

Does your family make you smarter?
James Flynn

James Flynn is a conflicted man.

His heart is all liberal, but he is a conscientious researcher whose findings support the hereditarians. This book discusses the effect of family on a child's educational prospects.

If the child is smart – IQ of a hundred and thirty or so, the upper 2% – it doesn't matter. The schools will figure out that the child is smart and will be sure he gets an appropriate education. It is the children who are merely above average who benefit most from family.

Although Flynn must agree with the hereditarians that intelligence is ultimately 80% due to genetics, he will also tell you that the 80% only hardens into a measurable fact later in life. The family environment is more influential in school children.

A child with an IQ of 115 growing up in a family with substantially smarter parents has a significant advantage – Flynn puts it at about three IQ points – over similarly smart kids growing up in merely average households. He will be at a significant disadvantage if he grows up in a below average household.

In America most people go to college. Flynn points out that there are colleges tailored to serve the least intelligent quarter of the population. In this broad middle spectrum, a few IQ points difference this way or that translates into a difference of 50 to 60 points on SAT scores. The difference between 500 and 560 is dramatic in terms of which colleges will admit the kid.

I read this book for a different reason. Caltech polymath Stephen Hsu wrote in a 2011 paper that smart people usually do not have similarly smart children. Quite specifically, the average intelligence of offspring will be only 60% as far above the population mean as the average of the parents. Two parents each with an IQ of 150 can expect to have children whose intelligence averages only 130. Moreover, the standard deviation around that 130 will be 13 points – fairly broad. Smart people can have some pretty dumb kids. As a parent, trustee and teacher in Washington DC area private schools this was certainly my observation.

Flynn addresses this question only indirectly, but he seems to agree totally with Hsu. Children who test in the 98th percentile – IQ of about 130 – on average come from families where the family IQ is in the 69th percentile. That would be pretty close to the 118 that Hsu would predict.

This book is fairly heavy reading, but the product of a scrupulously honest, moral and highly intelligent man. I recommend it to those with an interest in the subject.