

The Mismeasure of Man

Stephen J. Gould

Gould's nineteenth century straw men find 21st century support

It is peculiar that the science of measuring cranial capacity has found a new respectability. Gould expounds at length on the wrong-headedness of Morton's efforts in the mid 19th century to find a correlation between brain size and intelligence. Morton was, of course, handicapped by the fact it would be another fifty years before another intelligence researcher, Spearman, would invent the science of statistics.

Gould, reediting this book in 1996, responded to "The Bell Curve's" Murray and Herrnstein and in so doing chose to ignore the work of major contemporary researchers in the area of intelligence, among the most important of whom are Richard Lynn, Tatu Vanhanen and Arthur Jensen. Three quarters of "Mismeasure" focuses on work that was decades old at the time of his writing. He dismisses "The Bell Curve" with an argument to the effect that the "g" which intelligence tests measure does not measure everything, as he would have his antagonists claim, and therefore really measures nothing. The answer is of course in between. "g" is a far from perfect predictor of individual performance. It is, however, the result of a century's science. It is the best available predictor and has a high statistical correlation with success in education and professional life. Gould's task is not to prove it is not perfect. That much is conceded. He needs to disprove the significance of the above correlations or devise a better measure.

It is ironic that recent intelligence researchers have revived cranial measurement as one device for studying differences among populations, along with traditional intelligence tests, reaction time measurements, pitch discrimination tests and almost every other metric that might make sense to the Howard Gardners of the world. Their studies show consistent correlations among these metrics, and between measured intelligence and worldly accomplishment.

Resisting the science of intelligence is becoming untenable on scientific grounds. Gould's modern-day villains have arrived at their positions through elaborately constructed analyses controlling for nutrition, educational environment, parental involvement, different types of intelligence and different methods of testing. His supporters should do the same; within the realm of science, it is time to conduct some major statistical studies to support the thesis of equal intelligence or cede the argument.

But, as Gould acknowledges throughout, it is primarily a moral argument. Egalitarian authors find it "hurtful" and "unutterable" even to discuss the possibility that there are differences among the average abilities of different races. On the other hand, observing the vast difference in the accomplishments of different races, not only in the U.S. but between and within countries throughout the world, a great many observers have come to one of two moral conclusions:

- 1) Certain peoples do not achieve because they are morally deficient: lazy, given to vice or whatever, or,
- 2) "Hegemonists" such as European nations or Caucasian people systematically and immorally frustrate the aspirations of other peoples through subtle racism.

Either way it is a blame game. And profoundly immoral, if the blame is not deserved.

Rejection of the insistence of equality would clear the way for some difficult but needed discussions of public policy. If we acknowledge that averages of the peoples of the world differ not only, as we can easily observe, on every visible trait, but also on latent traits such as temperament and certain cognitive abilities, we may find that the vast sums spent attempting to force equal average outcomes in, say, education are simply wrongheaded. We may be blindly trying to force some kids to achieve above what they are able, and withholding from others the preparation they could use to make the most of their abilities. The way to overcome these difficulties is to see each person as an individual. There are smart people and high achievers of every hue... why get preoccupied with percentages? Simply attempt to enable each person to achieve his or her potential.