# **Life as an Intelligence Test** The Predictive Power of IQ

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**Cognitive Science and Psychology** 



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www.vernonpress.com

*In the Americas:* Vernon Press 1000 N West Street, Suite 1200 Wilmington, Delaware, 19801 United States *In the rest of the world:* Vernon Press C/Sancti Espiritu 17, Malaga, 29006 Spain

Cognitive Science and Psychology

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023940492

ISBN: 978-1-64889-716-0

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## Preface

Human beings have a wide array of characteristics that distinguish them from other species, but their cognitive abilities distinguish them most clearly. Humans do not have great strength, speed, ferocity, or natural weapons to enable them to meet the needs of survival, but their intelligence does a much better job and has enabled them to become masters of the Earth. Intelligence has enabled humans to plumb the mysteries of nature's laws and adapt them to their needs. By the power of the intellect, we have harnessed the laws of nature to the extent that we can traverse continents at a far greater speed than any animal by at least a factor of ten, cross vast oceans (both on them and under them) far faster than any sea creature, and fly further and exponentially faster than any bird. It is also unfortunately true that our understanding of the laws of nature has made us the most dangerous species on Earth; stronger and more ferocious than any other creature, capable of killing millions with the push of a button. The human cognitive abilities of consciousness, language, selfawareness, theory of mind, and abstract symbolic representation seem far in excess of the abilities required to meet nature's twin survival and reproduction imperatives.

Every human being is intelligent, but some are more intelligent than others. We know this by observations of people's behavior and their achieved position in life. We also know it by intelligence quotient (IQ) scores that vary immensely among people. Most of the business of life can be conducted on the basis of habit, with little need for high intelligence, which is largely irrelevant to many day-to-day pursuits. However, people of higher intelligence do much better in life than those of lower intelligence in so many ways, and much of life is an intelligence test. I borrowed the title and the idea for this book from Robert Gordon's (1997) article: "Everyday life as an intelligence test: Effects of intelligence."

There are more than a few egalitarian people in academia who balk at the concept of intelligence, particularly its assessment via IQ tests, precisely because it leads to so many life outcomes that separate people and can lead to invidious comparisons. Yet the reliability and validity obtained from these test scores sit head and shoulders above those of any other pencil and paper measures of human traits and characteristics. Others deny that there is a single monolithic intelligence and that there are multiple intelligences that IQ tests do not capture. There are indeed many human talents that we usually don't think of as being intellectual, but if they involve taxing the mind, they engage measurable intelligence.

IQ tests measure different cognitive abilities, but there is a factor common to them all that psychometricians call *Spearman's g*, or simply *g*. What this means is that in tasks that tax the brain, however different they may be from one another, if a person is good at one mental task, he or she is likely to be good at others, although not necessarily to the same degree. Because of the painful issue of race differences in IQ, many have claimed that IQ tests are biased in favor of White middle-class subjects, but IQ predicts many life outcomes equally for all races. Others who acknowledge the racial differences counsel that they should nevertheless be denied lest they be used to give aid racist agendas. I examine the evidence related to these issues and find none that point to bias, although there is evidence that some factors, such as motivation and stereotype threat, can reduce people's IQ scores. However, these factors have no bearing on the issue of test bias.

Chapters three and four examine the biological underpinnings of intelligence. They examine evolutionary scenarios (e.g., Cold Winters Theory) contributing to the evolution of the human brain and the genetics of intelligence (the selection of alleles by new environmental challenges). Both chapters emphasize the role of the environment, first in the development of the brain and then its role in the expression of genetic potential. The purely environmental contributions to intelligence, both in enhancing and reducing it, and the Fynn Effect are addressed in chapter five. Some reasons offered in the literature for the Flynn Effect are explored, as are reasons offered for its cessation and reversal in Western countries.

So many of life's outcomes are predicted by intelligence. The remaining three chapters look at three of the most important to social science. The first is socioeconomic status (SES), which predicts many other things. The second examines various health issues and the third looks at criminal behavior. Above-average IQ successfully predicts higher levels of socioeconomic success, good health, and prosocial behavior. Below-average IQ successfully predicts the opposite. Some scholars reject the notion that IQ predicts any of these phenomena but the evidence that is does too overwhelming to be cavalierly dismissed.

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge the acquisitions editor Blanca Caro for her faith in this work and production editor Argiris Legatos for his usual great job in moving this book forward into print. I also would like to thank anonymous reviewers for their excellent criticisms and suggestions. The input from these good people has made this book better than it would otherwise have been. Of course, whatever errors that remain are mine alone. Most of all, I thank God for giving me the time, inclination, and insight to be able to complete this work. I also acknowledge the contribution of my dear and most gorgeous wife, Grace (AKA "Grace the Face"). She takes such great care of my needs that I am able to devote far more time to writing than I would otherwise have. She makes my life heaven on earth: thank you, Gracie. Nagyon szeretlek gyönyörű kapálós edényem!

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