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INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ROBERT STERNBERG

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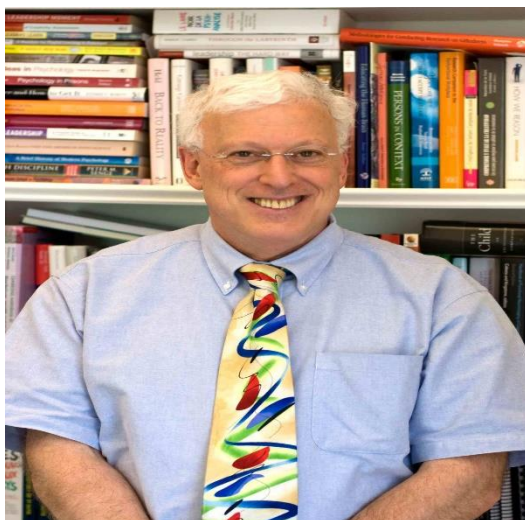
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Interviewer: Tania Vicente Viana

Who is Professor Robert Sternberg?

Among his major contributions to Psychology, Professor Robert Sternberg created The Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, a conception of intelligence more broadly and focused on the challenges of reality, beyond the analytical skills so emphasized at school. He is a Psychology professor at Cornell University and a past president of the American Psychological Association [APA]. Professor Robert Sternberg has won more than two dozen professional awards; and has been ranked, in the APA Monitor on Psychology, as one of the top 100 psychologists of the 20th century. He has written more than 1,800 articles, book chapters, and books.

Tania Viana: My first question for you is about intelligence. Do you believe in the existence of intelligent life... outside school? Are good grades really a synonym for intelligence?



Robert Sternberg: I don't think that good grades are a synonym for intelligence. Good grades are important for showing that you've learned material and that you work hard, that you're a diligent student. But I have been focusing in recent years, the last few years, on what I call adaptive intelligence, which is intelligence as it should be defined: as adaptation to the environment. And, if you look at the kinds of problems that really require intelligent thinking, things like what I would hope would be important, preserving the Brazilian Rainforest, not just for the reason of it's nice to have trees, but for the country and for the world.

Or if you look at the importance of controlling pollution, and the purity of our air and water, and reducing climate change, and reducing poverty, and educating as many students as possible, as well as possible, those are really important problems for the world to solve. And, so, my issue has been that the kinds of things that we teach, but more importantly, test for, in school, are not always such a good match to the kinds of things we need to do in terms of adapting to the real world environment.

So, what can happen – and it's happened in our country – is we have very bright leaders, who many of whom went to top universities and got good grades in school and had high test scores. But when it comes to solving the real problems of the world, the ones that require not just school intelligence, but adaptive intelligence, sometimes they're not only not the best, but they're actually quite bad at it. And, right now, we have a challenge, for example, in the United States, which will sound familiar to you, perhaps – I don't know, maybe it won't – of a political candidate who wants to be a dictator. And what do you... how do you teach students to have the critical thinking you apply to the knowledge they have to say: "This man doesn't want to serve us. He's only looking out for himself. He's looking out for his power and his money and his worshipers and this is not the person... This is not a person who wants to lead a country". This is a person who, in my opinion, you know, in our country, is a narcissist. He's looking to consolidate power.

And that's what to me adaptive intelligence is about. Did you see a guy like that running for president and you immediately say: "Yeah, he's charismatic and maybe he's a good speaker". But he's not a leader who wants to make things in the country better. So, I give these examples to emphasize that, for me, intelligence isn't about grades. It's not about IQ¹ tests. It's not about Mensa². It's about how we solve the problems that are very pressing in the world that, right now, we're not solving. And sometimes, not even addressing, and, other times, making worse from what I understand. You know, there have been times when the situation in the Brazilian Rainforest was getting worse. Well, those are the people we want. We want people who will make things better in our country.

Tania Viana: About human intelligence. What do we need to be successful in our lives? Could you explain to us your ideas about Triarchic Theory of Intelligence?

