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Ceiling Effect

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Synonyms

[Ceiling level](#)

Definition

A ceiling effect is observed when an examinee obtains very high or maximum scores on a particular test. This may lead to an underestimation of the examinee's true ability level because the test does not allow for higher levels of performance to be assessed.

Current Knowledge

A ceiling effect in a large number of participants in a normative sample may prevent the examiner's

ability to gauge a particular individual's personal ceiling, or highest level of performance, when compared with others in the standardization sample because the maximum level of performance within the sample cannot be assessed.

For example, on a list-learning memory test that contains only four words, the majority of examinees will most likely recall most or all of the words. Four "bits" of information (in this case, words in a list) place very little demand on the average person's memory ability. To say that any particular examinee who learns all four words is demonstrating intact memory abilities may underestimate that examinee's actual memory span. Adding at least five more words would allow for an investigation of that individual's upper limit of learning or memory capacity.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Floor Effect](#)
- ▶ [Testing the Limits](#)