

“WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT LIMITATIONS” SCALE: FURTHER CROSS-VALIDATION AND ITEM ANALYSIS

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Berger (2, 3) has called attention to a phenomenon that must be familiar to virtually every perceptive counselor working in a school or college setting, viz., the “underachievement” of a student by reason of an “unwillingness to accept (his) limitations.” Berger’s conceptualization catches the essence of what I have, for a number of years, informally called the “myth of the lazy but able mind”—the reluctance of some students to exert themselves in areas where they are paradoxically intensely eager for achievement. Such students, it appears, greatly prefer to fail without making a serious attempt than to face the possibility of failure following upon admitted effort. Thus they can keep an “idealized image” of themselves alive (2). The student can tell himself, and indeed does tell himself repeatedly, that he is gifted, a quiescent but awesome intellectual dynamo. If he had only exerted himself, his prodigious resources would have allowed him to attain remarkable academic results, but somehow he just could not get started or interested etc. because the subject matter was trivial and intruded on other profundities with which he was occupied or even because he is too “lazy” etc.

These observations, as Berger (4) discovered, are of a piece with much of Alfred Adler’s thought. Consider, for instance, Adler’s discussion of the “able but lazy ploy.”

The lazy child possesses certain advantages. Many children adopt a lazy attitude as a means of easing their situation. Their families usually say: “What couldn’t he do if he were not lazy?” The children content themselves with the recognition that they could accomplish everything if only they were not lazy . . . When such children really do something, their small deed assumes extra significance in their eyes. Lazy children are like tightrope walkers with a net underneath the rope; when they fall, they fall softly. It is less painful to be told that one is lazy than that one is incapable (1, p. 391).

Berger (2, 3) put such insights to empirical tests. He devised a 16-item “Willingness to Accept Limitations” (WAL) questionnaire to assess the extent to which students were willing to accept the limitations endemic to human kind, i.e., to tolerate less than perfection from themselves. The more a subject is unwilling to risk putting his best efforts “on the line,” as it were, insisting that achieve-

ment is genuine only in so far as it comes easily, the *lower* his WAL score. Berger’s initial publication (2) and a cross-validation study (3) support the hypothesis that the attitudes reflected in a low WAL score do indeed interfere with academic performance.

The present paper is concerned with (a) a further cross-validation and (b) an item analysis of the WAL.

METHOD

Subjects. The Ss were the 658 students of an entering Freshman class at a selective private coeducational university of approximately 3,000 undergraduates.

Procedure. The Ss took the WAL as part of a day-long battery of vocational and achievement tests during the fall orientation period.

1. To validate the scale those who scored above the median, i.e., 11 points and higher, and those scoring below the median, 9 points and lower, were selected into Group A (N = 230, including 124 men and 106 women) and Group B (N = 265, including 131 men and 134 women).

Regarding scholastic aptitude, Group B was somewhat superior to Group A. On the Scholastic Aptitude Test-Verbal (SAT-V) they scored 600.8, on the Mathematic (SAT-M), 617. Group A scored 584 and 613, respectively, the difference on the SAT-V being significant at the .05 level.

The validation was against grade point averages (GPA).

2. For the *item analysis* the students who received at the end of their freshman year a GPA of 2.0 or better (N = 66, including 30 men and 36 women) and those receiving 1.00 or less (N = 59, including 44 men and 15 women) out of a maximum of 3 points, were selected. They are the “successful” and the “marginal” groups, respectively.

RESULTS

1. The outcome of the cross-validation is shown in Table I. Group A emerged as reliably superior to Group B, although Group B was slightly superior in scholastic aptitude, as mentioned.

TABLE I. GRADE POINT AVERAGES^a OF SUBJECTS SCORING BELOW (GROUP B) AND ABOVE (GROUP A) THE MEDIAN ON THE WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT LIMITATIONS SCALE

GPA		Group B N = 265	Group A N = 230	t value
2nd semester	M	1.535	1.691	
	SD	.591	.580	2.96*
1st year cumulative	M	1.497	1.626	
	SD	.536	.529	2.68*

^aComputed on a 3-point scale.

*p < .005; one-tailed test.

2. In the item analysis with the 59 “marginal” and 66 “successful” students only 5 of the 16 items proved to discriminate between

the two groups at a .10 level of significance or better. These items together with the distributions for the two groups are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. WAL SCALE ITEMS DISCRIMINATING BETWEEN MARGINAL AND SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS, AND DISTRIBUTION OF THEIR ANSWERS

Item		Marginal N = 59 ^b	Successful N = 66	χ^2
1. It's important for me to do well in everything I choose to do.	T <i>F^a</i>	39 19	58 8	7.72***
2. After a person makes a decision about what he wants to do in life, he should always stick to it rather than change his mind several times.	T <i>F</i>	8 50	3 63	3.31*
4. If one is careful enough, it's possible to avoid making mistakes.	T <i>F</i>	15 43	8 58	3.87**
8. I never had to work hard to get grades in high school and so I never really worked hard to get even better grades	T <i>F</i>	26 32	19 47	3.46*
9. I have done the best I could to get good grades.	T <i>F</i>	17 42	30 36	3.72*

^a"Plus" alternatives from the viewpoint of "willingness to accept limitations" according to Berger's key (2) are italicized.

^bIn the first 4 items only 58 Ss answered, not always the same S failing to answer.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

The alternative for each item in the sense of "willingness to accept limitations" is italicized. Thus we see, e.g., from Item 9 that accepting as "true" the statement, "I have done the best I could to get good grades," is assumed to be a component of the "willingness to accept limitations" and that indeed a larger proportion of successful than of marginal students check this statement as applying to themselves.

The most discriminating item is Item 1. Quite surprisingly, however, it was answered in the direction contrary to the scoring key. Thus, "to do well in everything" was affirmed by a greater proportion of successful than of marginal students.

When the WAL scale was scored according to the published key, the mean scores of the successful and marginal students were not reliably different. However, when it was rescored with the score for Item 1 reversed in accordance with the above findings, the difference

in mean WAL scores between the two groups reached statistical significance in the expected direction ($p < .05$).

The reversal of scoring of Item 1 is in accordance with the author's clinical experience. He finds himself not infrequently confronted with students who attempt to cope with their fear of failure by an elaborate depreciation of the importance of virtually every one of the tasks which confront them. Sometimes this coping takes the form of philosophic attack on the whole educational enterprise or the entire culture or of an "identity crisis". Indeed, Berger actually recognized this point clearly making the "denial of wholeheartedness" a crucial part of the unwillingness to accept limitations. But apparently he did not think that this was applicable to Item 1.

CONCLUSION

It appears from the present study once more that "willingness to accept (one's own) limitations" is a dimension which the clinician might well utilize in his work with students. A cross-validation of Berger's WAL scale against grade point averages yielded a significant difference between higher and lower achieving students, in the expected direction, confirming Berger's results.

In an item analysis only 5 out of 16 items could be considered as having significant discriminating power between successful and marginal students. The most discriminating Item 1 actually was answered in the direction opposite to the original scoring key. When this item was re-scored in accordance with our findings a previously insignificant difference in WAL mean scores for the item-analysis subjects, reached significance. Had this re-scoring been applied to the cross-validation reported here, undoubtedly larger and more significant differences would have been obtained.

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function of a convergence between the person's fictive ideal of individuality (which is always imperfect) and his feeling of unity with other persons. On the plane of psychology, this is very like a way of stating the First and Second commandments of the Law, hallowed equally in the Hebrew and the Christian traditions.²

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²The two commandments of the Law are: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."—Ed. note.