Robert Sternberg: Yeah. So, the Triarchic Theory was the theory I proposed in... I guess 1984. And it was reflective of my thinking in 1984. Some people propose a theory and stay with it. I don't. I tend to move on. So, the way I see things today draws on that theory, but it goes a bit beyond it. So, first of all, the basic idea, then and now, is that we often look for the wrong things when we say someone is intelligent. So, what do we look for? Do they get good grades? Do they do well on tests? Are they good student types? You know, pat on the head. They're very good students.

And what? The abilities that are involved in that are abstract analytical ability. You can think abstractly and having a good knowledge base. And I sometimes give the example of a student I had: Alice – which is not a real name – who was a very good student type. And we admitted her to our graduate program, because she was such a great student. And, when she came to the program, she was really a good student too. But, what turned out is that, although she was good at memorizing textbooks and memorizing stuff, and sometimes analyzing it, she didn't have any ideas of her own.

And, in life, not just in school, but it really in life... These days, the world is changing so darn

¹ Intelligence Quotient (IQ).

² Society for high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) people.

fast. I mean, in this country, every day brings some kind of new challenge and some new headache. You really need to be creative. You really need to say: “Hey, look the ideas of 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 50 years ago...”. Like we have a political candidate – not mentioning his name – who wants to bring this back to the way he imagines things were in the 1950’s and some people say: “Yeah, you know, the world is falling apart”. But, you know, this imaginary world of the 1950’s... that's not being creative. Creative is saying that the world has changed. We face new problems. We need new ideas and compelling ideas.

So, creativity is really important and it's not only important in politics. It's important in your personal relationships, like with your husband, or your wife, or your boyfriend, or your girlfriend or your kids. You know, sometimes you have a problem that you just can't stop. You know, I was just telling you before we started, how my kids are noisy, and I told them to be quiet. But will they be quiet? You know, sometimes it's getting them to be quiet when I'm giving a talk, which is why I went upstairs. ‘Cause I can't fit you later.

Or it could be you have a problem with your husband or wife, and you keep having the same problem. It just keeps coming back again and again and you realize that if I'm ever going to solve this problem, I need a creative solution, because I've already tried that solution 20 times and it never worked before. You know, he is still drinking; he's still gambling; he's still going out with other women; he's still getting home late; he's not showing up for work, whatever it is, or she. So, you need to be creative to get through life. Now, of course, my wife is perfect, and we don't have any problems with her. But, you know, others maybe. She has plenty of problems with me. I mean, to live with me, she has to be really creative, because I'm such a pain. I mean I even can't stand myself. But the point is that, in real life, you need to be creative. And IQ tests and often schools don't value that.

The third set of skills, that's really important, are practical skills, common sense. And IQ tests sure don't measure common sense. You know, I teach at a pretty good University. I've taught at Yale, I'm teaching at Cornell. I was a student at Yale and Stanford, and they are all full of professors who are very high in IQ, but really notably lacking in common sense. I mean, like sometimes it's just extraordinary and students too.

And, to get through life, you need to have common sense. There are practical, in terms of several studies in Brazil and Brazilian street kids. And the studies found that these kids, who were doing very poorly in school, who were living on the street, when you gave them problems in Math, that were nonacademic problems, but problems about the kinds of Math they needed to make money on the street. They actually did very well on the problems. They had no problem solving them. But when you put them in a classroom and gave them analogous problems, and in an academic context, they couldn't do them. And, so the point is: that so large extent. Intelligence is contextual.

The people who are good in school, as we see with some of our Harvard and Yale educated politicians... The people who are good in school often are not very great in real life and we have some extremely highly educated politicians, and you listen to them, and you wonder: how in the world did they have the IQ to get into these schools? And you realize it's not about IQ. They have the IQ. They just don't have the common sense and they're imposing the lack of common sense on the rest of us. So, it's important to have the school intelligence. But it's also important to have creative and practical abilities and skills and to have a fourth component, which is wisdom, which is seeking a common good.

I think the biggest problem today is lack of wisdom and that is we live in an age, maybe it's

different in Brazil. But I find, in the US³ – and there's actually been research on this – that people are more narcissistic, more self-absorbed, than they've been before. And I think our culture rewards that. And, you know, charismatic and sometimes toxic personalities, who “it's me, me, me and more me and me”. They're often rewarded for their toxic behavior.

