

somehow not physically real things, what does it say of chairs, for example?" "You're denying the existence of a physically real world." "... told his cat story to show that quantum theory denied the existence of a physically real world." All quotes from this book! Why, then, does the list of interpretations in this book not include the Henry interpretation?

Or perhaps I should call it the Rees interpretation—I have not read Martin's book but the authors quote him: "The universe could only come into existence if someone observed it. It does not matter that the observers turned up several billion years later. The universe exists because we are aware of it."

Does any of this matter? It most certainly does. The authors point out that "*Principia* ignited the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment." It was the Enlightenment that inspired the American founding fathers to create the Constitution, a landmark in human history. Note that Newtonian physics is deterministic, and yet, nonetheless, the founding fathers were all Deists. They, noble souls, had a much larger leap of faith to make than we do today (thanks to quantum mechanics), yet they all managed it. Our authors ask "Can it be that out there in our future there is a quantum impact on our worldview?"

Bruce? ... Fred? ... Hello-o? Have you read your own fine book?

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The Cult of Personality: How Personality Tests Are Leading us to Miseducate our Children, Mismanage our Companies, and Misunderstand Ourselves by Annie Murphy Paul. New York: Free Press, 2004. 320 pp. \$26.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0-7432-4356-0. Republished as **The Cult of Personality Testing: How Personality Tests Are Leading us to Miseducate our Children, Mismanage our Companies, and Misunderstand Ourselves**. 2005. \$14.00 (paper). ISBN 0-7432-8072-5.

To understand others is a desire that has persisted throughout the ages. From Hippocrates' four temperaments and Galen's corresponding body fluids, to physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater's use of facial structures, expressions and colorations and German physician Franz Joseph Gall's determination of character on the basis of the shape (and bumps) of the head (phrenology), cultures have sought to capture the essence of individuals—to describe and classify people and predict their behaviour.

During the 20th Century, a belief in the ability of psychology to subject

human nature to classification and measurement took such a strong hold that today we rely on personality testing to serve as a means to this end.

The *Cult of Personality*, later republished in paperback with the content unaltered but the title curiously (and without explanation) changed to *The Cult of Personality Testing*, is Annie Murphy Paul's journalistic foray into this modern version of an ancient inquisitiveness.

As one might expect of a previous senior editor of the popular magazine *Psychology Today*, Paul's book is engagingly written. When she delves into the personal lives and idiosyncrasies of the creators of an array of popular tests and illustrates how these tests are overused or misused, she does so with a well-tuned flair. For instance, she titillates the reader with details of how Isabel Myers's marriage suffered from years of inattention as she became enraptured by the test that bears her (and her mother's) name, and she shocks us with her portrayal of Raymond Cattell as a eugenicist who sought to replace established religions with his own invention—"Beyondism," which he claimed was "based on the principle that evolution is good" (p. 181). As for the misuses, she tells us that Brad Seligman, a Berkeley lawyer, has successfully won million dollar damage awards in a number of cases involving corporate abuse of personality tests; that the Rorschach was administered to Nazi officers awaiting trial in Nuremberg; and that Rent-A-Center managers were required to complete the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), with their results being used "to determine the course of their careers" (p. 61).

Such stories delivered, sometimes to excess, intermingled with tantalizing tidbits and liberally peppered with Paul's own scathing comments make for an entertaining read on a rainy weekend.

My expectations of this book had, however, been higher. Because I laud both her expressed objective: to ask "whether the answers [that the tests provide] are correct—or just ones their users want to hear" (p. 14), and her promise, made in the book's subtitle, to tell us "how personality tests are leading us to miseducate our children, mismanage our companies and misunderstand ourselves," I had looked forward to a more serious read. I had expected, or perhaps simply hoped for, a thoughtful book that would engage readers in a critical examination of the science and business of personality testing. Instead, what I found was a puzzlingly disturbing and disappointing book.

Given the sensationalized use of the word "cult" in the book's title, I might have anticipated my disappointment. While the term may be well chosen for marketing purposes, it is a poor choice if one values accuracy. Cults are devoted to beliefs or practices that society generally renounces; they are, by definition, the antithesis of mainstream. Personality testing is, as people generally would agree and as Paul both declares and demonstrates in her book, mainstream; so, the title gets it wrong and that's hardly a promising beginning.

This book is, as I noted above, engagingly written; however, what is good about it—what makes it enjoyable to read—is also one of its major faults. Instead of addressing the topic directly and displaying reasoned judgment, it

relies on a story-telling strategy that focuses more on the lives of the test creators than on the tests themselves. At first, I assumed that this sometimes entertaining, seemingly irrelevant, often salacious material was intended to denigrate particular tests through the all-too-popular ploy of 'character assassination.' For example, in the chapter on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Paul repeatedly reminds us that Isabel Myers was merely a "housewife," implying that her lack of professional credentials somehow diminishes her test as a psychological instrument. Elsewhere, she reports at length how Henry Murray conspired with his mistress in the creation of the Thematic Apperception Test, suggesting that his adulterous behavior somehow makes the instrument suspect. However, as I read on I discovered, as I shall explain momentarily, that Paul's handling of this story was part of a larger and unstated agenda that runs through the entire book.

