

## QUESTION #58

# Why Are Intelligence Tests Controversial?

**E**ven though the major intelligence tests are highly reliable and are generally considered valid under accepted standards, they have long been controversial. There are generally three issues of concern when the value of intelligence tests is questioned.

**Intelligence tests are culture-dependent.** It is difficult to define intelligence and choose items and tasks for an intelligence test without being influenced by the values and assumptions of the dominant culture in which the test is developed. Different races, ethnicities, and cultures perform differently on these tests, and consequently have different “IQs.” This suggests that intelligence tests are not universally valid.

**Is intelligence determined by genetics or environment?** This is often framed as a debate of *nature versus nurture*. Researchers have long studied whether one’s level of cognitive ability is determined based on nature (genetic predisposition at birth) or whether it is affected by nurture (the conditions in which one is raised). Does your DNA set the range for your ultimate intelligence, or is it the stimuli and learning opportunities in the world around you as you grow up? The current thinking is that it is likely a mix of the two influences. You inherit a general level of ability from mom and dad, but your eventual IQ can be affected by environmental factors such as interactions with parents and family, language-rich surroundings, and so on.

**Intelligence as a measure of worth.** Think of how we use words like *smart* and *stupid* in everyday conversation. It is common to treat the trait of intelligence as somehow a proxy for how valuable or useful a person is. A stinging insult among children is to accuse each other of having low intelligence. Intelligence, though, is just another characteristic of humans, like height or shyness. How well a person would score on an IQ test is not a measure of their goodness or worth as an individual. The early intelligence tests helped foster this name-calling, by the way, with official categories based on low IQ scores of *imbecile*, *idiot*, and *moron*.

Ultimately, it is the assumptions of what intelligence is and how IQ scores are used to make decisions that have led to controversy. The intended purpose of most intelligence tests is to predict how well a child will do in school, how well someone can take care of herself, or how one will perform in the world of work. And, for those purposes, intelligence tests actually do a pretty good job.

*More questions? See #50 and #51.*