And I think the most important thing for schools to teach is that the world, you know, has challenges and we're in it together. We all have to work together to make the world better. And if you have a situation like in the United States [US], where there are people in so-called red states and blue states, conservatives and liberals, who can't even talk to each other. You're on the way downhill. You know, it's like I look at the people from red states that I can't even understand what they're thinking. I mean, they want a dictator as their next president, and they look at us and they say: “I can't understand the way he's thinking”. And, so, people need somehow to look for a common good, not just for their own self or their own group. So, adaptive intelligence is making the world a better place.

Tania Viana: Professor, I think common good is something we need it yesterday. I have a question here in Sternberg's style. We recently had a health and humanitarian tragedy in the whole world, a social problem that also involved human values, as the common good. What lessons can the education system learn from the pandemic of Covid-19?

Robert Sternberg: I think there are several lessons we can learn from Covid-19. Lesson number one is that problems we think are over are not over. We were doing research with kids in rural Kenya, so these were kids who grew up in very economically challenging circumstances, and they – what we were saying similar to the work with the Brazilian street children – It's these kids who grow up near Lake Victoria in Tanzania, Kenya... they're smart. They have skills. They're just not what we're valuing in school or measuring on their tests.

So, we did a study and we asked ourselves: “What are the skills they really need to do to adapt to their environment?” Because they don't live here, in the US, they live in their environment. And we found that one very important skill was identifying natural herbal medicines. That could be used to combat parasitic illnesses like malaria, hookworm, woodworm, schistosomiasis, but a whole variety of sort of what you might call jungle illnesses, tropical illnesses. And the kids, who we found, scored really quite poorly on IQ tests. We're extremely knowledgeable and how to use natural herbal medicine to combat these parasitic infections.

And when I give a talk on this, I give some examples of items from our adaptive intelligence test, adaptation to their environment. And no one here couldn't answer any of the questions at all, because we don't have that problem, but they don't have our problems. So, when we give them IQ tests' problems, we're essentially saying: “We want you to solve our problems which are the IQ tests' problems”. And, if they were giving IQ tests, they might say: “Well, why don't you try solving our problems”? And we wouldn't do well in those either. Now, when we did the work, some people said: “Hey, look, okay. They're good at these sort of medical knowledge problems and, you know, knowing how to recognize and treat illnesses, but they're in a sort of developing society. We're a much more sophisticated post-industrial society”. So, those skills, we don't need those. So, your point is not well-taken, because they're good at skills that don't matter.

So, then the Covid Pandemic comes along, and it turns out the skills those rural kids in Kenya have are really valuable for dealing with an illness. And some of their brilliant politicians and their leaders and celebrities with their high IQs and good education make a total mess of the pandemic. So, one lesson we can learn is to respect people, including kids. From more

³ US stands for United States.

indigenous environments, from environments that are not as industrialized, because they may actually have skills we don't have, that would have been useful for us when the pandemic hit. So, one thing I think is about respect for people who have skills that we have undervalued but that remain important.

The second lesson is many of our leaders politicized a medical problem. And adaptive intelligence is about working together because, you know, real world intelligence is almost always collective. It's always people working together for a common good. But they didn't do that. They turned the pandemic into a political football to sort of get their base, their voters emotional. And the result was many people died or got very sick, including some of them, some of the people who died of Covid were the ones going around and saying: "Don't wear a mask, don't socially distance, don't get a vaccine, don't pay attention, this is all a trick". And then they died of Covid. So talk, it's almost like evolutionary, you know, they were adaptively unfit and they were dead. So, I think a second lesson is intelligence isn't about your grades in school, your SATs⁴, is when there's a real-world problem like Covid. Can you work with other people constructively, at least to address it? Rather than pretending it doesn't exist. And that's true for other things like global climate change, and air pollution, and water pollution as well. So, that's the second lesson.

