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IQ

There is no reason to believe, and much reason not to believe, that the measure of a so-called "Intelligence Quotient" in any way reflects some basic cognitive capacity, or "natural kind" of the human mind. The domain-general measure of IQ is not motivated by any recent discovery of cognitive or developmental psychology. It thoroughly confounds domain-specific abilities—distinct mental capacities for, say, geometrical and spatial reasoning about shapes and positions, mechanical reasoning about mass and motion, taxonomic reasoning about biological kinds, social reasoning about other people's beliefs and desires, and so on—which are the only sorts of cognitive abilities for which an evolutionary account seems plausible in terms of natural selection for task-specific competencies.

Nowhere in the animal or plant kingdoms does there ever appear to have been natural selection for a task-general adaptation. An overall measure of intelligence or mental competence is akin an overall measure for "the body," taking no special account of the various and specific bodily organs and functions, such as hearts, lungs, stomach, circulation, respiration, digestion and so on. A doctor or biologist presented with a single measure for "Body Quotient" (BQ) wouldn't be able to make much of it.

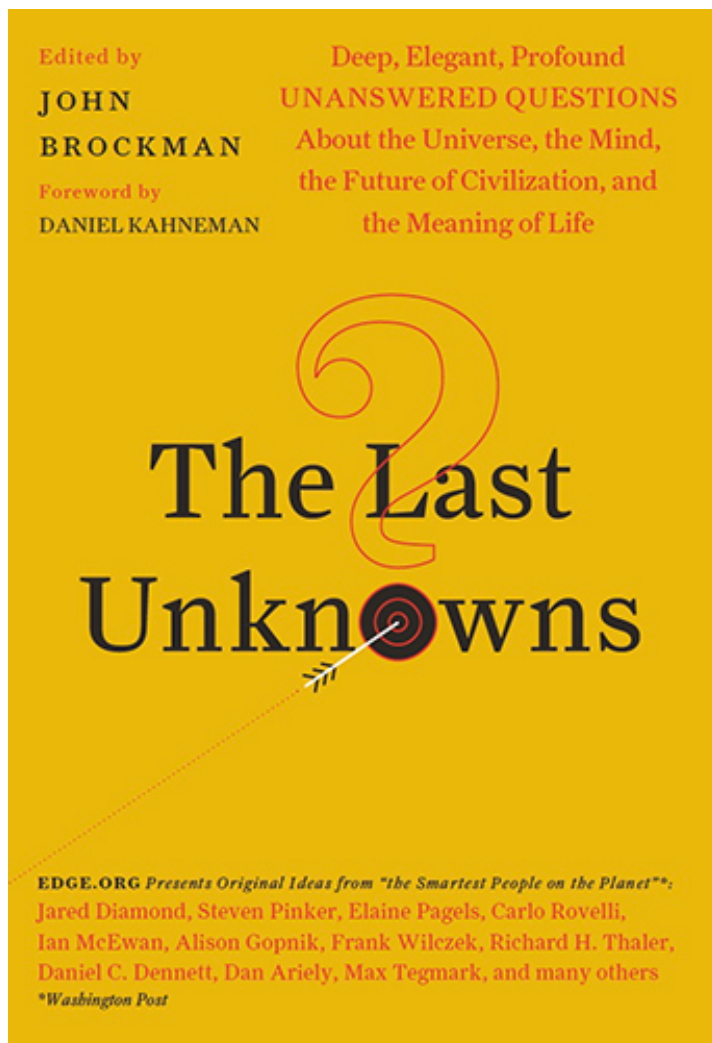
IQ is a general measure of socially acceptable categorization and reasoning skills. IQ tests were designed in behaviorism's heyday, when there was little interest cognitive structure. The scoring system was tooled to generate a normal distribution of scores with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15.

In other societies, a normal distribution of some general measure of social intelligence might look very different, in that some "normal" members of our society could well produce a score that is a standard deviation from "normal" members of another society on that other society's test. For example, in forced-choice tasks East Asian students (China, Korea, Japan) tend to favor field-dependent perception over object-salient perception, thematic reasoning over taxonomic reasoning, and exemplar-based categorization over rule-based categorization.

American students generally prefer the opposite. On tests that measure these various categorization and reasoning skills, East Asians average higher on their preferences and Americans average higher on theirs'. There is nothing particularly revealing about these different distributions other than that they reflect some underlying socio- cultural differences.

There is a long history of acrimonious debate over which, if any, aspects of IQ are heritable. The most compelling studies concern twins raised apart and adoptions. Twin studies rarely have large sample populations. Moreover, they often involve twins separated at birth because a parent dies or cannot afford to support both, and one is given over to be raised by relatives, friends or neighbors. This disallows ruling out the effects of social environment and upbringing in producing convergence among the twins. The chief problem with adoption studies is that the mere fact of adoption reliably increases IQ, regardless of any correlation between the IQs of the children and those of their biological parents. Nobody has the slightest causal account of how or why genes, singly or in combination, might affect IQ. I don't think it's because the problem is too hard, but because IQ is a specious rather natural kind.

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