

The Bell Curve

Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein

More relevant today than when it was published in 1994

The subtitle is "Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life." Although you would not glean as much from the vicious attacks that have been leveled against this book since its publishing, the major thesis is that intelligence is highly correlated with success in America. This applies not only to financial success but also educational success, marital success, and happiness in general.

This is only a commonsense observation. People who can figure out how to deal with life's problems are happier. As I write this I am having a fight with Social Security to receive my pension and a fight with the bank to get a deposit credited to my account. Fighting this kind of bureaucratic battle takes intelligence. People without the ability to argue their case, write a letter, and call their Congressman lose out. This same kind of intelligence, needless to say, is valuable to employers and leads to success at work.

One of the observations is that as American society has become more mobile, like kinds of people tend to group together. There are enclaves of high income, highly intelligent people in Boston, New York, San Francisco and Washington DC. Lesser enclaves exist in the three cities area of North Carolina, Austin Texas, Madison Wisconsin and other university towns. More than that, the upper strata congregate very predictably in certain neighborhoods, comfortably separated from the minorities and other hoi polloi in their neighborhoods.

This results in what the authors call "cognitive stratification." Young, mobile and affluent people seek each other's company and marry each other. The society is naturally separating itself by intelligence. A topic that Murray in particular addresses elsewhere is that even though the cognitive elite have the wherewithal to raise families, they don't. Those that don't, do. The result is that the world is getting dumber, summed up quite well in Richard Lynn's [[ASIN:0956881114 Dysgenics: Genetic Deterioration in Modern Populations]].

The discussion of race which has made this book infamous does no more than reiterate what psychometricians have consistently discovered since intelligence first started to be measured a century ago. Black Americans, on average, score one standard deviation lower on IQ tests than whites: averages of 85 versus 100. What they also find, but which does not excite controversy, is that Ashkenazi Jews average 115, Americans of Northeast Asian descent average about 107, American Indians average about 90, and Hispanic Americans about the same.

It is worth a paragraph to describe what intelligence is. Intelligence tests measure the ability to cope in a modern society. They are designed to be independent of culture. Some of them are even independent of language. They produce highly reproducible results – there are a wide range of intelligence tests available, and all of them will yield pretty much the same results for a given individual.

In practical terms, a one standard deviation difference in population averages means that only one person in six in the lower population has an intelligence at or exceeding the average of the higher group. Only one white person in six is as smart as the average Ashkenazi Jew, and only one black in six is as intelligent as the average white. The bell curve explicitly predicts that there will be extraordinarily smart, and extraordinarily dumb people in every population. This is only common sense – we see exceptional Blacks such as Paul Robison, Clarence Thomas and Thomas Sowell who far exceed almost all of their white peers. On the other hand, you run across some dumb Jews. But not very many.

Intelligence is highly correlated with success in school, income, health and happiness. This deserves a side note on statistics. A high correlation in the social sciences is not extraordinarily high. In round numbers, intelligence explains about 25% of the difference in levels of success. Other factors, such as personality, good looks, a stable family, being born rich, and so on certainly play a part. Statistically, however, none of these are as important as intelligence.

As I write this review in 2016 the question of intelligence is even more pertinent. Technology is eliminating routine jobs at an alarming pace. Typists and grocery check out clerks are becoming a thing of the past. The target now seems to be drivers, paralegals and others who do fairly routine work. It is simply easier and more accurate to have machines – often computers – do the work than to pay people. At the same time, as noted in Lynn's book above, the intelligence of nativeborn Americans is declining. The problem is compounded by the fact that America is bringing in large numbers of immigrants from the populations with lower intelligence.

Murray and Herrnstein did not offer a very optimistic conclusion or a realistic way out of this problem. There does not appear to be one. It has only gotten worse since their publication. In hindsight, the United States appears to be worse off for not having paid attention to this book when it came out, just as it did not pay attention to the Moynahan and Coleman reports in the 1960s. As things collapse as I write this, during the Clinton – Trump election campaign, it appears that the chickens are coming home to roost.