

Essay Review

The Bell Curve: A Commentary

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Editors' Comments

The release of *The Bell Curve* this past year created a storm of controversy. The authors have been accused of everything from racism to poor research. Despite the controversy, the book portends a tremendous impact on how we think about the role of intelligence in social science and social policy. In addition, it appears especially relevant for adult education programs geared to serving the less fortunate in society: the illiterate, the jobless, the homeless, the socio-economically disadvantaged, and others. For these reasons, it seems appropriate to discuss the merits of the book from an informed position. The following commentary by Strand is offered in that spirit.

The recent publication of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) has generated a maelstrom of media attention and scholarly debate. Cover articles by *Newsweek* and the *New Republic* were followed by an *ABC News* story which attacked the integrity of the work stating that cited studies were funded by racist organizations with historical ties to Nazism. Like the ABC story, many published statements concerning *The Bell Curve* bypass an exposition of the scientific data and focus instead on the morality of those who would challenge the popular notion that intelligence tests are biased and that differences between racial groups are the product of that bias. Emotionally-based reactions are not unexpected. The claim that intelligence differences are not wholly the result of social forces may, it is feared, foster further discrimination and anger against individuals occupying the lower levels of the social and economic strata and, in the case of certain minority groups, undermine an already tattered sense of self-esteem and cultural pride.

Unbeknownst to many, *The Bell Curve* is concerned not simply with race and IQ. Rather, it is an attempt to synthesize our present knowledge concerning the relationship between intelligence and class structure and to

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offer a vision for the future of American society based on the implications of that synthesis. While divided into four parts (22 chapters), the work may be discussed in terms of a couple broad aims. First, data are presented which bear on the work's cornerstone premises: 1) Individuals differ with regard to intelligence, and intelligence, moreso than any other variable, is responsible for contemporary socioeconomic stratification. 2) Whether people believe stratification based on intelligence is "good" or "fair" is irrelevant; the significant role intelligence plays in the partitioning of the American culture will increase in the future, despite efforts to curb it. 3) Attempts to alter intelligence have, for all practical purposes, failed, and barring changes in technology, will continue to do so.

The second aim of the book is to explore and discuss the implications of the above-mentioned findings for America's present and future social environment. The authors argue convincingly that low intelligence is a prominent predictor of such social problems as poverty, failure to earn a high school diploma, unemployment, injury, early divorce, illegitimate births, welfare reciprocity, having an underweight baby, raising a child in the worst of home environments, and criminal involvement. Contrary to popular portrayals, IQ tests have proven to be equally valid predictors of performance across ethnic, racial, educational, and socioeconomic lines.

Despite longstanding data consistent with these findings, intelligence has been conspicuously absent from contemporary investigations of social ills. The authors claim that this failure has been politically motivated. They present data illustrating that, for almost every social problem, measured intelligence is so powerful a predictor that even after controlling for the influence of other variables such as SES and education, its contribution remains significant. The converse, on the other hand, is rarely true; SES and education typically account for much less criterion variance after controlling for intelligence. On the strength of these data, the authors argue that we should reverse a 30-year trend and reintroduce intelligence as a variable of interest in the scientific exploration of social behavior.

But what are the repercussions of reintroducing this most contentious of variables? Problems arise from the fact that measured IQ differs according to race. Asians outscore whites by about one-fifth of a standard deviation (three standard score points), while whites outscore blacks by about one standard deviation (15 standard score points). These findings frame the most controversial question facing intelligence testing. Are the IQ differences between the races due to genetic or environmental factors?

While emphasizing that at present there are no definitive answers to this question, Herrnstein and Murray believe that preliminary evidence is

informative. They draw upon two primary sources of data: analysis of cognitive ability profiles and data from adoption studies.

In addition to overall performance differences on measured IQ, much accumulated evidence indicates that the races differ with regard to patterns of ability. For example, East Asians, regardless of whether they are raised in Asia or America, outperform whites on measures of nonverbal intelligence. The more delicate questions about IQ and race concern black-white differences. At the center of the debate is the "Spearman hypothesis." This hypothesis states that if differences in test scores reflect true differences in general cognitive ability, *g*, then the differences should be largest on those items which are most highly related to *g*. Although there continues to be dissenting opinions (Gustafsson, 1992), the authors conclude that the bulk of the evidence suggests that the patterning of black-white differences is consistent with the "Spearman hypothesis." Correlations between *g* and the black-white difference typically range between .5 and .8.

In contrast, the "Spearman hypothesis" does not hold for variables other than race. For example, there is no correlation between *g* and IQ differences across SES. Such differential support for the "Spearman hypothesis" is suggestive of a genetic contribution.

Another source of information concerning the differential contributions of environment versus genetics are adoption studies. Herrnstein and Murray indicate that the Minnesota transracial adoption study is the soundest empirical exploration of the impact of genes and environment on IQ. It is a longitudinal analysis of 101 families with adopted children of white, black, and mixed racial ancestry who are being raised by white adoptive parents of middle or higher social status. These children were recently tested upon reaching middle adolescence. The ordering of IQ means was 109 for the biological children of white parents, 106 for white adoptive children, 99 for the adopted children with one black parent, and 89 for the adopted children with two black parents. The 16 point difference (discrepancy due to rounding error) between the adopted children with two black parents and those with two white parents is consistent with the often reported one-standard deviation difference between blacks and whites.

