

**Comment**

**Papierno and Ceci Miss the Point**

John Raven  
30 Great King St.,  
Edinburgh EH3 6QH  
Scotland

e-mail: [jraven@ednet.co.uk](mailto:jraven@ednet.co.uk)

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(Name and address inadvertently omitted from submission).

Contrary to what Papierno and Ceci (2005) assert, a glance at any survey of career aspirations will show that it is *not* true that most people *want* to move into professional positions. They *do* want to avoid the degrading and dehumanising treatment meted out to those who lack the credentials said to be pre-requisites for employment in middle and higher-level occupations. And many also understand that widely touted claims about the importance of qualifications and “ability” are associated with a sociological process that has the effect of legitimising a divided society which in turn compels many people, against their will, to participate in the personally and socially destructive, viz. unethical, activities that constitute most work in modern societies.

Ceci and Papierno reiterate the widely shared view that the abilities schools claim to nurture are those required to manage organisations and society effectively. Although schools’ claims of this kind are, at best, dubious, there is some truth in the proposition that general cognitive ability can contribute to managerial ability – although even this claim tends to be over-stated.

One sense in which it is an over-statement derives from the fact that intelligence and enterprise are, in reality, cultural, not individual, characteristics. As researchers like Schon (1971/1973) and Kanter (1985) have shown, innovation - and the survival of organisations more generally - depends on a wide range of people, who possess a wide range of very different talents and abilities, and who are employed at many different “levels” in those organisations, contributing in different ways through what Kanter has called “parallel organisation activity” to the effectiveness of those organisations. In the normal course of events, most of these talents, abilities, and contributions pass un-noticed - as does the fact that, during time devoted to parallel organisation activity, work is anything but hierarchically organised. It is not just that these talents and abilities *are* overlooked, as Spearman (see my earlier response to Ceci and Papierno) noted, things cannot be otherwise unless we radically revise the dominant way of thinking about and assessing human abilities. The same is true of the endless abilities which can be nurtured and observed in schools if appropriate educational practices are adopted.

The question then arises as to why psychologists have not developed a psychometric framework which would enable us to recognise and nurture these abilities. The answer has a number of components which include the effects of sociological pressures which result in an ever-increasing demand for a single and unarguable norm-referenced criterion of “ability” to legitimise the divisions within our society. As previously noted, this division compels most people to participate, against their will, in a huge range of personally destructive and socially unethical activities which have the wider effects of driving our species toward extinction, carrying the planet as we know it with us. (This process is discussed more fully in Raven, 2002)

And so we come back to problems with “closing the gap” philosophy and research. My claim is that the main difficulty with the philosophy and research on which most interventions and research in the area are based is that both the problem and its solution are framed within a Westernised, largely American, single-factor (hierarchical) model of society and ability. Neither is appropriate. Stated more strongly, given the way these thoughtways are contributing the extinction of life on earth, nothing could be more unethical. The problem is, not to “close the gap”, but, on the one hand, to find ways of recognising, nurturing, and utilising the wide range of talents that are available and are needed in society. And, on the other, to halt the promotion of some of the most destructive people the world has ever known into positions of authority on the specious grounds that they are “the most able”. To adopt the terminology of Ceci and Papierno’s original article, such a solution would indeed be “universalised”.

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Papierno and Ceci (2005). Beyond the American Context. *American Psychologist*, 60, 1042 –1043

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[http://www.wpe.info/papers\\_table.html](http://www.wpe.info/papers_table.html)

Schon, D. (1971/73). *Beyond the Stable State*. London: Penguin.