COVID-19 Has Taught Us What Intelligence Really Is

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COVID-19 has taught us something important about intelligence. It's not just that we can get by without IQ-test proxies like the SAT and ACT that go by a number of different names to avoid being called IQ tests. (Research by Douglas K. Detterman, professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University, and others shows that these tests are essentially disguised tests of general intelligence.) It's not that such tests administered online at home will almost certainly be invalid. Rather, it's that the tests never measured what's important in the first place, and we should have known better. Actually, we *did know better*.

Ever since psychologists started measuring intelligence, including the academic skills measured by IQ tests and their proxies, they have known that intelligence is not really your ability to solve obscure multiple-choice problems with largely trivial content that will have no impact on your future life whatsoever. Instead, intelligence is the ability to adapt to the environment.

And that's what Alfred Binet and David Wechsler, the founders of the intelligence test movement, said. Any evolutionary theorist should be able to tell you that: organisms that don't adapt die. Species that don't adapt die off. That's also the consensus of psychologists in scholarly symposia that have sought to understand what intelligence is. Trivial academic problems don't measure well your ability to adapt to the environment.

Why are these tests such mediocre measures of your ability to adapt to the environment — of true intelligence? Compare a real problem, like that of dealing with COVID-19, to the characteristics of standardized-test problems. The characteristics of real-world problems are entirely different from the characteristics of problems on standardized tests. Standardized test problems are mostly multiple choice or short answer and have a right or wrong answer. Real problems require extended answers; there is no perfect answer, and sometimes, not even a very good one. Standardized test problems are decontextualized, emotionally bland and have no real-life stakes. Real-world problems are highly contextualized, emotionally arousing and may have high stakes. Standardized test problems are solved quickly and then you are done; real-life ones often take a long time and, after you think you have solved them, often come back.

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