

THE SOMPA: A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS, PHILOSOPHICAL RATIONALE, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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Summary: The SOMPA is examined in terms of the multicultural model and Mercer's justification for multiple normal distributions within that model. The philosophical basis of the approach and the environments in which any assessment strategy must function are also examined. It is concluded that multiple normal distributions are not justified based on the variance accounted for in WISC-R scores by the Sociocultural Scales of the SOMPA. The philosophical basis of the SOMPA, the sociology of knowledge, is not considered helpful or useful in the assessment process because of internal logic problems associated with the paradigm and because it creates an artificial separation of populations. Some of the components which influence education are examined in an effort to place the SOMPA in a realistic operational environment and to contrast the complexity of that environment with the oversimplified view offered by the SOMPA.

As an evolving field, school psychology is the recipient of many specialized assessment instruments. The System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) was designed to address the problem of over-identifying minority children with respect to their inclusion in a variety of special programming options, most notably classes for the mentally retarded. While the SOMPA could certainly be expected to disqualify many minority students from such classes, the philosophical basis of the strategy has received little comment. If the SOMPA is to be seriously considered by psychologists, an exploration of its philosophy and ramifications is appropriate. In conjunction with such an investigation, the efficacy of the WISC-R in terms of bias must also be examined, in part, because it is one component of the SOMPA.

DEFINITIONS OF BIAS

According to Mercer (1978-79), bias as defined by the dominant core culture ideology refers to the technical question of how well a test predicts the predetermined criteria of school and occupational success and does not refer to differences among groups in mean scores on a test. This view states that if the instrument predicts well, it is not biased. On the other hand, the pluralistic ideology identifies mean differences in scores among groups as the primary indicator of test bias, cases in which the regression intercepts are significantly different for various groups. As Mercer states, "the greater the sociocultural distance between the individual and the dominant core culture, the lower his or her score will be" (p. 14). Such a distance in Mercer's opinion would apply to a particular segment of any population, be it ethnic minority or poor whites living in Appalachia. In Mercer's (1974) terms, "a multicultural model would assume that there

are as many normal curves for behavior as there are distinct life styles and would not evaluate all human behavior with a single statistical distribution" (p. 16). Consequently, the "ELP (Estimated Learning Potential) has multiple normal distributions, one for each pattern of Sociocultural Scale scores" (Mercer, 1979, p. 137).

Given that particular orientation then, a justification for multiple normal distributions must be provided. Mercer (1979) attempts to accomplish this when the rationale for the Sociocultural Scales is provided. "If the Sociocultural Scales do not account for much variance in WISC-R scores within each ethnic group, then we could use a single normative framework for each ethnic group on the assumption of cultural homogeneity within each group. If, however, sociocultural factors account for a significant amount of the variance within each group, we will need to use multiple normative frameworks within each group on the assumption of cultural heterogeneity within each group" (p. 130). All matrix correlations were significant at .01 for each ethnic group (Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites), for each WISC-R score (Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale), and for the Sociocultural Scales (Family Size, Family Structure, Socioeconomic Status, and Urban Acculturation), when used simultaneously to predict WISC-R IQ. However, in the *best* single case (WISC-R Verbal IQ for Hispanics), the multiple correlation of .47 indicates that only 22% of the variance is accounted for, leaving 77% not accounted for by the factors used—the Sociocultural Scales. In addition, only one of the remaining eight multiple correlations accounted for more than twenty percent of the variance. While Mercer (1979) acknowledges that "it is within the limits imposed by those percentages that the pluralistic norms of the SOMPA must operate to adjust for differences in sociocultural background" (p. 131), it is not self-evident that using the SOMPA would inform to any large degree the decision-making process as it relates to the placement of children, or appreciably reduce any instrumental bias associated with that process. Accounting for less than twenty-five percent of the variance does not seem to be a particularly strong argument in support of the Sociocultural Scales.

Since the WISC-R provides an important component of the total SOMPA strategy, a few comments regarding this instrument are appropriate. In terms of instrumental bias, Oakland (1979) has indicated that transforming a WISC-R IQ into an ELP reduces the number of students identified as mentally retarded. While this is probably true, as Brown (1979) asserts, the statistical equating procedure "does not guarantee that the transformed scores will be useful or valid" (p. 44), or anymore accurate in predicting academic competence than the WISC-R score alone. Oakland and Feigenbaum (1979) found no consistent patterns of WISC-R bias among the nine comparison groups they investigated (children's sex, race, socioeconomic status, age, birth order, health, family size, family structure, and urban acculturation). Sandoval (1979) has stated that the "internal criteria of test bias against minority children have not been found in the WISC-R" (p. 926), and Clarizio (1979) has documented similar findings. Vance and Wallbrown (1978) obtained a hierarchical factor solution on WISC-R subtest intercorrelations for 150 referred black children and determined that the basic ability dimensions between this group and the standardization sample were the same. In a highly rigorous factorial study, Gutkin and Reynolds (1981) demonstrated that "the portion of total variance accounted for by common factor variance for the white and black groups was 51% and 53%, respectively," leading to the conclusion that "the WISC-R is not biased when used to assess the intellectual functioning of black

children" (p. 230). Similar evidence also exists for other minority groups (e.g., Gutkin & Reynolds, 1980; Reschly, 1978).

Any instrument of course can be abused, any result can be manipulated, misinterpreted, or ignored. However, since the WISC-R does not appear to be inherently hampered by bias associated with race, a competent administration should yield valid results. To assist in this process, Massey, Sattler, and Andres (1978) have provided supplemental information to clarify by example the scoring criteria for the WISC-R verbal subtests. A highly useful source for the analysis of WISC-R profiles and overall interpretation is Kaufman's (1979a) work, which should be required reading for any school psychologist.

The major argument here is that there does not appear to be any compelling reason to use the ELP; essentially it contributes little except additional process steps and the potential for clerical error. If a psychologist wishes to score a WISC-R using norms based on race, the data are available. Kaufman (1979b) has provided IQ data based on socioeconomic status (parental occupation), region, and rural/urban characteristics of the 1972 standardization sample in terms of the measurable differences among black and white populations. This approach would seem to be much more straightforward than the WISC-R/ELP transformation used in conjunction with the SOMPA.

In addition to the issues discussed above concerning the technical adequacy of the SOMPA and the use of the WISC-R with minority populations, the philosophical basis of the SOMPA must be addressed if an adequate understanding of the approach is to be realized. It is the point of view here that such an examination reveals serious weaknesses in the SOMPA's rationale.

SOMPA & THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

The sociology of knowledge paradigm, as delineated by Mannheim, forms the philosophical basis for the SOMPA. According to Mercer (1978-79), "a fundamental premise of the sociology of knowledge is that knowledge systems can be comprehended only within concrete historical-social settings, because the creation of beliefs which are accepted as 'knowledge' is a social process" (p. 1). In this scenario, the core culture interests are represented by APA psychologists in the majority and a counterideology by emerging minority groups. "Because the testing controversy is fundamentally a confrontation between the ideology of politically dominant groups and the counterideology of rising minorities, the sociology of knowledge provides a useful conceptual framework for identifying the sociohistorical basis of a controversy which is fundamentally political" (Mercer, 1978-79, p. 15). However, as Lawton (1975) has pointed out,

the debate about the social distribution of knowledge and the stratification of knowledge is important: equality of educational opportunity certainly should imply equality of access to knowledge. But some sociologists of knowledge go much further and question the validity of knowledge itself, suggesting that all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore relative, i.e., that one man's view of reality or knowledge is as good as another's. In one sense, to say that knowledge is socially constructed is merely stating the obvious: if knowledge is shared by a number of people, it must be social. It

does not follow, however, that all interpretations of reality are equally valid. Sociologists of knowledge such as Marx, Mannheim and others eventually find themselves in the paradoxical position of claiming that all knowledge is merely the product of particular social situations—except their own views. (p. 115)

Given the criticisms above, Mercer's reliance on the sociology of knowledge as the basis of the SOMPA raises serious questions regarding the appropriateness of this system. Of equal importance, however, is the adversarial relationship that Mercer has constructed in an effort to establish two opposing groups so that the sociology of knowledge approach appears valid. In essence, this relationship can be interpreted as follows.