And I think a third lesson is that we can see how different real intelligence is – adaptive intelligence – from what we're teaching in school. Like, if you look at a problem, like a pandemic. You can see why just having a school, a lot of schooling, does not always give you the skills to solve those problems. It's not multiple choice. It's an evolving problem. As soon as you think you have the problem, there's a new problem. There's a new variant of Covid. The problem... it's sometimes not even clear what the problem is. We need to work together in groups to solve it. It takes a long time to solve it. It's emotionally charged. The stakes are high.

So, if you look at the characteristics of a real-world problem with Covid, they're almost the opposite of the problems you find on many school exams and on a test to get into our colleges or Mensa, for that matter. So, I think what it points out is that, unless you want people to fall to the pandemic, you need to develop the adaptive intellectual skills, the creative skills. To say "What we've done isn't working. We need to find new solutions". The analytical skills to say: "Here's why it isn't working, here's we need, what we need to do better". The practical skills to work with other people on real problems and to convince them to listen to you and the wisdom to say we're all in this together. We can't just say this is a... You know, it's like what people did with AIDS⁵: that's a problem for gay people or that's a problem for people in Africa. Well, that sure didn't work very well. To realize that what you hope will be just a problem somewhere else, in this case, you know, maybe it'll stay in China or something. We live in a global world. It's going to come here.

So, the America first mentality or the any country first mentality, you know, Brazil first, Columbia first or Argentina, it doesn't work anymore because any problem in one country very quickly becomes a problem in another country. Any problem for one group very quickly becomes a problem for another group. So, I think that's another lesson. That we learned from the pandemic.

Tania Viana: Professor, I believe your ideas of Successful Intelligence are based on your own

⁴ SAT stands for "Scholastic Aptitude Test".

⁵ AIDS stands for "Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome".

life. Is that true? Could you talk about it to us?

Robert Sternberg: Yeah, sure. So, almost everything I study is based on my own life. I mean, you know, people motivate themselves in different ways. And what motivates me, the reason I became a psychologist is I do so many things badly. It's to understand why I do them badly. So, what got me started in Psychology? It was that, as a child, a young child, Elementary School, you know, grades. When I was six years old, seven years old, eight years old, nine years old... I did poorly on IQ tests. So, they weren't going to take me into Mensa, and it's, you know, there might have been many reasons I did poorly on IQ Tests. I know one of them was test anxiety, but I just didn't respond well to the test. And so, as a result, my teacher thought I was kind of stupid, and then I thought I was kind of stupid and the teachers treated me like I was kind of stupid. And I did kind of stupid work. And they were kind of happy that I was doing kind of stupid work and I was kind of happy that they were kind of happy. Everyone was happy. And that's what happens to a lot of kids, who may become from alternative backgrounds.

You know, my parents weren't educated. My parents never graduated from High School. My father sold buttons, my mother was a housewife. She was a refugee from Austria. And I think a lot of people, you know, most of the people where I lived... their parents went to college, They were executives. At least they were, they were higher class than we were, we were, you know, like "the bottom of the barrel"⁶, we were not a classy family. And I think the kids like me, who are sort of first generation, when I went to college, it's a challenge, because you don't have role models. And so, I was interested from when I was young and what... and what intelligence is. Why am I so dumb?

And so, I started in Elementary School, becoming interested in intelligence. And, then, when I was in seventh grade, 13 years old, which ironically is the same age as our triplets are right now. Our triplets are 13 years old. The same age I was. I did a Science project on IQ testing to try to find that: why was I so stupid? And I got into trouble. I got into trouble because part of my project was to develop my own IQ test, which I did, the famous "Sternberg Test of Mental Abilities", which nobody's ever heard of. I no longer, it's long gone. But the other part was I found the Stanford-Binet intelligence test in the adult section of the library of my hometown.

So, I thought: "Hey, this is great. I can get some experience giving this test to my classmates". So, I took the items from this book called "Measuring Intelligence", by Terman and Merrill. And I decided to test some classmates. So, in order to show how just is that...— it's not only my cognitive intelligence that's low, it's also my social intelligence. I... there was this girl I was romantically interested in and I thought a good way to "break the ice"⁷ with her would be to give her an IQ test. So, this turned out to be a particularly rotten idea.

