

Response to Billington
Working with Children:
Psychologists at the boundaries of knowledge and experience
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I would like to thank Prof. Billington very much for his thought-provoking paper. Also the editors for asking me to comment on it. Writing this *commentary* has been an interesting experience. I have completely re-written it a number of times, in the course of which I have re-read the article itself four times. At each reading I saw different things in it and these prompted very different trains of thought. Here I would like share a few of the thoughts that the paper provoked up to my third reading. My fourth reading suggests that Prof. Billington would have preferred to have set me thinking about very different things – and that I had assimilated what he is saying back into my conventional thoughtways. Nevertheless, having already spent a great deal of time writing this response, I am reluctant to start yet again.

The first train of thought – or set of trains of thought – was triggered by the apologetic way in which Prof. Billington mentions that his thoughts and actions, and those of the young people with whom he interacted, were grounded in feelings.

One of the things he notes is that psychologists' armoury of tests and "scientific" procedures and thoughtways have not really been of great help to him when advising governmental (or quasi-governmental) organisations what might be done about some of the people who were referred to him because they presented problems. This struck me as one more example of the fact, documented by a number of researchers, that occupational competence rarely depends on technico-rational competencies but rather on those which make up the repertoire of the "reflective practitioner". It seems a little strange that Prof. Billington does not seem to have caught up with this ... particularly as it has major implications, not only for "testing" and our theories of competence, but also for the design of "educational" programmes, whether for children or adults but especially for teachers and psychologists.

Maybe I should say a little more about this because I have the impression that many psychologists – particularly lecturers and researchers in Higher and Further education – are still attempting to apply a technico-rational model of competence. Unfortunately, technico-rational knowledge of the kind we spend so much time inculcating and testing rarely relates to people's problems, goes rapidly out of date, and is quickly forgotten. Worse, belief in its efficacy contributes to a plethora of specialisms and assertions re mandatory components in educational and training programmes.

The generic high-level competencies of the reflective practitioner are much harder to nurture and credential. Donald Schon captures the problem by saying that they are the competencies required “to deal with the swamp”. As Billington notes, such competencies include the predisposition to attend to and intervene in the contextual – environmental – interpersonal – determinants of problems. So, instead of “psychologising” children’s problems, one must also consider and suggest interventions in the institutional context. Where do we encourage our students to think about such things? Where do we help them to develop the competencies required to intervene in them?

The endless specialisms that have grown up in psychology and other “disciplines” and their seeming implications for a plethora of “educational” programs (a topic with which Prof. Billington at times seems somehow to wish to grapple) stem from neglect of these observations. Yet they have major implications for our images of the way we should organise schools and institutions of higher and further “education” and “training”. The competencies required to deal with the swamp cannot be assessed (credentialed) using any of the psychometric procedures widely employed at the present time and, while these competencies are not difficult to nurture, the individualised competency-oriented developmental programmes required to nurture them cannot easily be integrated with the kinds of activity that currently dominate the institutions that we call schools and universities.

At this point I would like to begin to explore another train of thought unleashed by Prof. Billington’s references to feelings– this time by the surprise he expresses about the fact that his reflections were prompted by his feelings (and those expressed by his clients [by the way, *were they his clients?*]).

Billington’s surprise provides yet one more illustration of the problems which stem from trying to separate the cognitive, affective, and conative components of behaviour – and of “thought” in particular.

In fact, *all thought begins* in feelings. These result in (usually unverballed) “hypotheses” which one then begins to test through “experimental interactions with the problem” (overt or otherwise). Thought ceases to be effective if these emergent hypotheses are not checked ... hence the importance of persistence – conation.

These observations present us with something of a paradox: What is often described as “cognitive ability” is primarily affective and conative. It is heavily dependent on the arousal of motives: The activities just mentioned are difficult and demanding. No one will develop or display them unless they are involved in activities that engage their motives.

This poses enormous methodological problems for our attempt to assess such things as the ability to think, take initiative, or be creative ... never mind such dubious notions as self-confidence or “internal-external locus of control”. All of these qualities are only released *in relation to something*. (In fact it is more meaningful to ask “*In undertaking what kind of task does this person display creativity, confidence, etc.?*” than it is to ask “*How intelligent, creative, or confident is this person?*”.)

The problems with the standard model of competence and our usual psychometric model also undermine most traditional performance measurement in the workplace since most of the contributions people make to their workplaces and society cannot show up on conventional measures of performance. People contribute in a myriad of different, but usually invisible,

ways to group activity the effectiveness of which depends on a wide variety of very different contributions .. contributions which could not be made or produce their effect outwith the context in which they are made.

No wonder Prof. Billington has some negative feelings about our tests!

My third group of reflections stemming from Billington's comments on the role of feelings have to do with the fact that, as he notes, we, as psychologists, have not only not developed adequate conceptual frameworks to help people to think about other people and their interactions with them, let alone the emergent properties of groups, we have also not developed a conceptual framework which helps people to think about, and engage, their own and other people's feelings.

Although, for the reasons which follow from what I have already said, I find the main thrust of what might loosely be called the "emotional intelligence" movement a conceptual quagmire, I have a feeling that some of those working under that rubric may actually have developed educational programmes which at least set out to encourage children to do this.

But Billington has an important point here. Although one of the most important components in competency-oriented developmental programmes in children and adults involves value and motive clarification¹, the absence of an agreed framework for working in the area is a serious barrier to progress.

