

Psychological testing: MMPI under fire

An LSU psychologist continues to question the widely used personality test

by Robert J. Trotter

In 1937 insulin therapy was becoming a widespread method of treatment for certain forms of mental illness. Some clinics, however, were reporting that the treatment was ineffective. J. C. McKinley and Starke R. Hathaway of the University of Minnesota School of Medicine thought the variation in effectiveness could be due to the fact that the patients treated with insulin in one clinic were not like those treated in another clinic. Estimations of a person's mental illness and of its severity were based on professional judgment that could vary with the training and background of the examining psychiatrist. To avoid this problem a personality test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, was designed.

A list of items (verbal statements) was taken from case studies in text books on psychiatry and clinical psychology. The persons' responses of either "true" or "false" to these items were then used as an indication of symptoms and severity of mental illness. Once the items were selected, the test was standardized on a cross section of normal adults in Minnesota. They represented all socioeconomic and educational levels present there.

The test was originally intended as a diagnostic tool for use on mentally ill patients. But because of its simplicity and its ability to indicate personality types, the MMPI has developed into a 550-item test that is in use around the world. It has been administered to applicants to graduate schools, to high school students and to persons being considered for jobs. Researchers claim that potential mental breakdown or delinquency in a school child can be predicted by the MMPI and possibly treated and prevented. If the test indicates that the personality of an appli-

cant is not appropriate to the job, both employer and employe can be protected.

But five years ago Congressional hearings exposed the Federal Government's widespread use of the MMPI as a selective instrument for employment. As a result of hearings held by the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights (SN: 4/15/67, p. 451) and the House Committee on Government Operations, the Civil Service Commission issued a revision of policy prohibiting tests like the MMPI except under medical supervision. The Department of Labor and the State Department acted similarly, and the Peace Corps ordered all personality answer sheets in its files destroyed. The Peace Corps continued to use the test but changed the instructions to permit omission of responses to any questions that the candidate might find offensive. The committees charged invasion of privacy because the questions on the tests delve into political and religious views without the informed and voluntary consent of the testee.

Ralph M. Dreger, a psychologist at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, insisted then that the Government and government agencies do not have the right to ask such questions whether or not the individual gives informed and voluntary consent. He still feels the same way. "This is one of the reasons, apart from technical considerations entirely (those having to do with utterly unqualified persons administering the test which has been the case in many instances) that I objected to the use of the MMPI in government selection procedures since before the matter became an issue in the Congress and courts," he says.

But Dreger does not stop there. He

believes that even outside the government a person does not necessarily have the right to assess another's personality. He mentions particularly the recently developed computerized interpretation of the MMPI (SN: 4/22/72, p. 264). Physicians not trained in psychology can administer the test and get a computer readout of the results. Dreger contends that this approach is useless in the hands of an unqualified person.

To be qualified, Dreger says, a personality assessor must be familiar with several dozen variables. Among them are societal and cultural goals, including ideologies; community structure and goals; geographical locale; socioeconomic status; caste status; child-rearing attitudes and practices; family structure, positions, roles and role expectancy; gene patterns; neurological status; biological functioning; prenatal experiences; perceptual development, including time and space perception; language development; self concepts and attitudes, particularly self esteem; levels of aspiration, real and expressed; expressive opportunities, including vocational opportunities; peer relations; cognitive styles; measurement-instrument variables, and immediate situational stimulation.

"I am referring not only to knowledge of these variables individually, but to interactions among these variables," he continues. He considers all these things necessary when assessing any personality and particularly when assessing the personalities of any minority. Dreger is especially interested in the use of personality tests on minority populations. "The research findings in which blacks are compared with the white Minnesota sample would lead us to believe that the majority of Negroes

are manic-depressive schizophrenics," he says.

In the forthcoming *Comparative Studies of Blacks and Whites in the United States* (Seminar Press, Nov. 1972) Dreger and Kent S. Miller of Florida State University evaluate much of the recent research on race. In a section on the MMPI, Dreger cites the work of Malcolm Gynther at St. Louis University and agrees with his suggestion that parts of the MMPI be re-standardized on blacks in the same manner it was originally standardized on whites. Dreger says even clinicians who are otherwise qualified do not always understand the cultural biases built into the MMPI.

The Psychological Corp. of New York City is the publisher of the MMPI. James H. Ricks of the corporation's test division acknowledges that re-standardization of the test for blacks is a legitimate suggestion. But, he says, the test could also be standardized for almost any particular group in the country. "The whole thing could be

Questions on MMPI Test Related To Religion

I am very religious (more than most people)
 Religion gives me no worry
 I go to church almost every week
 I pray several times every week
 I read in the Bible several times a week
 I feel sure that there is only one true religion
 I have no patience with people who believe there is only one true religion
 I believe there is a God
 I believe there is a devil and a hell in afterlife
 I believe in a life hereafter
 I believe in the second coming of Christ
 Christ performed miracles such as changing water into wine
 The only miracles I know of are simply tricks that people play on one another
 A minister can cure disease by praying and putting his hands on your head
 Everything is turning out just like the prophets of the Bible said it would
 My soul sometimes leaves my body
 I am a special agent of God
 I have had some very unusual religious experiences
 I have been inspired to a program of life based on duty which I have since carefully followed ..

Source: Report of the Special House Subcommittee on Invasion of Privacy, September 1965.

started over from scratch for special applications," he says, "but one of the things that is good about the MMPI is that it is a robust or sturdy instrument that has been useful in treatment of

different groups and over time." In his view, this is because it is an empirical tool that does not depend on anyone's arm-chair opinion. The primary use of the test is to help the individual. If that person happens to be a member of a minority group, his particular situation and background would have to be allowed for, says Ricks. As for invasion of privacy, Ricks points out that a person is not required to answer every question.