I don't know why, at the time, I thought it was a good idea, but I did. I gave her the IQ test: she did well, really well. That's the good news. The bad news is that the relationship never got started. But the interesting thing was and, we were both 13 at the time, and now, as you can see, I'm an older adult⁸ and we're still friends. I still am in touch with her. She lives in the state I was from, New Jersey. So, at least, we're friends, if not romantically involved. We never became romantically involved.

So, then I gave the test to a guy I knew from Cub Scouts, Scouts. And that didn't go well either, because he apparently told his mother that I gave him an IQ test, and his mother was outraged. And complained to the guidance counselor at the school, and the guidance counselor was

⁶ The lowest possible condition or level.

⁷ To remove the tension at a first meeting.

⁸ Adults aged 65 years and older.

outraged and complained to the school system. And, so, during second period Social Studies class – I still remember the event – I was called out of class. I had no idea. Why are they calling me out of class? And I go to the guidance counselor's office and this head school system psychologist... He's there and he yells at me for 50 minutes for giving IQ tests. And he said: "If you ever bring this book into school again, I personally will burn it".

And one thing you'd never do with teenagers is tell them: "You'll do this. You're gonna... you're gonna get in big trouble", because that's exactly what makes them want to do it. So, I said: "Good. This must be really interesting, if you're so, you know, if you're going to burn the book and... Great". I mean, this must... this must be what I should do. So, I continued to study intelligence secretly and then came out in the open later on.

And I've studied ever since. And every problem I've ever studied has been something I do poorly. I got into studying creativity when I ran out of ideas. I started studying wisdom when I gave bad advice to a student. I started studying love when I was in a failing relationship. I pretty much study things that I don't do well. So that's how I decide what to study: things that are hard for me.

Tania Viana: Professor, do you still have your test, the one you developed?

Robert Sternberg: When I was 13? No. No, I think it's long gone and it's for the best. And I'll tell you why it's for the best. Because the test I developed when I was 13 was a bad test. I thought mistakenly that the problem was that the tests... they didn't have enough different kinds of tests. And, so, my test had lots and lots of different kinds of items, but what I didn't realize... that, before my time, in 1904, Charles Spearman discovered that all of these kinds of school like test items measure the same thing. They all measure what he called General Intelligence.

And my breakthrough – for me, or one of my breakthroughs, or minor breakthroughs, if it was that – was realizing that the problem is that what they're calling general is general to academic kinds of enterprises, but it's not general to real-world enterprises. For example, it's not going to get you a date. It's not going to get your marriage to last. It's not going to put food on your table. It's not going to make you friends. It's just different. So, it's not to say school intelligence or academic intelligence is unimportant. Is to say it's only part of the story and I didn't yet realize that when I was 13. And that's another thing that's important, if I may mention it, because I referred to it before. And that is: my theory of intelligence has changed many times since I first proposed it.

I first proposed it in a book: a theory when I was – it was based on my dissertation – I was 27 and that's when I was an Assistant Professor⁹. Yeah. And I didn't stay with the theory because I realized the theory was too narrow, but it... the point is that we should never get stuck on our ideas. Not when we're in school, not when we're 27, not when we're in 37, not when we're 47, or 57, or 67. What we need to realize – and I think a lot of academics don't – is that all our ideas, at some level, are wrong. And so, no matter how good we think our ideas are, we can always do better, and, so, it's important always to be open. I sometimes say to my students: "If it ever reaches the point where I'm not learning as much from you as you're learning from me, then I'm doing something wrong. Then I'm stuck. I'm entrenched".

The advantage, for me, of working with younger people is that they're less so entrenched, although I may be more so-called expert. Their advantage is their less expert and they'll see things I didn't see. I'll give you an example. It happened last night. We had a meeting of my research group, and I said to the group there's a problem that's bothered me ever since I started

⁹ A member of a college or university faculty who ranks above an instructor and below an associate professor.

teaching Introductory Psychology. And the problem is... Are you all familiar with the Milgram experiment in Brazil?

The Milgram experiment was a guy, a psychologist at Yale. Who gave it... he did an experiment he asked subjects to be teachers and give shocks to a learner. And, as he went through the experiment, the shocks increased and increased and increased, and they increased and increased and then the learner starts screaming and he says: "Let me out of here!" "Help!". And eventually the shocks reach a very high level and the learner is silent. You know, that experiment. So, the interesting thing about the Milgram experiment is that two thirds... roughly two thirds of people on the experiment stay 'till the end.

