

## An Example of Counsellor Bias

### *They are all below average...*

Excerpt from personal diary (Arulmani, February, 1993)

For the full paper see:

Arulmani, G. (2015). The question is the answer: The cultural preparedness approach to assessment for career guidance. In M. McMahon & M. Watson (Eds.), *Career Assessment: Qualitative Approaches*. Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Some years ago very soon after I completed a high level degree in Clinical Psychology, I was invited to assess the children of tribal families to identify their potentials based on which they could be given scholarships for further education. The invitation was from the 86 year old head of the erstwhile royal family of the region who were owners of vast iron ore mines in the area. The fathers of these children were unskilled labourers in these mines and the mine owner's desire was to support the further education of the children so that their talents and potentials could be fruitfully realised. Brimming over with my new found knowledge about psychological testing I set off with my tests of intelligence, aptitude, interest and temperament. The tests were all administered in a "standardised" manner and the test instructions were meticulously followed. However, even during the administration of the tests, I noticed that almost all my young test-takers were "underperforming". Most of them could not use the various blocks and cards in my testing kit, their drawings were not "age appropriate", in fact they could not even correctly hold the pencils that I supplied. The tests were scored. As anticipated almost the entire group recorded a "below average" performance. I wrote up the various psychometric reports and handed them over. A few days later I was asked to meet the person who had commissioned the project. "From your reports it seems none of my children are worthy of a scholarship", he said to me. "Perhaps you are correct because you have taken a highly scientific approach. But before we come to this conclusion, could you visit these children in their homes and then tell me what your impressions are?" I didn't understand why that was necessary, since after all I had taken a "highly scientific approach". Anyway, I set off to the remote hamlets that were home to these children. As I approached, I began to see, scribbled on the rocks, examples of the most attractive child art – cavorting animals, soaring birds, twirling plants, dancing humans – executed in sophisticated (entirely age appropriate!) detail. The children and their families were thrilled to see me and I was treated as an honoured guest. Still amazed by the drawings I asked who had made the drawings and with what. Three of the "artists" in the group shyly came up and showed me lumps of iron ore – their drawing tools! These were the very ones who "underperformed" on my paper-pencil tests! Further, all around me I noticed an almost seamless involvement of children in what would be considered adult duties in urban environments: keeping the yard clean, caring for the livestock as well as their younger siblings, stoking the fire, were all activities that the children were quite naturally involved in. I was introduced to one of their "board" games (the board being the floor) the complexity of which required the intellectual prowess of a chess master! I could go on with my description of what I saw in that little hamlet. But gradually the wisdom of these children's 86 year old benefactor dawned on me: my tests had "underperformed" and not these bright eyed children.