

OPINION

Test results failing the test

An IU business school study that has found tools to identify bias in standardized tests don't actually work has thrown a huge monkey wrench into the apparatus for those who use such tests to predict the futures of millions — from grade-school through college and into career levels.

"We proved that bias can be present but not be detected by even the top experts in the field, which could result in inaccurate prediction of outcomes such as job and academic performance for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of individuals," said the study's lead author and IU business professor Herman Aguinis in a news release.

This new finding calls into question the validity of huge numbers of hiring and college admission decisions based on results that had been trusted as bias-free for decades. Those results came from honest tests of ability with no tinge of racial or gender or any other bias, the reasoning went. They'd all passed their own "bias test." It turns out that assumption, while honest, was mistaken. This study does not brand any particular test as having undiscovered built-in biases, or brand all those previous decisions wrong. It just says we don't know.

But it does raise a giant question mark about the use of such tests from this point forward. Schools are closed because their students fail them. Millions of dollars are distributed to educators at least partly based on test scores. People are hired and fired. The big questions now: Is any of that fair? Is our reliance on testing doing grave injustice not only to the test takers, but to those who must make crucial decisions based on such test results?

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