

At Our Wits End – Why we're becoming less intelligent and what it means for the future

A simple, powerful explanation for our decline: we are becoming less intelligent

Woodley of Menie and Dutton present a simple explanation for the phenomena we observe happening in the world around us. Mankind is becoming stupider.

Occam's razor says that the simplest explanation is the best. Many observers blame what's going on, or look for salvation from the political realm. That's not going to work if the voters are getting dumber.

Some blame social trends, such as cultural Marxism and the division of society along the lines of race, gender and sexual identity. Many lines of argument in the contemporary dialogue don't make sense. A simple explanation is that more people than ever consider themselves intellectual, but though they may outnumber previous generations of intellectuals, they are far less intelligent.

The authors introduce their book with the observation that we are not smart enough to continue doing things we used to do. The Concorde stopped flying. It has been a half-century since we went to the moon. Such huge projects required vast teams of smart people, and could be jeopardized by a weak individual anywhere down the line. Fewer smart people, more dumb ones, and things fall apart.

The authors provide a short, cogent chapter on intelligence: how it is measured, and what it means in practical terms. The major take-home point is that IQ tests are re-standardized every generation or so. Thus, an IQ of 100 identifies a person who is average within his age cohort. He is not necessarily as smart as a person who had a measured IQ of 100 in his grandfather's generation.

IQ is an artificial construct, two numbers, an average and a standard deviation interpreted by a widespread sampling of a population. The observations are interpreted via the Gaussian distribution – the bell curve. Thus, by definition, two thirds of the population has intelligence falling between 85 and 115. By definition, 95% have intelligence falling between 70 and 130.

This means that a person with an IQ of 115 is smarter than five out of six people within his generation and country. A person with an IQ of 130 is one in forty.

In a society with an average IQ of 100, those with an IQ over 130 will typically be professionals such as lawyers, doctors and professors. Those with an IQ of over 115 will typically be engineers, programmers, and teachers. Those with an IQ of 100 will more typically be policemen, firemen, and clerks. Those with lower IQs will be truck drivers, stevedores, warehousemen and security guards. These estimates cannot be projected across societies and eras: all individuals within nations have to fill these positions despite the fact that they draw from the populations with very different average intelligences.

Woodley of Menie and Dutton's thesis is that the genetically substantive component of human intelligence, namely general intelligence, of that core aspect of intelligence which all tests of cognitive ability collectively and commonly measure, rose rather dramatically up until the Industrial Revolution and has been falling since. They pursue several avenues to make their case. The first case they make is that general intelligence within a population can and does change quickly. Evolution is not the glacially slow process that most imagine.

Since IQ tests date back only to the first decade of the twentieth century, the authors have to use proxies to estimate general intelligence levels in earlier eras. They use:

- Levels of literacy – fairly easy to establish.
- Sophistication of word usage and printed material. Search on "WORDSUM Check" to see what it is – and check your own IQ.
- The correlation between estate size and number of heirs. Richer people are smarter. Up until the Industrial Revolution, they left more children.
- Constant decrease in phenomena associated with low levels intelligence: crime and capital punishment.
- Polygenic scores for IQ and educational attainment – with modern genomes being 'richer' in the relevant genetic variants when compared to populations from the Bronze and Iron Ages, 3-5 thousand years ago.

There are several longitudinal (that is, spanning significant periods of time) measures that suggest that general intelligence has been declining.

The national longitudinal survey of youth (NLSY) and the PISA tests of educational attainment provide fairly stable intergenerational comparisons. The SAT and ACT tests, proxies for general intelligence, have been re-centered downward several times over the years to accommodate declining student ability.

Simple reaction time also correlates with general intelligence. Although the correlation at the level of individual people is low, at the level of populations it is a reliable indicator. Reaction speed is potentially measurement-invariant – meaning that what it measures (central nervous system efficiency) doesn't 'drift' when different cohorts are compared with one another. We can therefore have faith in measurements taken a century ago. These show that our simple reaction time speed have slowed, suggesting a decrease in general intelligence possibly approaching one standard deviation, or 15 IQ points in a century. Performance on working memory measures show a similar propensity towards decline over the past 80 years.

Many intelligence researchers noticed during the latter third of the twentieth century that measured intelligence seemed to rise. This became known as the Flynn effect, for the researcher who dedicated the most effort to studying it.

