

A HUMAN BEING IS NOT A MOSAIC: SCIENTISM, STATISTICISM AND METRICOPHILIA

[LISTENING TO: '[PHANTOM ANTHILLS](#)' BY [CHAD VANGAALLEN](#); '[PAPERHOUSE \(LIVE\)](#)' BY [CAN](#); '[WHEN DID OUR DREAMS AND FUTURES DRIFT SO FAR APART](#)' BY [LEYLAND KIRBY](#); '[THE OLD GOLD SHOE](#)' BY [LAMBCHOP](#)]



'Panegyrics of Granovetter', <https://flic.kr/p/eRKYC9>

[t]he person is a unified whole, and has depth. ... A human being is not a mosaic, and therefore cannot be described as a mosaic. All attempts to represent a person simply in terms of a sequence of test scores are fundamentally false. (Stern, 1929, pp. 63–64, cited in [Lamiell, 2010](#))

FROM SCIENTISM TO STATISTICISM

I found the above quote in James T. Lamiell's 2010 paper about the psychologist William Stern, [inventor of the IQ](#), and his 'personalistic thinking'. Lamiell writes:

*Alongside [positivism](#), a closely related but nevertheless distinct historical development of enormous ... consequence of 20th century psychology was the rapid proliferation of a belief in the power of statistical methods to reveal the empirical regularities - i.e., the 'lawfulness' - of human behavior. ... I propose to call this unbridled faith in statistical concepts and methods **STATISTICISM**, and insofar as this -ism entails an "obsessive devotion to or veneration for" statistical evidence as the **SINE QUA NON** of genuinely scientific knowledge in psychology (and other behavioral sciences), it may be said to qualify as a **CULT**. (P. 138)*

Lamiell then says that, ironically, Stern's work on intelligence testing "quite possibly contributed to the establishment of this cult, though of course that was far from his intention." But that's a thread to pick up on another time perhaps; I'm more interested now in 'statisticism', perhaps as a sub-species of the 'scientism' I discussed in [my previous post](#).

Interestingly, in [Re-Examining Language Language Testing](#), Glenn Fulcher (2015) also refers to cult-like practices surrounding language proficiency scales. Preceding a discussion of IELTS, TOEFL and mapping tests to external standards, he writes of the 'social moderation' of language testing, which involves a

socially cohesive group of people who have been socialised into seeing the world in the required manner ... the individuals within the group are 'adepts', steeped in the interpretations and practices of a cult. Only they are capable of understanding the true meaning of the words of the scales. The uninitiated are outsiders who can only begin to see the truth if they submit to the required initiation processes. (pp. 97-98)

TO METRICOPHILIA

Like Lamiell, [Richard Smith \(2011\)](#) is "critical of overreliance on statistics and measurement in social science and, by implication, in education as a branch of social science" (p. 633). But, perhaps in the spirit of the 'humility and tentativeness' advocated by David C. Berliner, Smith is "not against statistics, only overreliance on them and unreflective faith in them."

The fact that science has made our lives safer and more comfortable in countless ways, and that many areas of science are intrinsically fascinating, does not justify scientism, the colonizing by science of every other form of thought and the assumption that whatever problem we have, the solution will inevitably be a scientific one. (IBID.)

However, Smith feels that the word 'statisticism' "does not trip off the tongue" and so he suggests **METRICOPHILIA** - a 'love of measurement' bordering on pathological - as an alternative, one which can also "do justice to the fact that statistics are only part of the fascination with measurement more generally" ([2010, p. 190](#)). Metricophilia, Smith argues, "flourishes where diversity can be reduced to a single scale, so that aggregation can take place and comparisons can be made" (2011, p. 634).

Such reduction for the sake of aggregation and comparison is [happening all around us all the time](#). In ELT, perhaps the clearest illustration is how we talk constantly about IELTS scores and how a particular level at our school is 'equivalent' to an IELTS 5.5 or how our course takes students from an IELTS 5 to a 5.5 or how our test scores correlate with IELTS scores to such-and-such a degree. We can't change all of that but, with a deeper, broader understanding of language assessment, we can better recognise where there might be an 'overreliance on statistics and measurement' in our own educational institutions, explore alternatives and give the discourse and practices a nudge in their direction.