SELF-DEFINITION

A Personal Style of Cognitive Initiative

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SELF-DEFINITION: A PERSONAL STYLE OF COGNITIVE INITIATIVE

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Variable

Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative is a measure of "whether a person habitually thinks in terms of causes and outcomes or whether a person sees the self as an ineffective victim of events which have an unknown cause."1 A self-defining person is one who thinks and acts as an autonomous individual. A person who is not self-defining receives his or her personal definition from others. One could call this a "social" definition as opposed to a "self" definition.

Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative is not a traditional "ability" such as being able to add or subtract. It is better described as a "competency," a collection of skills, behaviors and abilities that form a pattern which recognizably distinguishes between effective and ineffective performance. People high in Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative can reason from the problem at hand to a solution. They can propose and take effective action on their own. Such competence is characteristic of people who think in a rational, systematic way and who anticipate problems before they arise.

Low Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative is characteristic of people who accept a situation as it is given. They neither seek actively to understand the cause of events nor think of effective steps toward a solution. This seems to happen because people low in Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative feel incapable of changing a situation.

High and low Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative describe styles of responding to stimuli. They are styles which are learned and which, through repetition, become enduring characteristics of individuals. Higher education often teaches

the skills involved in Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative, although indirectly. For example, tasks which ask students to analyze an historical event, such as the Renaissance, call for understanding an event and its causes. Generating solutions to the world hunger problem for an economics class, to use another example, would involve both understanding events and their causes and being able to reason from the problem to a solution.

**Description**

The Picture Story Exercise (PSE), a version of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), is used to test for Self-Definition. A person is shown six pictures, each printed one to a page. For each picture the person is asked to "make up and write out a brief imaginative story." The person is asked to spend about five minutes on each story and to write not more than about 150 words per story. The questions listed below are given as guides to "help cover all the elements of a story plot in the time allowed":

1. What is happening? Who are the people?
2. What has led up to this situation? That is, what has happened in the past?
3. What is being thought? What is wanted? By whom?
4. What will happen? What will be done?

Each story is scored for five categories by a trained scorer. Categories scored +1 involve the use of explicit causal language to describe events, thoughts and feelings, and writing about a sequence of events in which the character takes action. Categories scored -1 include the lack of any indication of causality in the story, leaving the actor in the story with no chance to act upon the circumstances, and ending the story without action. Scores for each story can range from -3 to +2.

**Sample**

The scoring system for Self-Definition was developed in two different studies by comparing TAT stories written by female college students who had well-articulated plans for future careers to those written by female college students who had only vague plans or no plans for a career outside the home. At the time of the original research (autumn, 1970), women planning careers seemed an excellent criterion group for defining one's self over and above traditional role ascriptions.
Reliability

Test-retest reliability data will be available shortly on Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative.

Validity

Face Validity - The Picture Story Exercise does not appear to be testing for Self-Definition and therefore does not have high face validity.

Construct Validity - A number of other variables have been shown to be related to Self-Definition in men and women. This research has shown that Self-Definition among college-educated men correlates with:

- a greater feeling of satisfaction with college;
- a feeling later in life that college was an influential, significant experience;
- taking on voluntary organizational responsibilities (community-mindedness) ten years after college;
- political moderation later in life (i.e., avoiding extreme positions);
- feeling, as an adult, that life is busy;
- encouraging one's wife to develop her potentialities along career lines;
- a lack of physical wear and tear from effects of emotional stress.

Among women it has been found that this measure is related to:

- planning a career, even among junior high school girls;
- organizational activity and leadership;
- a willingness to defend ideas and opinions openly and vigorously;
- active participation in political campaigns;
- going to graduate school right after college;
• persisting in a career;

• working seriously at an avocation (painting, writing, teaching music, etc.)—and making a living at it—even when constrained by small children;

• coping with real problems in life by taking instrumental actions to solve them.

Perhaps of equal importance, research has also shown that Self-Definition is not related in college-educated samples to social class, intelligence, verbal fluency or sex, and may therefore safely be used with heterogeneous groups of people.

Content Validity—Proof that the test measures what it claims to comes from a study where Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative differentiated career-oriented from noncareer-oriented female college students. Further research has shown that Self-Definition is increased by college education, most dramatically by a liberal arts education. Thus, liberal arts education appears to increase one's capacity to define oneself, as indeed it has claimed to do. Evidence for this appears in Table 1 on page 5.

Freshmen at the traditional liberal arts college and at the state, nonselective, teacher-oriented college scored very similarly on Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative. Seniors at both schools scored substantially higher than their freshman counterparts. The seniors at the traditional liberal arts college, however, scored much higher than the seniors at the nonselective, teacher-oriented college. These data suggest that a four-year liberal arts education improves Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative scores more than a four-year, career-oriented education does.

Sophomores at a public, two-year, community college scored much higher than their freshman counterparts. The freshman and sophomore scores there were lower than freshman and senior scores at either four-year college. Yet there was greater absolute change between freshman and sophomore scores at the community college than between freshman and senior scores at the state, nonselective, teacher-oriented college.

At the moment there are no comparison data on seniors for the freshman engineering students at the state university, nor for freshmen at the church-affiliated, nontraditional women's college.
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Freshmen (n)</th>
<th>Seniors (n)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Undergraduate Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Private, Highly Selective, Liberal Arts College</td>
<td>-3.32 (145) [1.95]</td>
<td>2.68 (118) [2.14]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) State, Nonselective, Teacher-oriented College</td>
<td>-3.45 (29) [1.75]</td>
<td>0.03 (36) [2.52]</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) State University Engineering Students</td>
<td>-3.16 (285) [3.87]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Nontraditional, Church-affiliated, Women's College</td>
<td>-1.38 (117) [3.54]</td>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Freshmen (n)</th>
<th>Sophomores (n)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(5) Public, Nonselective, Two-year College</strong></td>
<td>-5.19 (27) [1.77]</td>
<td>-0.63 (30) [2.33]</td>
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</tbody>
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|                |             |             |
| **Career Professionals** |              |             |
| (1) Educational Administrators | -3.25 (42) [2.24] | | |

* ( ) = number of subjects
[ ] = standard deviation
Freshmen at the liberal arts college, the teacher-oriented college and the state university all scored at roughly the same level on Self-Definition. Freshmen at the public, two-year college scored lower than these groups. Freshmen at the nontraditional, women's college, however, scored higher in Self-Definition than any of the other freshmen measured. It seems likely that women who choose a nontraditional form of education have more clearly defined goals for their futures than typical freshmen do. This, by definition, would lead to a higher Self-Definition score for these women.

Educational administrators scored at about the same level as the freshmen at the liberal arts and teacher-oriented colleges and the engineering students at the state university. Self-Definition does not necessarily change with age.

Administration

The test takes approximately 20-30 minutes to administer and can be administered to large groups of people. Tests carried out in a similar setting guarantee that the verbal content gathered is comparable across individuals. This makes it possible to compare scores obtained in one group given a set of pictures with scores of other groups shown the same set of pictures.

Uses

The outcome data listed under the "content validity" heading argue strongly for the value of possessing high Self-Definition. Research supports the argument that liberal arts schooling increases Self-Definition. Furthermore, Self-Definition measures the development of students into independent individuals, a goal that liberal arts colleges often espouse. Using Self-Definition as a diagnostic tool could help schools measure progress towards this goal. Students especially low in Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative could receive training in this competency. Diagnosis of student needs in the development of Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative could lead to the most efficient use of the time and money the college devotes to increasing Self-Definition/Cognitive Initiative in its students.

References