The results of the adoption study are disappointing from an environmentalist standpoint. Herrnstein and Murray put it this way:

[T]he debate over the Minnesota transracial adoption study has shifted from an argument about whether the environment explains all or just some of the [black-white] difference to an argument about whether it explains more than a trivial part of the difference. (p. 310)

The data reviewed by Herrnstein and Murray suggest a genetic as well as an environmental contribution to racial differences in intelligence. Despite media portrayals of such conclusions as irresponsible and without merit, the data cited represent mainstream results and are difficult to dispute. Nevertheless, contradictory findings exist. For example, Herrnstein and Murray cite a post-World War II study in which German children of black U.S. servicemen showed no overall differences in average IQ compared to the offspring of white occupation troops. This study is consistent with an argument for environmental effects. However, such studies are rare, and methodological drawbacks oftentimes make them difficult to interpret. Furthermore, recent findings that black-white test score differences are declining, while encouraging, do not contradict the notion of a genetic influence.

In addition to contradictory findings, alternative explanations to those presented by the authors continue to be formulated. These are oftentimes quite speculative, however, and sometimes posit a multigenerational interaction between heredity and environment (Storfer, 1990). Although possible, such neo-Lamarckian ideas lie outside of mainstream thought and are supported only by highly selective reviews of the empirical literature.

Unfortunately, the furor over the ethnic differences debate has dominated all discourse concerning *The Bell Curve*, to the exclusion of other key issues. The authors claim that we must resign ourselves to the fact of individual differences. Efforts to alter intelligence on a societal scale have failed and will continue to do so barring major and unforeseen technological advances in education or biology. Rather than ignoring IQ differences, social policies must be informed by them. For example, development of programs to alter the lives of chronic welfare recipients must acknowledge the fact that the majority of these people fall within the lowest 20% of intelligence.

The societal decay that has occurred over the past several decades has impacted the dull much more severely than it has the bright. This is evident when one examines changes since the 1960s in unemployment, divorce, illegitimacy, welfare, and violent crime for high versus low IQ populations. Contrary to media portrayals, negative societal change has not been equally distributed across classes. Rather, it has become endemic within the low echelons of society, while impacting the privileged classes modestly at most.

It has been popular among social scientists to implicate social and economic factors as causing the blight of the underprivileged. As the reader might guess, Herrnstein and Murray argue for the importance of

intelligence. However, the data indicate a differential effect across classes. Given that major shifts in the absolute level of IQ and poverty have not occurred, these variables cannot be solely responsible for societal changes. Their involvement appears to be as agents in interaction with one or more other variables.

What factors may have had a differential effect on members of the lower cognitive classes? Herrnstein and Murray posit several factors including a policy shift toward greater government and the increasing complexity of society. It is at this point that the authors begin making statements and conclusions which do not necessitate from the data.

Although established with good intentions, affirmative action policies have, according to the authors, had a negative impact on those it intended to help, as well as on society in general. For example, programs such as Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) have reinforced women at the lower end of the cognitive distribution to have children. These women would have difficulty supporting themselves, let alone children. However, because assistance is available, these women are afforded the opportunity to have children, regardless of their economic situation. Policies such as AFDC do not hold the same attraction for women of higher intelligence. Bright women generally choose to delay childbirth until they are confident of providing a better home than is possible under federal assistanceship.

By providing incentives to have children they cannot properly raise, public policy traps AFDC mothers and their children into the lower levels of society. It also has a dysgenic effect on the nation's cognitive capital because it reinforces women of lower intelligence to have a disproportionate number of children.

Arguments concerning the desultory impact of affirmative action, and the possibility of a dysgenic trend in the nation's cognitive ability distribution, are nothing new. Herrnstein and Murray rehash how reducing affirmative action will save the intellectually underprivileged from themselves and engender greater cooperation from the gifted. Unfortunately, these prescriptions rely on the same "trickle down" mechanisms advocated by the "haves" for many years. Furthermore, the presentation on dysgenics reads like a 1920's social Darwinism text. Although data presented in other sections of the book are compelling, that concerning dysgenics is weak.

In addition to the role of social policy, Herrnstein and Murray implicate the increasing complexity of our information-driven society as fostering greater disparity between the bright and the dull. They touch on

how information results in choices and liberation for those with the intellectual power necessary to comprehend and proactively respond to complicated messages. That same liberation, however, equates to oppression for those who, rather than being adept at manipulating symbols, are themselves easily manipulated.

Herrnstein and Murray highlight the interaction between IQ and public policy. They argue that treating people as members of ethnic and racial groups conceals the real factor that segregates people — intelligence. They implicitly call for policy based on intelligence to replace policy based on race. *The Bell Curve* will, therefore, likely become the centerpiece of a tremendous furor over important societal issues. As this debate rages, I would like to draw attention to an aspect of the book that will not make the local news, namely, the argument that the something that intelligence has interacted with to create three decades of negative societal change is complexity in the form of information.

As educators we should be highly interested in the possibility of an interaction between IQ and information. For years we have been asking questions such as: What effect does television have on people? How do people decide whether to play the lottery? Who is likely to engage in high risk behaviors? What role do advertisements play in people committing murder for brand name shoes? These questions have been asked with regard to children, adults, adolescents, women, men, blacks, whites, Latinos, schizophrenics, etc. Although it gets lost in the emphasis on policy, Herrnstein and Murray suggest that we need to focus on answering these questions with regard to intelligence.

It is highly possible that the media influence is greater on people at the lower levels of society because, by and large, they are less intelligent. The cognitively disadvantaged are, in many ways, less free than the advantaged. Might the problems facing the underclass be as much related to the uses of information by big business as they are to the spending of big government?

In addition to debating whether the less fortunate would do better with more or less public assistance, we should focus on modern methods by which people are exploited. How does susceptibility to information differ across the cognitive spectrum? This is the type of question that, as educators and scientists, we may be capable of answering.

This book should not be most remembered for its claims about the genetics of intelligence; every day we are infused with new findings about the role of genes in our lives. If looked at through nondespairing eyes, this book may establish a novel way to think about social problems and set a new agenda for research.

References

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