The core culture	vs.	The minority culture(s)
Dominant ideology	vs.	Counterculture ideology
APA psychologists	vs.	Psychologists from groups "who are rising from lower status levels"
Monocultural assessment	vs.	Pluralistic, multicultural assessment
One normal curve	vs.	Multiple normal curves

While it is undoubtedly true that differences in the control of knowledge exist between the dominant and minority cultures, and that schools are controlled by the core culture, it is also true that "if we believe in a particular 'social character,' a particular set of attitudes and values, we naturally believe that the general education which follows from these is the best that can be offered to anyone; it does not feel like 'indoctrination,' or even 'training'; it feels like offering to his man the best that can be given" (Williams, 1961, p. 127). Belief in the correctness of one's actions would not be restricted to the dominant culture. If the implications of the sociology of knowledge are correct, any group, by definition, would be myopic with regard to its own values and norms, regardless of where the particular group would fall on the control continuum. To challenge a dominant cultural group, the challenging group of necessity would have to feel that its values, beliefs, and norms were somehow either better or in some way more appropriate, certainly for themselves and perhaps for the dominant group as well. The major point is that the sociology of knowledge seems to construct antagonistic camps by creating a definitional sacredness for the existence of any point of view. Characterizing a dominant culture as somehow malevolent because of its dominance, and providing a method for explaining the ideology (the sociology of knowledge), which also justifies an emerging counterideology, seems not only unnecessarily complex but essentially nonproductive in realizing needed change. Ideological considerations must be broader. As Apple (1979) points out, "the problem of educational knowledge, of what is taught in schools, has to be considered as a form of the larger distribution of goods and services in a society. It is not merely an analytic problem (what shall be construed as knowledge?), nor simply a technical one (how do we organize and store knowledge so that children may have access to it and 'master' it?), nor, finally, is it a purely psychological problem (how do we get students to learn x?)" (p. 45). Ideology then is far more than an attitude of them versus us, of good and bad, of winners and losers, of special education inclusion or exclusion based solely on the individ-

ual's congruence, or lack of same, with the core culture in an educational evaluation setting.

It would seem that Mercer is probably correct when she identifies the testing controversy as fundamentally a political problem. Blatant racism is also a political problem, but political solutions will not always be an option which can be readily exercised by all. Although Verba and Nie pointed out in their classic 1972 study that the political system is more open to blacks and other minorities than is the socioeconomic system, serious problems with this avenue for change exist. "A major force leading to [political] participation . . . is associated with social status and the civic attitudes that accompany it. This skews the participant population in the direction of the more affluent, the better educated, those with higher-status occupations" (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 336). As Form and Huber (1971) put it, "to participate fully in the political market is as costly in time and money as are other forms of participation" (p. 688). In addition then to the problems of ideology, political participation, and the impact of those influences on the testing controversy, many other components of society also operate to complicate the environment in which any assessment process must function, the SOMPA included.

EDUCATION AND BIAS

Mercer emphasizes some obvious points when she indicates that: the public schools are the primary labelers of children; schools act as the pivotal screening and referral agency for the community; children are labeled primarily during the elementary grades, and that teachers are the most common referral agents (1979, pp. 1-2).

