

BOOK REVIEWS

The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life by R. J. Herrnstein and C. Murray. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994, 845 + xxvi pp.

Where does one begin with a book this size? John Kenneth Galbraith, the noted economist, suggests that it is always academically safe to quote oneself. Instead, I will tell you that my eleven-year-old daughter can ice skate, roller skate, swim, ski, play the piano and sing. None of these things could I or did I do at that age.

I point this out to illustrate that the just-named skills are environmental and not genetic. While this should be eminently obvious, there are many such as E. O. Wilson who contend that there are genes for the most unlikely of attributes such as names for dogs and wives. Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, claimed that males "are biologically driven to go out and hunt giraffes"; females, according to Gingrich, "have biological problems staying in a ditch for 30 days because they get infections." Males apparently don't have to be concerned with infections: "On the other hand, men are basically little piglets, you drop them in the ditch, they roll around in it, it doesn't matter, you know."

In a more sane era, such comments would be thought loony, laughable, and ludicrous. Today, however, the hereditarians are riding a crest of empirical plausibility where any statement attributing a genetic cause is seriously considered. No wonder *The Bell Curve* was a best seller, capturing and exploiting as it does the mood of the country.

Much of the *The Bell Curve*'s original numerical contribution to the nature vs. nurture debate can be summed up by the graph given below (Figure 1) which in essence is repeated many different ways. The data comes from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) which deals with about 12,000 "American youths who were aged 14 to 22 in 1979, when the study began, and have been followed ever since." The response (y-axis) or dependent variable tends to be the probability of being in trouble — poverty, unemployment, lack of an education, an unwed parent, etc. The predictor or independent variable is either (standardized) socioeconomic status (SES) or (standardized) IQ. Because the logistic regression curve is steeper when IQ is varied for a fixed SES than the logistic regression curve for variable SES when IQ is fixed, the implication is that (lack of) intelligence is more of an underlying cause than (lack of) wealth.

But just as with Gingrich's comments, closer scrutiny of *The Bell Curve*'s logic reveals a few flaws. For one thing, intelligence is not synonymous with IQ no matter how infatuated Murray and Herrnstein may be with psychomet-

Typical Bell Curve Regression

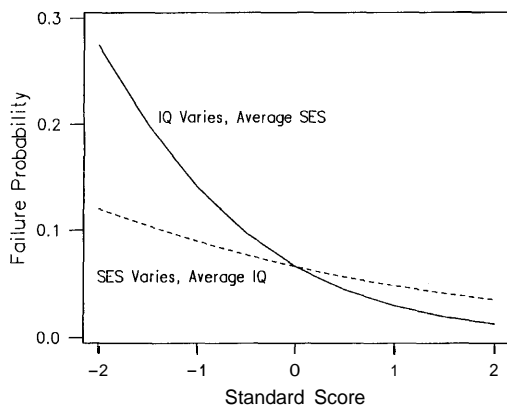


Fig. 1. Typical Bell Curve Regression

rics. For another, statistics deals with associations and not causes; putting IQ on the horizontal axis does not make it the cause of a response. A lurking or hidden variable such as racism can be driving the predictors and the response.

In addition, the authors mysteriously consider interaction between IQ and SES but once in the myriad of mind-numbing computer runs, even though the correlation between IQ and SES is, by their own admission, quite high. And just to make their plausibility arguments even more tortuous, note that the IQ that appears in all the graphs is not quite what was actually measured; "it is impossible for anyone to have a standardized score higher than 1.66" even though the authors happily go to 2 standardized scores.

Moreover, the test — the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) — given on the NLSY wasn't even one of the customary IQ tests taken by little kids but rather one that has the property of being "highly g-loaded" and so in the eyes of *The Bell Curve*, valid. But this amounts to a tautology especially since the concept of "g" of general intelligence is vehemently denied by many researchers in the field.

One could go on pointing out how fragile the connective fibers of the arguments are: the absurdly low values of R-squared [a measure of the strength of the regression relationships] or the bizarre claim [based on SAT scores] that the average intelligence of the graduates of the top 12 universities in the U.S. is +2.7 standardized scores or that in a country where basketball coaches earn \$100,000 or so just for sneaker endorsements, coaching for academic success is impossible. But in a sense, that is playing Murray and Herrnstein's game under their rules. *The Bell Curve* is not a scientific quest for knowledge but is political polemic, with two *idées fixes*: intelligence is inherited and unalter-

able (Herrnstein) and thus social welfare programs are a waste of money (Murray).

Academics are still battling over the first, but as of this writing, the second has been decided. The only issue to be determined is how many of the welfare programs are to be gutted. School lunches this year, child-labor laws next. Perhaps even giraffe hunting will become mandatory. In the meanwhile, undeterred by infections, Becky continues her conquest of things physical in her school designated for the "gifted and talented" despite her great grandparents' inability to speak English or afford a bike, skates, or music lessons.

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Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants by Richard Wiseman & Robert L. Morris. (College Lane, Hatfield, Hertfordshire, England AL10 9AB): University of Hertfordshire Press, 1995. 72 pp. (p), £7. ISBN 0-900458-58-5.

Parapsychology has been plagued for years by criticisms of supposedly poorly-controlled experiments and experimenter gullibility when working with gifted subjects. *Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants* by Richard Wiseman and Robert Morris explores means for correcting these weaknesses and offers suggestions for future research. Although this book contains less than 56 pages of actual text, it does provide the reader with valuable advice.

The strong point of *Guidelines* lies in the chapters dealing with formal studies of psi and recommendations for reporting these experiments. The authors offer sound methodology for testing ESP and Macro-PK and detail possible scenarios for cheating by the purportedly gifted subject. Wiseman and Morris strongly suggest that the experimenter acquire knowledge of the conjuring arts or consult with magicians when designing protocols or evaluating the claimants' abilities.

The issue of control is highlighted both demonstrably and experimentally in Chapter 6 dealing with Formal Studies. The authors caution that allowing a claimant to control the environment and protocol enables the claimant to 'control' the experiment in his favor. However, strictly adhering to an established protocol may lead the subject to claim inability to perform under such adverse conditions. In these situations, Wiseman and Morris explain, it is vital to develop good communication between experimenter and claimant and, equally important, to record the negotiation process. Another important tip is to require claimants to sign a form stating that they will not cheat during any of the experimental sessions. Although a simple suggestion, this is also a valuable one.

Criticisms of earlier experiments involving psychic claimants focused on the insufficient information provided by the authors of subsequent reports.