

# 2011 MMPAW Presentation

## Organizational Fixation with Fads

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# Presentation Outline

- I. Setting the Stage
- II. Considerations when facing a fad
- III. Two Examples
  - Engagement
  - Gladwell
- IV. Summary

# Fad vs. Change

- Dictionary definitions of “fad”:
  - “a temporary fashion, notion, manner of conduct, etc., especially one followed enthusiastically by a group.”
  - “a practice or interest followed for a time with exaggerated zeal”
- Connotation: fad = bad
- How do we know it’s “temporary”?
- Why do we “resist fads” while we are encouraged to “embrace change”?

# When is change good (or, at least, reasonable?)

- Some change is based on strong data. Embracing it is a good thing. (Example in I/O: rejecting the doctrine of situational specificity in favor of the doctrine of validity generalization).
- Some change is put forward with appropriate modesty. For example, a leader may say “external constraints (e.g., budget and staffing cuts) require that we do things differently; the status quo is not an option. I’ve consulted broadly, and am putting forward the following as the course we will take. It may be right, it may prove wrong. But its only chance is if we all pursue it together”.

# Prototypic features of change proposals likely to be fads

- Strong claims
- Simple solutions to complex and often longstanding problem
- Provocative, “sexy”, intrinsically interesting. Likely cocktail party conversation.
- Limited evidence
- Heavy reliance on personal charisma of promoter
- Promoter has clear economic interest
- Runs counter to established theoretical frameworks or patterns of empirical data
- Resistant to non-supporting data

# How do we tell fads from sound ideas?

- Of course, all truly revolutionary truly sound ideas also start out as untested and counter to established frameworks.
- But advocates of sound ideas build compelling evidence, and don't expect others to be swayed before that evidence is assembled.
- Being quick to make extraordinary claims is one of the key “warning signs” that rightly get our defenses up.

# Continuum from “psychological” to “not psychological”

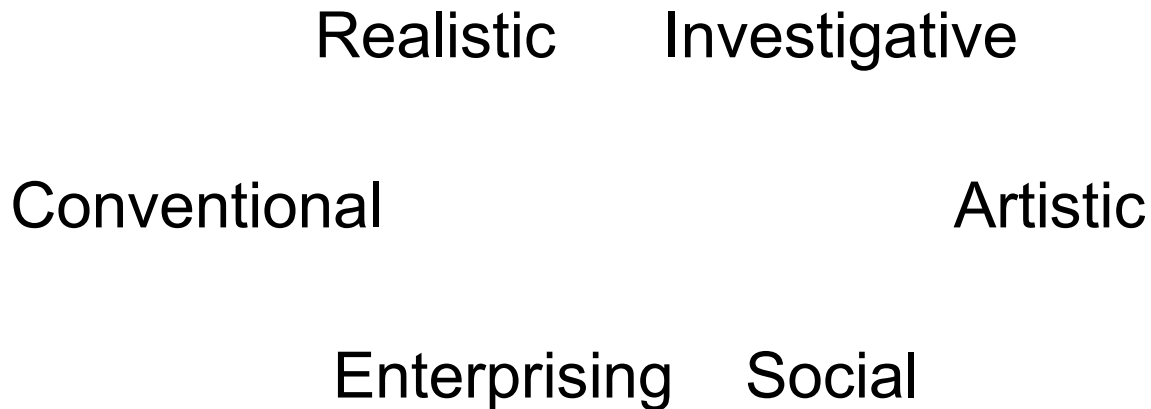
- Some fads are “in scope”: they are psychological in nature. When we encounter them in our work it’s natural for us to be involved. We may be asked for our opinion. Or the fad may be championed by others, and we face the choice of speaking up or being silent.
- Others are not per se psychological in nature. While virtually any issue can benefit from analysis via a psychological lens, fads that are not psychological in nature do not require a response from us.
- Our focus in this workshop is on fads that are psychological in nature.