So, I said to... So, I said what puzzles me... I said this to my own research group. What puzzles me... Is when I explained that, as I just did, last week to my Adolescence Class. I say two-thirds of the people in the experiment went up 'till the end. How many of you think you would go up 'till the end and deliver the full shock? No one ever raises their hands, but the point of the experiment is that two thirds of you would. You just don't think you would. And I said to the group I don't understand why it's like everyone misses the point. The point is not that other people will go up to the top. The point is that all two-thirds of all of us will. And I said: "why don't they realize that?"

And, for years, I couldn't figure it and then one of the students in my group, who is less than half my age said: "Well, maybe it's because of the fundamental attribution error, that they... when they do something bad, they think it's because of the situation, that they're not a bad person. It's just the situation forces them to do it. But, when someone else does something bad, it's because they're a bad person". And, I said to her: "You know, that's brilliant".

I don't know why I didn't think of it. It's so obvious. But the point was... And then she had another point about how people experience depersonalization, that they stopped thinking it's them doing the bad things. So, here's the student who's less than half my age. I've been thinking about this problem for 45 years. I couldn't solve it and we get together and we're talking for 10 minutes and she comes up with a solution better than any I came up with in 45 years. It's not even what she studies. But the point is, that if you want to be creative, listen to younger people. Listen to your students. Don't just have the students listen to you.

Tania Viana: It's a good advice. Talking about advice, would... what advice would you give to students with low grades whose self-esteem is damaged by a standardized educational system?

Robert Sternberg: Yeah, so, what I tell... What I tell my students is that, in life, there always going to be crappy things that happen. It's you're always going to be having people telling you what you can't do. And you'll always have people who will have low expectations for you. And, at some point, the solution is very simple: is to believe in yourself. And to say, you know, and it's not about your ability. "It's not I'm really an Einstein or I'm really a Picasso or, you know, God, we are García Márquez". It's not that you're saying I'm really like these geniuses. Is to say: "That if I really work hard, I can achieve a lot". Because "an awful lot of"¹⁰ life – as Woody Allen once said – he once said: "I think 90% of life is showing up"¹¹. And I think his point was and I just said that to Karin, my wife, earlier today that, you know, sometimes our kids have challenges in Math, but – they're girls – if you try hard, there it's... you're always surprised by how many challenges you can overcome, if you really work at it.

And, so, that's when I think is important to say to those kids that you can succeed. You don't

¹⁰ A very large amount.

¹¹ Showing up as synonym for "work hard" or "put in the effort".

need to get the best grades. If you look at the people who are the most successful in society... The irony is they're usually not the people who have the best grades... The people who have the best grades get want to become college professors or teachers and they don't even make much money and they're not particularly respected. It's the people who don't have the great grades, who wouldn't get jobs as college professors or teachers, who go on to be the leaders in society.

I have two older kids and the one who got, you know, who did great on tests and got great grades and has a PhD¹² and a Law degree and this degree. And another one who just went to college and the one who went to college is the one who is, you know, "raking in dollars"¹³ and has been very successful and they're both successful in their own way.

You don't need great grades and to be good and every Math test, what you need is to believe in yourself. And to fight – I said that to my group this morning – I said in my lecture to my group this morning, the important thing is to figure out who you are. What is your contribution to make? What can you contribute to the world that maybe no one else contributes? And then, make the most of that and it's a different thing for every person.

So, you know, they should get grades that are good enough to get by. But, in the end, grades aren't what are going to lead you to succeed in life. It's figuring out what... What do I uniquely have to contribute to the world? And how can I leverage it to make a difference?

Tania Viana: Professor, at school, did you have someone who believed in you? A teacher?