Another indication of this agenda appears in Paul's discussion of the tests she chose to review. The core of her book is comprised of six chapters, each of which is devoted to some particularly well-known test or to a familiar variety of testing methods. When one puts aside the story-telling, anecdotal material in these chapters, what one finds is remarkably little substance, and what there is of substance demonstrates, at best, a superficial understanding and, at worst, a sweeping misunderstanding of test construction and usage.

I will refer briefly to one chapter that addresses the MMPI to illustrate this point.¹ While certainly it can be argued that the MMPI is grossly overused and that all too often it is misused, I see no justification for Paul's outright condemnation of it. She describes it as "heartless," "potentially offensive" and "without doubt one of the weirdest creations in the history of man's attempt to understand himself." And she criticizes its items for their "flat, affectless tone and careless alteration of the weightiest subjects with the most banal" (p. 53). All of this suggests that Paul lacks an appreciation, or even a basic understanding, of the nature of actuarial tests (of which the MMPI might be considered the prototype). She fails to grasp that these test questions are statistically selected according to their ability to contribute to the test's overall discriminative ability and not for any cuddly, emotionally warm, feel-good quality. It is easy to persuade a general readership that the test is somehow offensive by citing such items as "I have never had any black, tarry-looking bowel movements" or "There is something wrong with my sex organs." But the real question of whether the test does what its creators say it does (i.e. to differentiate personality factors) is lost in the sensational. Such pursuit of the dramatic appears again in her accusation that the MMPI has "helped to create, and continues to reinforce, a culture in which our unique and varied personalities are subject to the petty tyranny of the average" (p. 71). While the accusation itself is highly questionable, another hint of Paul's agenda is found in the words "our unique and varied personalities." The author does not believe in a stable and enduring personality that can be measured—the fundamental assumption of personality testing. According to her way of thinking, it is not just that the tests

don't work, it is that they are doomed to failure because "there can be no universal key to personality, only unique, particular personalities, and shifting, evolving ones at that" (p. 219).

What Paul does believe in is eventually revealed when she states that "the vista (psychological tests) afford are too restricted, obscured by the objectives and agendas of others." To which point she asks "Is there another way?" Presented as a rhetorical question, this would have been an effective final line, but here it serves only as an opportunity for the author to give her own answer. Rising up with an emphatic "yes," she starts to tell us about what she *knows* to be a better way.

That better way—the alternative for which she would have us discard personality testing—is "the telling of one's own story." Presumably to inspire us, she tells the arduous tale of Dodge Morgan, a 51-year-old man who sails off alone on a voyage around the world in order to sort out what is important in his own life. Each day he completes a different personality test and, on his return, no thanks (apparently) to the results of these tests, he enthusiastically takes his place within the human race, presumably having discovered his own (human) nature by virtue of his own experience—his own story.

Somehow she connects this mariner tale to the work of psychologist Gordon Allport, to whom Paul attributes the discovery of the story-telling approach, something that she believes should have joined the ranks of mainstream personality testing long ago. From Allport she moves to Dan McAdams, a contemporary psychologist she describes in heroic terms as championing this worthy cause. She relies primarily, and I would expect exclusively, on his book, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, to argue her point. After stating that McAdams "has worked out an objective system of coding the narratives" gained through a structured two-hour interview, she confusingly describes the approach as, "in many ways, *the un-test*. It has no norms; subjects are not assigned numbers or types . . . [the results are] almost defiantly resistant to the requirements of institutions, *just about useless* for the purpose of sorting and screening and labeling" (p. 219--emphasis added). While such claims (or disclaimers) might rightfully leave the reader wondering what purpose this life-story approach actually serves (and why it is even mentioned in a book on personality testing), Paul justifies her eagerness by explaining that psychological tests should aid "our advance toward self-discovery and self-awareness" (p. 222). While this may be a popular goal in our psychologically-obsessed society, it is not the purpose of psychological testing; that of identifying and classifying personality factors in order to explain past actions or predict future behavior. But for Paul, there is no stable personality to measure, no factors to categorize—just stories to tell, impressions to make and the 'self' to discover.

Paul's enthusiasm for 'life stories' explains her fascination with the personal lives of the test creators and explains why this book unfolds as it does. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm may tell us more about this author and her cultish

fascination with self-awareness than it does about the practice of personality testing.

My review of her book might well have ended here had Paul not chosen to interject, toward the end of her Epilogue, a brief, peculiar and seriously misleading caveat: "When some kind of formal assessment is necessary," she writes, "(as evidence in a court case, for example), personality tests are not the only option" (p. 222). She proceeds to recommend the general use of "structured interviews," "the collection of relevant biographical information" and "behavioural observation" and to suggest that, for custody evaluations, one should rely on such instruments as "the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory or the Parenting Stress Index" (p. 222).

How can she, one wonders, recommend these alternatives without bothering to ask whether the answers they give are any better than those of the tests she condemns. I am not a fan of personality testing but neither am I a fan of any unexamined psychological alternative.

A critical examination of personality testing and its impact on our society is long overdue. I would welcome a book that does what this one has failed to do.

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Notes

- ¹ For a more detailed critical examination of another chapter—the chapter on the MBTI, see Geyer, Peter. Glibly attractive: Reading Annie Murphy Paul's "The Cult of Personality." Available at: http://www.personalitypathways.com/MBTI_cult.html. Accessed 7 December 2006.