# Roles in which I/O psychologists encounter fads

- The in-house psychologist
  - fads championed by leaders or other organizational members
  - fads championed by potential vendors
- The consultant
  - asked to provide services related to a fad
  - fads championed by competitors
- The academic
  - asked to evaluate a fad by an outside organization
  - personal choice to invest time in researching a fad

# Who embraces fads, and why?: 1

- Perspective 1: A psychological perspective (Hogan and Stokes, 2006): personality plays a key role
- Relies on the Holland hexagon:



- Managers tend to be ES; I/Os tend to be RI

# ES vs. RI

- ES:
  - Prefer rapid, “good enough” decisions
  - High need for social interaction
  - Extraverts prone to equating activity with productivity
  - A subset of these are striving for power; championing something new may be a route to power
- IR:
  - Prefer high quality data-driven decisions

# Who embraces fads and why?: 2

- Perspective 2: a sociological perspective (Abrahamson, 1996)
- Describes “fashion setters” and “fashion users”. There is a large supply of potential “fashion setters”: consulting firms, business gurus, business schools. They compete in a variety of media for prominence.

# How fashion setters influence fashion users 1: Rationality

- Organizational stakeholders expect managers to manage rationally (i.e., by the most efficient means to important ends).
  - (But both means and ends are often ambiguous...)
- Thus managers are motivated to create the appearance that they are conforming to norms of rationality
- Conforming to “best practice” is a way to create this appearance
- Fashion setters use various forms of rhetoric to create a belief that:
  - a) a particular goal is important,
  - b) a particular technique provides the best way to attain this goal, and
  - c) that other admired organizations are doing this”)

# How fashion setters influence fashion users 2: Progress

- Organizational stakeholders expect ever-improved management techniques, with ambiguous criteria for what constitutes “improvement”
- Thus managers must create the appearance that they are progressive by adopting new and improved managerial techniques
- Bottom line: the norms of rationality and progress lead managers to constantly seek new techniques. Simply due to the passage a time a once-new technique becomes old-fashioned. And sticking with the tried-and-true runs counter to the norm of progress.

# When you combine norms of rationality and progress...

- Fads satisfy competing needs for individuality and novelty, on the one hand, and conformity and traditionalism on the other.
- This means managers demand fads that appear individualistic and novel relative to other managers who are out of fashion.
- At the same time, they maintain some measure of conformity by using techniques used by other managers who are in fashion.
- But: as managers at lower-reputation organizations adopt fashionable techniques, the greater the pressure on managers at higher reputation organizations to re-differentiate themselves, thus perpetuating the fad cycle.

# In Sum...

- Useful to understand these forces influencing managerial attraction to fads
- Rather than a “just say no” approach, we may find it more helpful to
  - Determine whether there is a germ of truth to the underlying idea
  - Ask whether we can help refocus the manager on a better route toward addressing the issue
  - Investigate the motive behind the interest in the fad
    - Addressing a real problem?
    - Striving for novelty?
    - Striving for status differentiation?

# References

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	Initiated from Within the I/O Field	Initiated from Outside of the I/O Field
Essentially Sound Evidence		
Evidence Lacking and Interpretation Misguided		

# Part Two- Considerations when Facing a Fad

- **Considerations when facing a force or fad coming-in to your organization**
- When considering how and what you might do when faced with something moving toward your organization that looks to you like it might be a fad, the following set of twelve considerations can assist you and your colleagues chart a course of action with due attention paid to what, why and how.
  - 1. Who's Driving
  - 2. How Potent
  - 3. Why Join
  - 4. Where Join
  - 5. Your Role
  - 6. Needed Capital
  - 7. Professional Issues
  - 8. Duration
  - 9. Worst Case
  - 10. Current Priorities
  - 11. Who Else Is Joining
  - 12. Potential Leverage

# Part Two – When facing a fad

- **1. Who is driving this inside the Company?**
- One of your first considerations would be to assess if you even have a choice to make? If the driver is in a comparable level position to yours, you may have a host of response options. However, if the driver is a person in a position senior to yours, your choices might be limited. Those choices might be further limited if this person also happens to reside within the same functional organization as you do. In the end, you need to identify the originator or originators behind the movement and inventory their assets in light of what might be possible for them to accomplish.
- **2. What is this person's degree of potency inside the Company?**
- By nature organizations have high potential, fast-track people. In all organizations there are some individuals who have contributed much over time. Often, those individuals are accorded some degree of autonomy and freedom to act. Equally plausible, on the other hand, is the fact organizations employ people who might be viewed less favorably. These might be people who were once high-potential but are no longer. So, assess and categorize the influencer. Determine if the person is viewed as a gadfly, outlier or dilettante; or, as a highly credible, well respected professional known for vision, risk-taking and foresight.
- **3. Why join this person or why not join this person?**
- Inventory your previous experiences working with the person who is driving this within the Company. Review what you can learn about others' experiences when working with this individual. Some people are generous, above-board and straight-forward. Others are not. Some people have a strong likelihood of continued career success. Others do not. Be aware of the cluster of attributes that will accompany partnering with this person.

# Part Two – When facing a fad

- **4. Where/when would you be able to join this person?**
- If the other individual has or is likely to solicit your input and possible participation, where do you fit-in? How might you add-value to the movement, as articulated by this other individual? Does that assessment wash with your personal assessment? And what type of positioning might be accorded? Do you anticipate having to struggle for a meaningful role? Might there be ownership conflicts? Does any vibe within you make you feel uncomfortable about joining the movement? Or, joining this person?
- **5. What role might you have vis-à-vis this other person?**
- As you get more micro, what specific role is being outlined by this other individual for you? Or, is role definition left as an open item with anticipation of a future discussion? Do you have the opportunity to write-out the type of role you would most prefer? Or does such authorship threaten the person driving this movement?
- **6. What political capital might you be expending if you join?**
- How solid is the data behind the movement? Might there be any damage to people associated with this initiative? Would others question your judgment, professionalism, maturity or influence should this movement turn sour at some point? Might you have to negotiate and give-up anything to secure the type of meaningful role you most prefer? Can you live with that trade-off?
- **7. Are any professional/ethical matters entwined with this fad?**
- Without question, your professional and ethical assessments need careful review and reflection. Organizationally and professionally speaking, there is likely no risk in taking a contrarian view of movements for which there exists (or could exist) any hint of impropriety. In fact, the opposite could be true. If the issue is black and white, you absolutely must speak-up and call-out the ethical or professional concerns. There is organizational risk in not doing so if such exist or might evolve as things move forward in the company.

# Part Two – When facing a fad

- **8. What do you envision might be the duration of this inside of the Company?**
  - Is it possible for you to attach any estimate of the longevity of this movement? Can you see this migrating into different functional areas within your organization? Can you envision any colleagues in any geographic or functional areas of your company who might find this movement compelling? Can you identify any clear business outcomes or values to accrue to your Company if this gets traction? On the other hand, does this smell and look like a short duration movement? Are the people behind the movement credible? Are the people driving this credentialed? Does research evidence exist supporting this? Do you see your Company's line people taking-quickly to this? Have you learned if this message resonates well with line management in your Company?
- **9. What might occur that could reflect unfavorably upon this fad/movement?**
  - Take some time to think-through some "worst" case scenarios. The objective of the scenario planning is not to be negative but to be well informed. You have more than likely witnessed things which took a bad turn or run into resistance which should have been predicted. You do not want to be caught holding the bag if things start to unravel. And this becomes more salient the more central role you might have or be taking with the movement.
- **10. How might this fad impact your priorities and those of your department?**
  - Do you presently have any work assignments that relate to this movement? Are you aware of any departmental priorities that relate to this movement? Might working on this take-away from time you do not have to spare? Might working on this be an asset for any current or near-term assignments you have in your queue? Should this movement be main-stream within your work portfolio? If not, how far away is this from your core priorities? The more tangential, the easier it should be to take the right decision on your involvement.

# Part Two – When facing a fad

- **11. Who might jump-on this fad and what is their potency in the Company?**
- What types of people have reacted positively to this, or might react positively to this movement? Is the nature of supporters of this a known or unknown variable at the present time? Do you have any intelligence about the nature of people who are behind this movement? Do those people sit in influential positions within your Company? Or is there no trend to discern relative to the appeal this has for the types of people employed in your Company? Consider people with technical and scientific training; might this appeal to their ways of thinking or doing things? In a similar vein, what impact might this movement have on?
  - Numbers-oriented people?
  - Marketing people?
  - Sales people?
  - Manufacturing people?
  - IT people?
  - Legal people?
  - Governmental and agency people?
  - Social service people?
  - Any age-related trends to be discerned?
  - Any cultural or ethnic background trends to note?

# Part Two – When facing a fad

- **12. What leverage might this fad offer or provide to you and your agenda?**
- Movements, by definition, can take-on a life of their own. Your schedule is more than full already. Consequently, getting involved, dragged-in or volunteering to join the movement has important implications for your ability to complete other important assignments. Might this movement or trend impact your work on...?
  - Selection Testing
  - On-Boarding?
  - Individual Assessment?
  - Job Attitude Measurement?
  - Performance Appraisals?
  - Succession Planning?
  - Human Capital Planning?
  - Metrics and Outcome Research?
  - Personnel research?
  - Training?
  - Management development?
  - Executive Development?
  - Organizational Change?
  - Organizational Effectiveness?
  - Coaching?
  - Executive Consulting?

# Part Three

- Specific Examples
  - Engagement
  - Gladwell

# What fits where in your judgment?

Engagement & Gladwell

	Initiated from Within the I/O Field	Initiated from Outside of the I/O Field
Essentially Sound Evidence		
Evidence Lacking or Interpretation Misguided		

# What fits where?

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Essentially Sound Evidence	-Engagement	
Evidence Lacking or Interpretation Misguided		

# Employee Engagement

- Who is behind Employee Engagement?
  - One could suggest executives and managers as much as researchers
- Where did it originate?
  - As much from the practitioner community as the academic community
- When did it become so much the rage?
  - Seeded during 1990's which intensified and grew into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Why has it taken such a strong hold upon our field?
  - Global, intense competitive pressures for business survival; much less growth
- So, is Employee Engagement a fad?
  - Certainly it shows the market demand characteristics of a fad

# Employee Engagement – Some Definitions

- Academic

- Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir 2002 put forward ideas about active engagement and looked at it in terms of high levels of activity, initiative and responsibility.
- Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick 2004 suggested engagement represents a high internal motivational state.
- Kahn 1990 it involves the extent to which a person is psychologically present in the performance of their work roles.
- Wellins & Concelman 2005 suggested engagement is the illusive force that motivates employees to higher levels of performance.

- Consultancies

- Gallup – Engagement is the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work.
- Hewitt- Engagement is defined by the state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organization or group (Say, Stay, Strive)
- Kenexa – The extent to which employees are motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are willing to apply discretionary effort to accomplishing tasks important to the achievement of organizational goals

# Employee Engagement – Antecedents & Consequences

- Antecedents
  - Working Conditions
    - Career Opportunities
    - Nature of the work
      - Challenge
      - Variety
    - Nature of Leadership
      - Transitional
      - Transformational
    - Market Forces in the Economy?
  - Employees Dispositions
    - Organizational Citizenship
- Consequences
  - Organizational Indices
    - Profitability at unit and organizational level
    - Sales
    - Shareholder Returns
    - Employee Retention
    - Employee Productivity
    - Customer Satisfaction
    - Accidents
  - Individual Indices
    - Job Performance
    - Intentions to Stay

# Employee Engagement – Macey & Schneider 2008

- Psychological State
  - Job Involvement
  - Organizational Commitment
  - Employee Empowerment
- Performance Construct
  - Effort
  - Prosocial Behavior
  - Organizational Citizenship Behavior
- Disposition or Trait
  - Conscientiousness
  - Positive Affect
- Combos

# Employee Engagement

- Macey & Schneider Propositions, as published. 2008. (pp. 8-23).
  - “1 Satisfaction when assessed as satiation is not in the same conceptual space as engagement. Satisfaction when assessed as feelings of energy, enthusiasm, and similarly positive affective states becomes a facet of engagement.”
  - “2 Organizational commitment is an important facet of the state of engagement when it is conceptualized as positive attachment to the larger organizational entity and measured as a willingness to exert energy in support of the organization, to feel pride as an organizational member, and to have personal identification with the organization.”
  - “3 Job Involvement (including task engagement and job commitment) as traditionally conceptualized and assessed is an important facet of the psychological state of engagement.”
  - “4 Feelings of empowerment that connote an inclination to action vis-à-vis work (feelings of self-efficacy and control and impact from one’s action) comprise another facet of state engagement.”

# Employee Engagement

- Macey & Schneider Propositions, as published. 2008. (pp. 8-23).
  - “5 Positive Affect associated with the job and the work setting connoting or explicitly indicating feelings of persistence, vigor, energy, dedication, absorption, enthusiasm, alertness, and pride occupies a central position in the conceptualization and measurement of state engagement.”  
Conversely, measures of psychological states that are devoid of direct and explicit indicants of affective and energetic feeling are not measures of state engagement in whole or part.”
  - “6 State engagement additionally refers to the investment of the self in the person’s work and the perceived importance of work outcomes and organization membership to that person’s identity.”
  - “7 Engagement behaviors include innovative behaviors, demonstrations of initiative, proactively seeking opportunities to contribute, and going beyond what is, within specific frames of reference, typically expected or required.”