The Psychological Corp. sells tens of thousands of the tests every year and use is increasing. Most of the tests go to clinics, hospitals, psychiatrists, psychologists and physicians. All potential purchasers are screened to make sure the test does not get into unqualified hands. But through the computer service, the MMPI goes to physicians who may not have had training in psychology. This, Ricks says, is because one of the original purposes of the test was to provide physicians who are not psychiatrists with some kind of objective index regarding when psychiatric referral might be necessary. "The usefulness of the MMPI is not to make a physician a psychiatrist," he says, "but to give him some signal that psychiatric or psychological help may be needed."

Raymond D. Fowler of the University of Alabama helped develop one of the computer interpretations of the MMPI. He says the computer may not give all the answers but it can indicate when a personal interview and possible reevaluation may be called for.

Even when these conditions are met there is a philosophical qualification that Dreger makes. In his view, no one has the right to assess another's personality. But he does believe that if the assessor sees the person he is testing as a person and not as a case, and if the assessor is reasonably qualified, he may have the privilege—but still not the right—to attempt to assess another's personality. □

SCIENCE OPTICS ELECTRONICS UNUSUAL & HARD BARGAINS NEW PRODUCTS · NEW MATERIALS · NEW METHODS

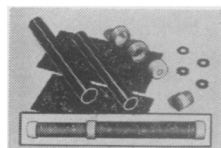
SEND UP A WEATHER BALLOON!



Have a ball with fun-filled weather balloons anywhere. Beach, yard, classroom. Play games, use as attn getters for stores, fairs, etc. Amateur meteorologists use to measure cloud hts, wind speed, temp. Made of heavy duty neoprene. Easily inflate w/air pump, vacuum cleaner, auto air hose, or locally available helium. Great to test helium's ability for high rise. Balloons come in package of two for double fun!

No. P-41,754Q.....(2' size).....\$2.25 Ppd.
 No. P-41,755Q.....(3' size).....\$3.50 Ppd.

8X REFRACTOR TELESCOPE KIT



Thrill to seeing craters on the moon, Jupiter's moons and many stars invisible to the naked eye with a scope you build yourself! Even an 8-yr old can do it with this new improved kit. Includes objective lens, eye lens, glare stops, kraft-board tubes, etc. and instructions to make a surprisingly powerful 18" long, 1-3/4" dia. telescope. Great group project for scouts, junior astronomy clubs, classrooms.

Stock No. 71,473Q \$3.00 Each Ppd.
 PKG OF 10 KITS (No. P-71,474Q) \$22.50 Ppd.

UNDERWATER MICROPHONE BUY



Listen to fish "talk" with this gov't surplus Hydrophone! Terrific buy! \$40 value! Make an accurate fish finder, pool splash-alarm, hear dolphins talk, add sound to underwater movies. Use with both high & low impedance amplifiers, tape recorders. Frequency response: 10-8000 Hz.

Working depth to 300 ft. Minimum sensitivity 1000 Hz. at depths of 60 or 300 ft. Operating temperature range: 0 to 35°C. Fungus and shock resistant. Includes leads (approx. 8" long) and instrs. Cable not incl. Wt. 2 oz.
 Stock No. 41,759Q \$5.00 Ppd.

"FISH" WITH A MAGNET



Go treasure hunting on the bottom! Fascinating fun & sometimes profitable! Tie a line to our 5 1/2-lb. Magnet—drop it overboard in bay, river, lake or ocean. Troll it along bottom—your "treasured" haul can be outboard motors, anchors, other metal valuables. 5 1/2-lb. Magnet is war surplus—Alnico V Type—Gov't. cost \$50.

Lifts over 150 lbs. on land—much greater weights under water.
 Stock No. 70,571Q 5 1/2 lbs. \$14.00 Ppd.
 Stock No. 60,215Q 1 1/2 lbs. \$ 5.75 Ppd.
 Stock No. 70,570Q 3 1/2 lbs. (40 lbs.) \$ 8.75 Ppd.
 Stock No. 85,152Q 15 3/4 lbs. (350 lbs.) \$33.95 F.O.B.

POWER HORN BLASTS A MILE



Frighten prowlers, muggers, vicious dogs with 118 decibels. Just press and this Freon powered pocket-sized horn can be heard a mile away to signal for help or fun. Great for boating (it floats), hiking, camping, hunting, seashore, rooting for your team. Can be heard over traffic and construction noises to sound fire drill, lunch break or emergency. Weighs only 3 oz. but contains up to 100 millipiercing blasts. A real bargain.

Stock No. 41,423Q \$3.25 Ppd.
 Giant 9-ounce Air Horn
 Stock No. 71,630Q \$8.20 Ppd.

MAIL COUPON FOR GIANT FREE CATALOG



148 PAGES! MORE THAN
 4,000 UNUSUAL BARGAINS

Enormous varieties of telescopes, microscopes, binoculars, magnets, magnifiers, photo components, lenses, prisms, optical instruments, parts, Science Fair kits, projects, and accessories. Write for Free Catalog "G" Edmund Scientific Co., 300 Edscorp Building, Barrington, New Jersey 08007.

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____

EDMUND SCIENTIFIC CO.  **300 EDSCORP BLDG. BARRINGTON, NEW JERSEY 08007**
 ORDER BY STOCK NUMBER · SEND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER · MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE