

This Week's Citation Classic

Oltman P K. A portable rod-and-frame apparatus.

Percept. Mot. Skills 26:503-6, 1968.

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The paper presents a description of a portable version of Witkin's Rod-and-Frame Test and data indicating that it is a valid substitute for the standard apparatus. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited over 135 times since 1968.]

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"The Rod-and-Frame Test (RFT) is one of the key measures of the cognitive style construct of field-dependence-independence. During the test, observers view a tilted square frame which takes up most of the visual field, and an adjustable rod which tilts on the same center as the frame. They are asked to adjust the rod to the gravitational vertical, and these adjustments vary greatly. Some, termed field independent, are quite accurate; others, termed field dependent, are influenced by the tilt of the frame and think the true vertical is tilted more or less in the direction of frame tilt. The significance of these differences between individuals in the extent of their susceptibility to contextual influences is most recently reviewed in Witkin, Goodenough, and Oltman.¹ The late Herman A. Witkin discovered this dimension, and most of his life's work was devoted to exploring its manifestations in a wide variety of psychological areas.

"My contribution in the cited paper was to develop a portable version of the RFT apparatus. The 'standard' darkroom version of the test requires a light-tight room and bulky equipment. I was interested in developing a desk-top apparatus which would be formally similar to the standard version, but which could easily be taken into the field. Apparently many others have felt a similar need, for the portable RFT has since been used in hospitals, schools,

and even in remote jungle and arctic settings.

"I built the first prototype during the summer of 1966 in my backyard in Brooklyn, New York, while working at Downstate Medical Center I needed some validation data, and offered to pay the participants in a doctoral student's dissertation if he would help administer both the standard and portable versions of the RFT. He agreed, although his interest was not in field dependence but in small group dynamics. He had a rather complicated and ingenious design, which manipulated a number of parameters of the usual conformity situation. As it turned out, none of his manipulations had any effect, but the RFT saved the day. It was very neatly related to a typology of styles of conformity which he observed in his data, and his work was often cited by us in later papers as an example of the influence of field dependence on interpersonal behavior. As we used to say of such situations, 'If the soufflé collapses, serve it anyway and call it a mousse.'

"During a family visit to Hong Kong, my wife and daughter visited John Dawson's department at the University of Hong Kong. There sat one of the portable RFTs, which was owned by the department, which at that time was part of the philosophy department. It was marked 'Phil. Department,' and my daughter exclaimed, 'Oh, does Phil work here too?'

"Over the years, the field-dependence-independence dimension has been related to phenomena in many areas of psychology, including education, interpersonal behavior, personality, psychopathology, lateralization of function of the brain, and even patterns of EEG activity. Over these years, our motto might have been 'My rod and my frame, they comfort me,' because of the usefulness of the dimension in generating new hypotheses for research. While there has been controversy (mostly, I think, coming from people who are too field independent to show any effect on the RFT themselves), the steadily increasing flow of articles and dissertations indicates the robustness of the phenomenon that now honors the memory of our beloved Hy Witkin."

1. Witkin H A, Goodenough D R & Oltman P K. Psychological differentiation: current status. J. Personal. Soc. Psychol. 37:1127-45, 1979.