The referral and assessment process, as a part of any educational system, can be and has been abused. Instances of "false positives" are in evidence in any public school system. In addition, anyone who has worked in public education can cite cases of what Mercer calls the "situationally retarded"—those children who function in a relatively "normal" fashion when they are no longer in an educational environment. As with the four points above, there are no surprises here. It is reasonable to assume that many children in educably mentally retarded programs could occupy this category. To conclude, however, that because an EMR program graduate can function in society once out of school, that the child was inappropriately labeled while in school is, or could be, a cruel twist of logic, since demonstrating acceptable social behavior is a primary goal of such programming.

The relationships between education and testing and the bias associated with the dominant culture which leads to the inappropriate placement of children in special programs is an important part of the rationale for the development of the SOMPA. However, research addressing a range of important issues which also influence the conduct and content of public schooling is essentially ignored in this process. In order to make a reasonable decision regarding the efficacy of the SOMPA and in order to view the SOMPA and its underlying philosophy in a wider perspective, it is necessary to explore some of this research. For example, Lasch (1977) has provided an excellent examination of the many forces which negatively impact upon the family and result in its essential impotency to deal with its own members in a constructive fashion. Keniston (1977) also talks about changes in the family but places more emphasis on the implications of economic structure in terms of the options available in education. In this regard, Brittain (1977) has argued that economic opportunity is restricted because economic status is inherited, which mandates a public policy focusing on the redistribu-

tion of income and wealth. That conclusion, however, is qualified by Brittain when he states that "the strong effect of education on success independent of family background is encouraging for the efficacy of educational policy, but it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that education also tends to be inherited; in that sense it also contributes to the role of socioeconomic background in perpetuating inequality" (p. 33). From an economic viewpoint, Keniston (1977) and Wilensky (1975) both identify the ultimate source of inequality to be one of condition rather than opportunity—inequality in the distribution of the rewards for competing as opposed to the opportunity to compete. For example, the argument is that of two equally qualified individuals in the same or similar positions, it is likely that the majority culture member would receive greater monetary reward.

In a somewhat mechanistic view of society, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that education responds to the behavioral requirements of the workplace. "Available evidence indicates that the pattern of social relationships fostered in schools is hardly irrational or accidental. Rather, the structure of the educational experience is admirably suited to nurturing attitudes and behavior consonant with participation in the labor force" (p. 9). The attitudes referred to here are those characterized by subservience to authority, complacency, and pervasive obedience, an assertion which is also not without its detractors. From the viewpoint of public education, this can be a no-win situation. Schools can either be accused of producing nonthinking people who correspond to industrial needs or of graduating undisciplined radicals intent on dismantling the economic system.

Along with additional sources representing a range of positions similar to those above are a number of authors commonly associated primarily with issues in education. For example, Sharp and Green (1975), in an analysis of "progressive primary education" in the United Kingdom, found that nontraditional instructional methods very often produced effects remarkably close to the hierarchical differentiation of students in the traditional schools. These findings suggest that superficial organizational changes do not necessarily result in "better" or even different educational opportunities for students. Sarason (1971) has explored a variety of problems regarding specific impediments to realizing educational change while Rosenbaum (1976) has thoroughly researched one aspect of education, tracking, which seems wholly dedicated to maintaining the status quo.

The purpose of the above review was to focus, however briefly, on examples from a spectrum of ongoing research activity which addresses some of the economic, political, social, and cultural interaction patterns with education. It is a manifest oversimplification to identify education as the residence of all of the more important sources of bias and inequality. Education is certainly not blameless in this regard and it cannot be, nor should it be, extricated from its responsibility in the process of perpetuating bias. However, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between education and bias; there is no overt or covert conspiratorial relationship between education and the marketplace; linearity is not an appropriate characterization in explaining the roles of bias and education. In short, there is a lot going on in society, within families, the economic system, the political process, and within and between different cultural groups. The process of reducing bias in education requires far more than a manipulation of numbers and the possible exclusion of some noncore culture children from special programming in public schools. The SOMPA may be a step in the right direction, but its realistic contribution to the reduction of bias is probably drastically inflated. Bias is re-

duced and eventually eliminated by sensitive and caring people, not by plotting "at-risk" profiles.

