

The Examination As Ritual

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Examinations are universal phenomena. Everyone who has attended school has experienced examinations. However, even in non-literate populations individuals undergo assessment of their relevant skills. When we find such a common behavioral phenomena we may assume that examinations serve some important functions. A simplistic view would claim that the function of an examination is to assess the knowledge of the examinee. This article will discuss two basic forms of examination: the multiple-choice written examination and the oral competence examination. These two forms are chosen because they are used in the medical specialization examination in Israel.

All examinations have in common several goals. The following list is a suggestion of these goals. I express my personal view in the order of importance of these functions.

- A. To increase the motivation of the examinees to study.
- B. To suggest to those who will be examined in the future what material is worthwhile studying.
- C. To evaluate the teachers and learning environment.
- D. To give a grade assessing the performance of the examinee.

Items B and C actually look at non-examinee effects. They suggest that examinations affect a whole set of variables outside the examination room. Yet, most assessments of examinations look at the level of difficulty and the ability of the examinations to differentiate the good and the poor performers and not the effect on the outside field. There are several methods of assessing the teachers, most of them not dependent on the examination process.

It is a common observation that people about to be examined behave in a regressive manner. Written

examinations involve little direct contact between the examinee and the examiners. The process of examination is impersonal, although the results are often more objective and enable easy checking. Multiple-choice written examinations enable the assessment of the ability of the examination to differentiate between the better and the poorer students.

Another problem in examinations is that places of learning are heterogenous. The better residents are often accepted by the so-called better places. As a result it seems that the more impressive candidates tend to cluster in certain centers. A vicious cycle is established so that it is impossible to assess the standard of teaching of the centers on the basis of their examination successes.

If the written examination is impersonal, in contrast the oral examination involves a face-to-face meeting between the examiners and examinees. I have often been struck that in spite of the fact that examinees and examiners vary greatly, there is a certain atmosphere that is similar and repetitive. This put me in mind of the concept of rites of passage in different cultures. These rites demarcate the passage of an individual from one stage of his life to the next. There are rituals that are well known: marriage, bar mitzvah, brit mila and others. Most societies contain such maturation rites. These often denote the acceptance of an individual as a mature member in his socio-cultural environment. Many societies have evolved elaborate rituals and rites of passages to help accepting young men (candidate) to manhood (specialist rank) (1). I have noted that rites of passage are characterized by two phases: the first one involves inflicting pain and/or humiliation on the candidate. These rituals include scorching, mutilation, beating, fasting and seclusion. The second phase is a test of knowledge and ability to function as an adult (2, 3). At the end of the rite the individual is accepted as an adult member of his group.

It seems to me that one may view the oral examination as a rite of passage into professional maturity. The two elements of humiliation and test of competence are present in this "ritual." One may ask why humiliation? We might even resist the idea that such an element is present in the process of the examination. However, even with the kindest examiner the situation where a competent adult is put before his elders to be tested and is put in a submissive situation is inevitably a humiliating experience. Very often when the examiner does not belong to the breed of kind examiners the experience becomes more vivid and painful. The other part of the rite of passage, that of proving one's competence, is obvious and needs no further mention. The end result of the examination is the acceptance of the candidate into the tribe of psychiatrists.

It seems to me important that examiners should be aware of and try to minimize the humiliating aspect of these examinations. The examinees may receive succour from the understanding that they are partaking in a time-honored ritual which is necessary not only to the individuals involved but also to the survival of the tribe they so aspire to join. This is indeed a worthwhile function of the specialization examinations.

References

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3. Fitzhardinge LF. *The Spartans*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.