

The Malleability of Intelligence Is Not Constrained by Heritability

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In *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray claim that a high value for heritability of intelligence limits or constrains the extent to which intelligence can be increased by changing the environment.¹ In this chapter it is argued that the calculated numerical value of “heritability” has no valid implications for government policies and that evidence of a nonspecific genetic influence on human mental ability places no constraint on the consequences of an improved environment. On the contrary, a very small change in environment, such as a dietary supplement, can lead to a major change in mental development, provided the change is appropriate to the specific kind of deficit that in the past has impaired development. The results of adoption studies, the intergenerational cohort effect, and effects of schooling also reveal that intelligence can be increased substantially without the need for heroic intervention.

The Bell Curve continues a long tradition, exemplified by Malthus, of basing recommendations for government social policies on claims about limitations imposed by human psychology and biology. Although Herrnstein and Murray (H&M) do not advocate a complete reversion to the laissez faire ideal of Malthus and Herbert Spencer, some of their policy recommendations point in that direction. While advocating government-imposed income supplements

for fulltime workers earning low wages who are trying hard, they also urge a wholesale decentralizing of government powers and a return to a greatly simplified common law and tort law, which would undoubtedly involve the dismantling of a vast array of existing programs. They argue that success in life in America depends strongly on intelligence and that intelligence is mainly hereditary; hence, further success of the nation requires improvement of the gene pool. Specifically, they propose (a) restoring the rewards of marriage (p. 546) by ending all child support payments for unmarried women, whom they note are often poor and black; (b) ending "the extensive network of cash and services for low-income women who have babies" (p. 548); (c) providing "birth control mechanisms that are increasingly flexible, foolproof, inexpensive, and safe" (p. 549) to reduce births among low income women; and (d) procedures to "shift the flow of immigrants . . . towards those admitted under competency rules . . ." (p. 549). H&M argue that everyone, including political leaders, should "try living with inequality, as life is lived" (p. 551), inequality that they believe is mainly biological.

Biological arguments concerning intelligence have often been invoked in the United States to influence current political policies. Just as Putnam warned of terrible things that would follow from any success of the Civil Rights movement, especially school integration,² Jensen, in his hotly debated *Harvard Educational Review* article, opposed the Head Start antipoverty program and warned rhetorically: "Is there a danger that current welfare policies, unaided by eugenic foresight, could lead to the genetic enslavement of a substantial segment of our population?"³ He expressed special concern about biological reproduction by "Negro Americans." *The Bell Curve* strongly supports the arguments of Jensen, but its political conclusions go much further in the direction of Malthus, Spencer, and Galton.

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Although biology forms the foundation of their policy recommendations, the biology presented by H&M is itself rather impoverished. Only one biological concept is invoked, the population genetic notion of "heritability." They claim that correlational statistics can reveal the percentage of variance in intelligence that is caused by genetic differences among people. While acknowledging there is disagreement among experts about the true value of this percentage, they assert that the "most unambiguous direct estimate" indicates it is about 60% to 70%. However, the validity of the heritability coefficient itself, not just its true value, is still subject to debate, and the concept has been strongly criticized as biologically unrealistic.⁴⁻⁸ Eminent geneticists and statisticians have questioned the methodology commonly used to compute the heritability coefficient.⁹⁻¹² R.A. Fisher, inventor of the analysis