CONCLUSION

As an assessment device, the SOMPA has a variety of problems, technical and otherwise, (see, e.g., Brown, 1979; Oakland, 1979, 1980). In addition, as Cleary, Humphreys, Kendrick, and Wesman (1975) have indicated, "all ability tests (whether called intelligence, aptitude, or achievement tests) measure current performance" (p. 17). The statistical manipulation of current performance (WISC-R IQ) may therefore succeed in eliminating certain children from special programming, but that in no sense changes the child in terms of his or her current functioning. The ELP process is descriptive, not prescriptive—it does not provide any strategies, by itself, for increasing a child's school-related competency. On the other hand, there is no difficulty in agreeing with Mercer (1979) when she states that "the definition for eligibility for special education services should be couched in terms of the child's need for such services rather than being contingent upon certifying that the child is defective" (p. 153). It is my opinion and it has been my experience that the multidisciplinary-team process accomplishes that goal by being prescriptive and there is evidence (Bernard & Clarizio, 1981) that subsequent placement decisions are not socioeconomically biased.

The multidisciplinary-team assessment process which I have experienced provides teachers with very specific information upon which an effective educational intervention can be reasonably and realistically based. Even when the placement recommendations of a team are not accepted, the work is not in vain because all of the information is available to help the regular teacher design the best possible program for the child in regular education.

As an organizing framework for political activity to change the dominant ideology, in this case as it impacts upon educational bias, the sociology of knowledge does not appear workable, or even legitimate. If taken seriously, the sociology of knowledge approach would seek to replace the dominant ideology with an unending menu of value positions since, by definition, all forms of knowledge are equally appropriate and authentic expressions of human value.

The dominant ideology is in need of a revamping. Bias in education, if not in instrumentation, does exist. There is evidence to suggest that black and other racial and economic minorities are mislabeled (see, e.g., Mercer, 1973, 1974, 1979). However, as long as socioeconomic status and education are "inherited," we are assured of a lower class population segment. As long as that segment exists, its younger members in public schools could be disproportionately mislabeled (although Mercer's continual reference to labeling and its deleterious consequences seems to be at least partially ameliorated by the relatively recent but consistent emphasis on mainstreaming). Mercer is correct when she describes this process as resulting from the distance between the child and the core culture. However, it is questionable if simply comparing such a child to others from the same sociocultural background will lead to any gain in academic performance, any positive change in the environment which could be expected to benefit the child. There *are* inequities in terms of the control and allocation of knowledge forms and the distribution of incentives and rewards within our families, our schools, and our society. As educators, we should be aware of and sensitive to the implications of the various defiladed ideologies as they permeate and influence the conduct of the

profession. Competing ideologies should be recognized as such, investigated, and understood. However, a child from a group other than the core culture should not be barred from appropriate and needed programming simply because, when compared to others with the same sociocultural background, his or her performance is "normal."

The idea of pluralistic, multicultural assessment is not threatening to any reasonably competent and sensitive psychologist, since that is what is being accomplished through a carefully conceived and consistently monitored multidisciplinary-team process. When designed, executed, and monitored professionally, when intellectual performance and adaptive behavior are considered, and when a number of individuals are involved in contributing viewpoints, interview/observation information and additional assessment data, the multidisciplinary process can insure that no child is placed in any program solely on the basis of an IQ. Admittedly, this situation was brought about initially by legislation, but it is reasonable to believe that of equal importance is the growing sense of responsibility for and sensitivity to meeting the needs of all children on the part of most, if not all, multidisciplinary-team members. Continued improvement in these directions ultimately will prove more beneficial to more children than will the implementation of a philosophy based on the division of peoples and the introduction of relativism manifested via a by-culture allocation of additional IQ points.

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