# Employee Engagement

- Macey & Schneider Propositions as published. 2008. (pp. 8-23).
  - “8 Engagement behavior includes actions that, given a specific frame of reference, go beyond what is typical, usual, ordinary, and/or ordinarily expected.”
  - “9 Role expansion, behavior that reveals attention to a wider range of tasks than is typical or usual, is a facet of engagement behavior.”
  - “10 Behavioral engagement is adaptive behavior intended to serve as organizational purpose, whether to defend and protect the status quo in response to actual or anticipated threats or to change and/or promote change in response to actual or anticipated events.”

# Employee Engagement

- Macey & Schneider Propositions, as published. 2008. (pp. 8-23).
- - “11 Trait engagement comprises a number of interrelated facets, including trait positive affectivity, conscientiousness, the proactive personality, and the autotelic personality. These all suggest the tendency to experience work in positive, active, and energetic ways and to behave adaptively (i.e., displaying effort by going beyond what is necessary and initiating change to facilitate organizationally relevant outcomes).”
  - “12 State and behavioral engagement are more likely under some conditions than others with the nature of the work people do and the leadership under which they work central to their choosing to be additionally and behaviorally engaged.”

# Employee Engagement

- Macey & Schneider Propositions, as published. 2008. (pp. 8-23).
  - “13 Feelings of trust mediate the relationship between leadership behavior and behavioral engagement such that feelings of trust is the psychological state between leader behavior and behavioral engagement. Thus, leaders create trust in followers, and it is the trust followers experience that enables behavioral engagement.”
  - “14 Trait engagement interacts with work and organizational conditions to produce state and behavioral engagement. Alternatively, work conditions not only have a main effect on state and behavioral engagement, but they also may moderate the relationship between trait engagement and state engagement as well as relationships between state and behavioral engagement.”

# Employee Engagement - Commentaries

- Newman & Harrison

- 1. Employee engagement comprises no new conceptual content...it is most appropriately specified as a higher order latent construct.
  - “Much effort is spent parsing among established constructs (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job involvement, positive affect and affectivity, and proactive and citizenship behavior) with regard to their partial conceptual overlap with the newer label.” (p. 31)
- 2. “The utility of a state engagement construct depends upon evidence for its discriminative validity from related higher order constructs, namely overall job attitude.” (p. 31)
- 3. The term engagement...can be parsimoniously conceptualized as a second-order factor of widely studied work behaviors, including focal job performance, withdrawal behavior, and citizenship behavior. (p. 31)
  - State engagement is redundant with the established, higher order job attitude construct.
- “We propose that the label engagement can be applied meaningfully to the higher order construct underlying the covariation among job performance, citizenship behavior, and withdrawal.” (p. 34)

# Employee Engagement - Commentaries

- Harter & Schmidt
  - “The newer emphasis on absorption, passion and affect may, in fact, better reflect the reason work attitudes matter to organizations...A key question is whether the newer constructs of engagement have discriminant validity relative to the older constructs of job satisfaction and organizational commitment that have been studied for decades.” (p. 36)
  - The Macey & Schneider distinction between work attributes and the construct state engagement appear to be empirically colinear once appropriate methods are used for correcting for biases due to measurement error.
  - “Newer and more accurate methods of correcting for bias due to measurement error will likely show that there is considerable redundancy in the constructs measured in work attitude surveys. If so, then what this means is that for a wide variety of job attitudes measures, conceptual distinctions such as those examined in such detail by Macey and Schneider may not have differentiated meaning in the minds of employees responding to surveys.” (p. 38)

# Employee Engagement - Commentaries

- Saks
  - “Employee engagement is made up of many different wines and spirits all mixed up into a perfect blend—a kind of cocktail construct. However, if the meaning of engagement “bleeds” into so many other more developed constructs, then engagement just becomes an umbrella term for whatever one wants it to be.” (p. 40)
  - Macey & Schneider use three sub parts to define engagement. Those include state, trait and behavior. Yet, in doing this, they are not clear which of the three should be measured and be the focus of future research.
  - “By defining engagement as a multidimensional aggregate concept compromising older and more developed constructs, Macey and Schneider have ended up exactly where they began—an imprecise definition and a repackaging of other constructs.” (p. 42)

