

The History of Test Development

Attempts to measure differences among the psychological characteristics of individuals could be traced back to 400 BC, when Hippocrates attempted to define four basic temperament types each of which could be accounted for by a predominant body fluid or humour; blood - sanguine (optimistic), black bile - melancholic (depressed), yellow bile - choleric (irritable) and phlegm - phlegmatic (listless and sluggish). Hippocrates' methods and the numerous other attempts that have been made since then were hardly scientific. The first attempt to scientifically measure the differences among individual mental abilities was made by Sir Francis Galton who in the 19th Century ventured to show that the human mind could be systematically mapped into different dimensions. He studied, among other things, how people differed in terms of their ability to discriminate between stimuli and by collating the results he obtained; to devise a system which would allow an individual's abilities to be compared to those of others - an idea on which we heavily rely upon today.

From the work of people like Galton and his French contemporary, Binet, a picture of the human mental domain emerged that saw general human ability as being composed of a number of specific abilities - a view which is still held today. The basic tenet of testing nowadays is based upon the principle of measuring human mental performance under different conditions and then making comparisons amongst people. Of course, the statistical rigour with which this is done today is much greater than that which was generally applied in Galton's day. There is a bewildering array of tests available to us measuring anything from hand-eye co-ordination to high-level cognitive operations such as spatial reasoning.



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