More generally, what are the questions we can ask ... and encourage other people to ask ... to clarify people's motivational predispositions and the interpersonal factors which in part determine what those predispositions are and appear to be? If the role of the psychologist is to understand, and help other people to understand (rather than to elaborate a technology for distinguishing between the supposedly normal and a range of abnormalities apparently demanding distinctive and prescriptive individual "remediation") what concepts and tools do we – and others – need?

So much for trains of thought precipitated by Prof. Billington's comments about feelings. I turn now to those precipitated by his worries about the role of government.

He worries that developing an effective assessment system which would relate to people's motives, thoughts, and feelings might give governments still more control over us. He is clearly worried – as we all must be – that this would facilitate the continuing drift toward the centralised, totalitarian, command and control regimes that are heading us toward our extinction as a species at an exponentially increasing rate.

But he strangely tries to water down this evident concern by saying that governments are "of course" entitled to control which knowledge their citizens will acquire. To anyone who knows anything about the extent of control that British governments currently exert over the information generation and dissemination process or the level of thought control they currently exercise this must surely be a red rag to a bull. Maybe that is what Prof Billington intended.

But, actually, I would like to re-frame this observation.

What we here is really evidence of a very basic failure on the part of social scientists ... and one to which Prof. Billinton draws attention in another context.

Behaviour is *not* mainly determined by the internal knowledge, values, and attitudes of individuals. It is mainly determined by a network of external social forces that act upon them. The situation in which we find ourselves as psychologists is analogous to that confronted by Newton. Before Newton, if things moved or changed direction, it was thought to be because of their *internal* properties. They were *animated*. After Newton, it was because they were acted upon by a network of invisible *external* forces which could nevertheless be mapped, measured, and harnessed.

Now then. One observation this leads us to is that – as Prof. Billinton hints – what he sees in schools and the community are behaviour “problems” (which we, as psychologists, claim special expertise at being able to understand and predict) that are heavily determined by environmental factors and the display and “treatment” of which is likewise so determined.

Where in our professional organisations do we assert that our competence as psychologists is in part dependent on our ability to understand and influence such forces? What are the concepts, understandings, and tools we have to offer – or do we just leave people to exercise “common” ... or rather uncommon ... sense (as we do in relation to reflective practitioner skills in general).

Where do we see injunctions to get together with others – including, and perhaps especially, other psychologists - to understand, influence, and harness those forces?

There is something else to be drawn out of this observation. This is that, instead of (rightly) being horrified at the use governments might make of some of our insights ... and indeed at the “insights” that “their” funding and employment structures compel us to generate for them ... it behoves us to see the actions of governments as expressions of a network of social forces which can be understood, mapped, measured, and harnessed and not as expressions of the personal needs of control freaks.

And so we may return to “our” tests - which Billinton implies governments have somehow required us to generate and then misused.

Actually, they are not *our* tests at all. They are *teachers’* tests which we have somehow plagiarised and claimed as our own. Teachers developed them, it may be argued, to show that they were at least doing *something* when they failed to behave in the reflective practitioner ways that would be required of people who were acting in “*loco parentus*”. As Spearman noted, these tests “have no place in schools” because they *prevent* teachers attending to and developing the idiosyncratic talents of the children in their care – and thus, in effect, preventing them offering any kind of education worth the name.

It is facile to argue that governments were somehow responsible for this. How, for example, were governments responsible for the tests used in the *private* schools which contributed the data that Spearman used to identify *g*?

What we have to ask is, therefore, what part these tests play in administering an increasingly elaborated hierarchical social system which has, over millennia, been heading us toward our extinction as a species at an exponentially increasing rate.

How are we to understand and influence this process? What are the socio-cybernetic forces at work? How are we to map and harness them?

Note that we, as psychologists, are in a unique position to collect the data needed to illuminate this network of forces and it is we, as psychologists, who are able to develop the tools needed to intervene in that network in such a way as to and harness these forces.

So. OK. Mr. Billington. See what a fine mess your attention to your feelings has got us into!

Thank you very much.

John Raven.

1. It is a sobering thought that more than a century has passed since Maria Montessori argued that one of the key competencies – indeed requirements - of teachers was to help children clarify their individual cosmic task – the unique way in which they could contribute to societal development.

Probably the most effective way of following up any of the views expressed in this *commentary* is to go to www.eyeesociety.co.uk.

Those teachers who do think about each pupil's motives and create individualised developmental programmes which enable them develop and display those talents in a group setting have developed the competencies required to do so over long periods of time and despite endless constraints from the system in which they work.

Indeed, one of the things they (distinctively) do is think about, and set about influencing, the situational constraints which otherwise prevent them behaving competently within their classrooms. They spend enormous amounts of time *outside* their schools. This is central to their competence *as teachers*. ***Because otherwise they could not do in their classrooms the very things they need to do to merit descriptions as competent teachers.***

The task becomes even more difficult when the objective is to nurture professional competence ... viz to be competent lecturers in higher and further "education".

As Schon discovered by actually trying to do it, the task of nurturing the competencies required by reflective practitioners within current institutional arrangements is virtually impossible.

High-level competency oriented education has been virtually driven out of schools and universities by an emphasis on testing ... "hard" performance criteria.

But one just cannot blame government (or capitalism) for that. We, as a profession, are partially to blame.

We have very few general competency-oriented studies in developmental psychology.

I do not know of a single study which has set out to develop the concepts and tools that teachers need to think about and nurture high level competencies.

We have not, within the BPS, established organisational arrangements to examine and influence the situational constraints on our behaviour.