# Employee Engagement - Commentaries

- Pugh & Dietz
  - “Macey and Schneider frame the construct of employee engagement at the individual level of analysis, but much of the interest in the practitioner and consulting communities and several influential academic studies in this domain are framed and conducted at the organizational level.” (p. 44)
  - Macey and Schneider leave open the issue of level of analysis.
  - “...We provide a brief rationale for why it may be valuable to conceptualize engagement at the organizational level of analysis...” (p. 44)

# Employee Engagement – Where Are We Today?

- Important and meaningful differences exist in how the construct of employee engagement is defined within the I-O Psychology community.
- It seems likely theory building and theory testing focused upon employee engagement are both being compromised due to the definitional uncertainty.
- Research and debate about employee engagement seems likely to continue because of the strong current organization-driven demand to have (or need?) an engaged workforce.
- More practitioner–academic partnership research seem very likely.
- SIOP can be expected to continue to serve as a forum for dialogue and debate addressing employee engagement.
- Importantly, it appears executives and managers will continue to find the construct powerful. So unless radical change happens in the global economic landscape, the demand for insights on employee engagement should persist.
- For executives and managers of today, employee engagement might represent the (good or bad) employee “attitude” of yesteryear.

# Engagement

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# Engagement

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# What fits where?

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Essentially Sound Evidence	-Engagement	
Evidence Lacking or Interpretation Misguided		-Gladwell

# Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers"

- Focal message: success is heavily affected by luck, circumstance, and effort, rather than by ability ("talent"), as is widely believed
- Since ability does not determine success, its use in selection decisions is misplaced.
  - Endorses random selection above a threshold (say, the mean)
- Examines "outliers"
  - Extremely successful individuals: what makes them successful?
  - Highly talented individuals who did not succeed: why not?

# Much to Admire

- The book is extremely well-written, with vivid and fascinating examples
- Makes a strong case for the role of luck, circumstance, and effort
  - e.g., Canadian NHL hockey players disproportionately born Jan. – March: as kids, those born earlier in the year are eligible for organized league play earlier than those born later
  - e.g., Asian culture values academic achievement; youth subsequently devote more effort to learning new material and to persisting in working on problems

# Straw Man: Ability is the Sole Determinant of Success

- Who claims ability is the sole determinant of success?
- Showing that luck, circumstance, and effort do matter doesn't preclude an important role for ability
  - Of Canadians born Jan-March, why do only a few end up in the NHL? Could it be ability?
  - While Asian-American do score markedly better on average than Whites on SAT Math (about .5 SD), the within-group variability on the SAT is about the same for Whites and Asian-Americans

# Evidence Offered for the Irrelevance of Ability 1: The Terman Study of Genius

- Terman identified 1500 kids with IQs above 130; they've been followed now for 75 years!
- Gladwell: while many were successful, many were not. Therefore, IQ isn't what matters.
  - Based on study comparing 100 most successful and 100 least successful. Big differentiators were persistence, self-confidence, and parental encouragement
- That some didn't fare well doesn't address whether ability is relevant
  - For example, study participants earned on average twice the national average

# **Evidence Offered for the Irrelevance of Ability 2: Nobel Prize winners**

- Gladwell documents the undergrad institutions of Nobel Prize winners
- Many attended “good”, but not “great” schools
- Therefore, he argues, having the level of ability needed to get into a “good” school is all one needs: more isn’t better
- ...but might there not be extraordinarily gifted students at “good” schools?

# **Evidence Offered for the Irrelevance of Ability 3: Affirmative Action Recipients**

- Gladwell describes U. Michigan study of Black and White law school grads
  - Blacks have lower mean LSATs
  - But career outcomes are indistinguishable
  - Therefore ability (at least above a threshold) doesn't matter
- ...but the outcomes studied were passing the bar exam (which virtually all do), career satisfaction, and salary (minority grads of prestigious law schools are in high demand)
  - Study authors acknowledged that none of their outcomes assessed "competence as a lawyer"

# Is There Relevant Data Out There?

- Sure: the I/O literature addresses the “threshold” question
- Coward and Sackett (1990)
  - 174 studies of GATB-job performance relationship
  - Departure from linearity at chance levels
- Arneson and Sackett (2010)
  - Army Project A data (N=5000)
  - 3 Education data sets predicting college performance
    - N’s of 6000 (NELS88), 15,000 (Project Talent), and 165,000 (College Board SAT data)
  - None show evidence of threshold
  - In fact, slope is steeper at high end!!

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# Organizational Fixation with Fads

**–THANK**

**»YOU**

Kevin & Paul