report test results are complex. In practice, testing usually departs from laboratory norms. Because psychometric instruments are designed to be finely tuned research devices, the departures I report in this book mangle methodological subtleties that make tests powerful in the lab.

For some readers, the fact that school psychologists do not religiously follow standard test norms may invalidate the occupation and its work. I will try to show that such rejection would be too hasty. I am convinced that good school psychology requires creative use of tests. If this is the case, however, the question arises as to how we can tell

competent, responsible testing from that which is incompetent and irresponsible.

The only way to make this distinction is to learn the many details about the contexts in which school psychologists work and about the dilemmas that confront them when they are asked to examine children in schools. Consider the following two case examples, for instance.

Crystal Thompson: A Psychologist in the Ghetto. Crystal Thompson is a black woman in her mid-fifties who is one of three school psychologists serving in a decentralized neighborhood school district in Chicago, a district that serves a black area on the South Side. Although there are a few middle-class neighborhoods in the district, Thompson is assigned to schools in the poorer neighborhoods. I accompanied her to one of these schools on a day given over to staffings. That is, a number of children had been placed in or referred to be considered for assignment to classes for the educable mentally handicapped (EMH; Illinois used EMH rather than *retarded*) or for reassignment. Mrs. Thompson and other members of the diagnostic team had already examined these children and now, in a marathon meeting, decisions would be made about each student.

Mrs. Thompson had tested these children in rapid-fire fashion on earlier days, when I had not been present. She explained that the district with its two high schools and seven elementary schools has about fifteen hundred students in special education classes. She and the other two psychologists must reexamine all of them each year and carry out examinations of all new children referred for special education. This means she must test more than three hundred children each year, and for many of them she must complete her job of testing in less than two hours—breakneck speed, if one takes test norms seriously.

The situation she works in seemed pretty discouraging to me. She is assigned to some of the most desperate neighborhoods of Chicago. This day we were in the Richard J. Daley Elementary School, a modern building with several boarded-up windows that sits in its glass-strewn playground in the middle of a field of burned-out apartment buildings.

We arrived early and sat down in an empty classroom, waiting for others to arrive. As people drifted in they chatted casually, waiting for the formal meeting to start. Because it involved many children already assigned to EMH classes, this staffing was primarily a planning session for the special educators, and it included special teachers and members of the interdisciplinary diagnostic team that served the Daley School. The interdisciplinary team included a special teacher, a speech pathologist, the school nurse, and the school social worker. In addition to the

team members, the people present were Tom James, the administrator for special classes in the region of the city in which Crystal Thompson's local school district is located, and two teachers of EMH classes.

Tom James asked Mrs. Thompson if she remembered Mr. Tompkins, the learning disability teacher who had been at the Daley school two years before. One of the students they were to discuss began his special education career in Mr. Tompkins's class. Mr. James laughed as he recalled that Tompkins never seemed to do any teaching at all. Mr. James came into the classroom one day and found the teacher asleep on the couch, ignoring the students. James had become so enraged that he finally spent an entire week sitting in the back of the classroom demanding that Tompkins submit detailed lesson plans and teach from them. Tompkins requested a transfer and left at the end of that semester. Mrs. George, the EMH teacher in the junior high school to which Daley sends students, asked ruefully if Mr. James had considered doing the same with Lenny Schmidt, one of the current learning disabled teachers at Daley. Thompson leaned over and whispered to me that they have constant problems finding teachers trained to teach in the special education classes of this district.

At the beginning of the meeting, Mrs. Thompson introduced each case and provided a quick overview of the case background. Team members then discussed any new information they had and decided whether the student's assignment should be changed for the coming year.

Nick was the first student discussed. He was put in an EMH class in February after a child study had been conducted in the fall. He had been tardy frequently and had a tendency to read from right to left instead of from left to right. He also was reported to have trouble getting along with classmates who were more aggressive than he. Mrs. Dale, the EMH teacher at Daley, reported that Nick seemed to be getting along better with his peers since he has been in the EMH class.

Mrs. Thompson gave a brief history of Nick's personal background. He lived with his grandmother in rural Arkansas until a year previously, when he moved to Chicago to live with his mother. His IQ was listed as 73-verbal, 51-performance, 63-full scale. His achievement was at the third grade level, although he was thirteen at the time. The reasons for referral emphasized his tardiness, withdrawn behavior, and defacement of property. All of this suggests, Mrs. Thompson said, that the boy has had trouble adjusting to the move from country to city. One would expect depressed school performance given his rural background and family changes, she explained. This theory was sup-

ported, she speculated, by Nick's quick responsiveness to Mrs. Dale. Everyone quickly agreed to retain him in the EMH class for the coming school year. The whole discussion took about four minutes.

The group then raced through several other cases. Throughout the meeting, Mr. James was relaxed, courtly, flirtatious, and complimentary to the two EMH teachers. The party atmosphere this group generated contrasted starkly with Mrs. Thompson's manner.

She seemed hurried, hassled, and a little confused. Although she emerges as the person taking care of most of the administrative details in the session, she seemed to have incomplete knowledge at best about what was actually happening in the classes. She did not seem to know how many classes there were, how many children were involved, or what the teachers were trying to accomplish prescriptively with particular students. It seemed as though Crystal Thompson's job was quite removed from the school and from the real issues involved in defining students' problems and determining what their needs were. She appeared mostly preoccupied with being sure that the many forms required for special education placement were completed and filed in the appropriate administrative office. It seemed as though the other people were at the meeting only to help Mrs. Thompson attend to these unpleasant administrative details.

Earlier, Mrs. Thompson had told me that she was frustrated with the formality of her work. She had been working in the neighborhood district for twelve years, having taken the job mainly because she wanted financial security after her husband died. She now was desperately unhappy because the local superintendent put pressure on her to do most of the paperwork for special education classes in the district at the same time he demanded a heavy load of testing from her. Mrs. Thompson feels trapped in her job and unable to change her situation.

As she talked about her life, some bitterness with the Chicago schools became apparent. She began her professional life as a teacher and had received her teaching certificate in high school chemistry. Unable to obtain a full-time job in Chicago, she had been assigned, as a long-term substitute, to teach general science and math in one of the inner city high schools. That she had a "temporary" assignment was amusing to her, because she continued in that position for several years while she did graduate work in psychology. Eventually, the principal, knowing of her graduate work in psychology, asked her to set up programs for the gifted and the EMH in the high school. This work encouraged her to continue with her graduate work, and she eventually completed her master's degree in school psychology. To her frustration,