Robert Sternberg: Yeah, actually, that was something I'm glad you asked, because I didn't mention it. So, I was, when I was young – five, six, seven years old – I was doing badly in school. And I probably would have stayed that way, doing badly in school, because everyone seemed happy. And then, in fourth grade, I had a teacher, Mrs. Alexa, who, for whatever reason, did believe in me. Who thought I could do better. I don't think... I don't think she thought I was any genius or anything, but she thought I could do better than I was dealing. And just as I had tried to please the teachers who didn't think much of me... I wanted to please her. And do better.

You know, at the time, I was nine. I have to admit that I... I thought Mrs. Alexa was pretty cool. And I was sorry that she wasn't younger. And that I thought it was too bad she was married. Because otherwise I thought we might have a future together. But that one didn't go any better than the one when I was 13 year old. The only difference was I didn't give Mrs. Alexa an IQ test. Anyway, so, she believed in me.

And, in fourth grade, I shocked myself by showing myself that I actually could do very well in school, that a lot of it had been my telling myself I can't do well. And, so, I tried and it's not just something that happens to kids. I can give you another example when I was an adult. I always have thought and – I guess I still think – I have a bad sense of direction. And I thought I just have a bad sense of direction. Whenever anyone gave me directions or whenever I'd go to a place where it was complicated. I'd say: "I'm gonna get lost". And I did. I always got lost, which reinforced my view that I have a crappy sense of direction.

And, then, I was invited to give a talk in a pretty rough city, and it was at night, and I was driving. And I when I went there it was only twilight and I said to myself: "I really better watch the streets where I'm turning, because, when I come back, it's gonna be dark. And if I get lost in this part of the city, I'm really screwed. You know, it's... it's not safe".

¹² PhD is short for Doctor of Philosophy.

¹³ Expression that means to earn a lot of money.

And, so, I gave my talk and I drive home. And I made no mistakes at all. And then, I realized that part of my having a bad sense of direction was really that when people... Because I thought I had a bad sense of direction, I didn't listen to directions, and then I didn't know the directions and, so, I created a self-fulfilling prophecy. And I think that a lot of our failures are just self-fulfilling prophecies, that if you tell yourself you can't do well in school – and that we have this with our girls all the time. You know, if you tell yourself you can't do it in Math, you're not going to do it in Math. So, if you believe you could do it, you'll do it and it's not just for kids. It's for adults too. If you tell yourself that, you know, I may not be the best at this. But if I really work at this, I can do this ok. You may be shocked that how much you can do ok.

Tania Viana: I'd like to ask something about school and reality. The schools are made of people who have problems of real life: teachers with problems in their marriages, for example, students with some emotional problems or health problems. Even so, the problems of multiple choice proposed by the education system are very different from the problems of real life. Professor, why is so difficult this approximation between school and real life? Wasn't school supposed to prepare students for life?

Robert Sternberg: Yeah, I think that's a mistake many – if not most – schools make. That we should give problems that are better preparation for life. That's what I try to do in my own classes. I teach my classes – they're college, university classes. But I teach them with the attitude that – and I even tell the students – the stuff you're gonna find on the test is this stuff that I think is most real event to what you're going to need to succeed in life.

And the other stuff is not the stuff I'm going to emphasize on test. And, so, what I try to infuse into my lectures, in my discussion classes, is not just teach them the material, but how can you use this material in your life? So, last term, for example, I taught a course on love and close relationships. And my emphasis is not on measuring a bunch, you know, they're memorizing a bunch of series and experiments. Is how can you use the material in this class to make your relationships better?

And, in my course on intelligence, which I also taught, I said my goal isn't just to teach you a bunch of Theories of Intelligence. It's for you to think about: “How can you leverage your intelligence to make your life better or other people's lives better?”. So, I think if we had the attitude that we... We should be teaching for real world adaptation, for dealing with the real world. Schooling would be much better preparation for life, then it often is and that's the way I teach and that's the way I test.

Tania Viana: Professor, everything changes. Why is it so difficult for school to change? I don't understand this, really.

Robert Sternberg: Yeah, I think there... Yeah, I mean I'm 74, you know, I'm an elderly gentleman at this point and sometimes when I think I... I started as an Assistant Professor at 25. So, it's been almost 50 years that I have been trying to change schools. And when I think... If I think about it too much, It's really depressing, because if anything things have gotten worse. But I think there are a lot of things that make it hard to change: one is entrancement, that where you just used to doing things a certain way. We keep doing it the same way. A second is that education schools haven't much changed the way they train teachers. They keep training teachers. They think for a world that not only doesn't exist, but never really did. So, that's the second thing.

I think a third thing, at least in the United States, is we're a testing culture. And, so, we teach

to test, to measure skills that aren't really very relevant to kids' success in life. The tests drive the *curriculum*, I think, in a bad way. I think a fourth reason, unfortunately, is that... So, with regard to testing... When the United States – I can't speak for Brazil – became a testing country. A large part of the reason it did that was because, prior to that, the people who were given opportunities were mostly upper middle and upper class, that to succeed in the US. You needed their parents who had money, who had social standing, who were white, who were Protestant or Catholic, you know, who “fit the bill”¹⁴. They were into... they were in the “right” *strata* of society. And, so, the idea of testing was to create a meritocracy that would be fair to everyone. What the people who started doing the testing didn't realize is that the correlation of the test was socioeconomic *stratum* would be astronomically high.

That essentially what they were doing was wandering the social class, socio-economic class, through tests and say: “So, the same people continued to succeed”. But now they could put this stamp of meritocracy because kids who grow up in challenging circles... If their first language, in our case is in English, or if they in our society – I can't speak for yours – the quality of the school you go to depends a lot on the social *stratum* of your parents.

And, so, if you take kids who... whose parents aren't very well educated, who go to schools that are not very good, the schools aren't well resourced. The state doesn't really support the schools very much. Some of the kids drop out of the schools. Sometimes because they're not very good, sometimes because they need to earn money, some of the kids don't speak English as the first language. Some of them experience racism or classism and or sexism. So, they experience a lot of challenges. And, so, of course, they don't do as well on tests that reflect the skills that we teach in better schools.

So, I think a lot of the failure to change is that the people who were in power in any society want to stay there. And not only do they want to stay, they want their kids to be there. And it could be because, you know, there... They went to good colleges. It could be because. But it doesn't matter: every society does it. It could be because they went to good colleges. It could be because you're white. It could be because you're tall. It could be because you're Christian. It could be because he was at the “right” political part. Every society gives preferences to certain kids and then imagines that the kids of those parents are the ones who show more merit. You know, in a dictatorship, it's the... you need parents who are willing “to bow and scrape”¹⁵ to the dictator. In Russia today, if you have parents who are very bright, but they don't play the Putin game, you know, your chances of being successful are not so good.

So, every society does that. And the most important thing is to say – instead of playing whatever game the society is playing – whether it's by race or sex or social class or test scores or whatever. Do it by help each kid find where they can make a contribution. Help them figure out who they are and it may be an academic sort of thing but, for some, it's music, and some it's art, and some it's crafts, and some it's mechanics, and some it's athletic. Helps them become the person they can be in whatever it is. And value them for who they are not some kind of prior mold that maintains the social order.

Tania Viana: You know Professor, here in Brazil is... it's not so different. We have a standardized education driven by standardized tests. More of the same.

Robert Stenrberg: Yeah, same deal.

¹⁴ Someone **fits the bill** when they are suitable for a particular job or purpose.

¹⁵ The act of honoring someone else's superiority or power.

Tania Viana: Professor, that's my last question for you. Sternberg by Sternberg. How do you define yourself?

Robert Stenrberg: How do I define myself? I would say that, at this point in my life, I would define myself as the husband of Karin, the father of Seth, Sarah, Sammy, Brittany and Melody, five kids. And as someone who has tried to make a difference in Psychology and Education and hasn't been so successful, but he's given his best shot. And, so, we hope that his students and his kids we all succeed where he didn't.

Tania Viana: Professor, you made it. You did a great job in Psychology, and we thank you for that. Here in Brazil, we like a lot the Triarchic Theory of Intelligence. Professor Sternberg, I'd like to thank you, not only for accepting our invitation, but specially for the courage to share your history of life with us and give hope to a lot of students who cope with standardized tests and a standardized education. Thank you.

Robert Stenrberg: Well, thank you. Thank you, and I hope to see you all again.