Woodley of Menie and Dutton offer a very comprehensive explanation of this perplexing observation. It boils down to the fact that as society has become more technological, testtakers have become more comfortable with the kinds of questions asked. It is an artifact of the testing process, most especially Raven's progressive matrices, not an indication of a gain in intelligence.

The subject of true genius fascinates the authors. Everyday definitions of genius would apply the label to anybody with an IQ above some cut off – usually 140, 160 or such. These authors' interest is in truly extraordinary individuals such as Sir Isaac Newton and Einstein. The book would be richer if their list were longer.

To Woodley of Menie and Dutton, genius is defined by temperament as well as intellect. Einstein and Newton had the ability to shut out the rest of the world as they focused on their theories. They were rather antisocial.

Within my lifetime we have seen John von Neumann, as quirky as any above, Robert Trivers, and Richard Feynman. In earlier eras certainly Fibonacci, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, some of the Bernoulli family, Pascal, Euler, and Carl Friedrich Gauss would qualify. Peter Bernstein provides wonderful thumbnail biographies, savoring the quirks, in "Against the Gods."

Woodley of Menie and Dutton's thesis is twofold. (1) The innovations made by true geniuses enrich the entire society, whether or not they grace the population with any of their own offspring, and (2) geniuses are becoming rarer – in part because of selection against general intelligence.

Without a doubt Laplace', Gauss' and Newton's mathematics enabled Faraday and Maxwell's work with electricity which has incalculably enriched our society. Atomic power, bequest of the last generation of true geniuses, has been of more questionable benefit. There were geniuses involved in the early days of the computer – von Neumann among them - and it took some level of genius to invent and continually improve the semiconductor. Overall however, one has to concede the authors' case that there are not as many geniuses today as in previous eras.

Why is general intelligence falling? The explanations are simple and obvious. Smart people are not having children, and the developed countries of Europe and North America are being diluted by large numbers of immigrants of lower ability.

We are not having children because (1) we have spent more than a century perfecting ways to avoid them, which (2) smart people are better at employing, (3) we no longer heed the call of religion to be fruitful and multiply, (4) we have normalized a panoply of sexual practices that do not lead to procreation and (5) smart people find many other pursuits more interesting than raising children, or even sex.

It is the dumber people, who remain religious, don't know how to avoid conception, and don't have anything better to do with their lives than have children.

The trends of declining fertility among the more intelligent, and the wholesale importation of less intelligent people into developed countries, are becoming more pronounced. The authors offer several predictions of a decline on the order of 5 to 10 points of IQ over the next century.

As I write this the Centers for Disease Control reported that the total fertility rate in America had dropped 18% for white people in large metropolitan areas over just the last eleven years, to a total just over one and a half children per woman. 40% of births are out of wedlock, corroborating Woodley of Menie and Dutton's thesis that they are not being born to the best and brightest.

Ninety years ago in "The Decline of the West" Oswald Spengler wrote that civilizations go through cycles. He traced Greece, Rome, China, Islam and now the West through their winter, spring, summer, and fall. Woodley of Menie and Dutton show the ways in which Spengler's predictions for the West are being borne out and conclude that we have cycled back to winter.

What to do? Religion would be attractive, but we cannot force ourselves to believe. Eugenics programs to breed more smart people would be attractive, but they would go against our principles of equality, free choice, and morality. We simply can't do it.

The authors wanly propose that we grin and bear it, accept the inevitable. A cheerful prescription of countermeasures to take might sell more books, but the conclusion they draw is absolutely in keeping with the book's argument and what we know of human nature.

I, the reviewer, have chosen a backwards, homogeneous (viz. traditional) East European country in which to raise a second family. We are doing it without television, video games, and cars. Raising children in a society that still values children and respects its own culture seems like the best way to beat the odds.

In closing I would like to introduce the "founder effect" meme. We appear headed for a population bottleneck as white people in general, and smart ones in particular, simply refuse to reproduce. Children of those who do will form a relatively small cohort. Fortune has favored those small cohorts in the past – survivors of the black plague and World War I, then the children of the depression. The smaller generation can be nimble, setting new directions for social trends. With ominous clouds hanging over the economy, pensions, and demographics, it is evident that new directions will be required. It would seem to favor the scions of those in this bleak generation who would accept the challenge of passing on their genes and culture.

This is a five-star book, uniting as it does so many streams of thought into a coherent and compelling story.