IQ and the Problem of Social Adjustment
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Psychologists have long known that there is a restricted range of intelligence that favors the development of successful and well-adjusted individuals. This limited range lies between approximately 120 and 140 IQ on most tests with a standard deviation of 16.1. Most Mensans fall within that range. The complaint of social maladjustment frequently heard from Mensans may very well be true; but, contrary to the prevailing myth, the cause of their troubles seldom lies with their intellectual ability. Severe problems in social adjustment due to exceptional intelligence are rarely found in those testing below 150 IQ, a score exceeded by only one in a thousand of the general population. Few Mensans score that highly. It's convenient, therefore, to divide gifted individuals into two categories: an optimum adjustment group that falls below a threshold of about 145 IQ, and a sub-optimum adjustment group that scores above it. These two groups are apt to differ in important ways in values, lifestyles, and, most important of all, in their strategies for adapting to their social milieu. Those in the optimum range will need little or no help in adjusting to the world as they find it; the exceptionally gifted, on the other hand, will often require special attention if they are to make the most of their gifts.

A threshold of this kind is not built into intelligence tests themselves, but comes into existence as a result of individuals' attempts to cope with their social environment. It begins to form when gifted children are introduced into the formal school system, and is basically the consequence of two factors: the frequency of like-minded contemporaries available and the degree of educational mastery already attained by the child. For a gifted child scoring in the optimum range, the school environment is something of a social paradise. He generally enjoys school work, and is intelligent enough to master the curriculum with ease. And, while he is more intelligent than most of his classmates, he is not so different from them that he can't win the confidence of large numbers of his fellow students, which brings about leadership. He manages his life with superior efficiency. Furthermore, there are enough others like him to provide a sufficient number of like-minded companions. He seldom suffers from loneliness or social isolation. He is the class leader, the valedictorian, and in adulthood he usually becomes a professional. He tends to rise into the upper middle class, if he was not born into it, and to enjoy most of the prestige and economic rewards our society has to offer.

However, even the child with an IQ of 145 is sufficiently intelligent to find school work below the college level intolerably boring. The child with an IQ of 155 or more is at an even greater disadvantage, and is so advanced that he is likely to regard school not only with indifference but with positive hatred. He generally has mastered the school curriculum several grades beyond his current placement, and finds no challenge in doing the work assigned to him. Moreover, he is often put into the care of dull-minded and unworthy adults who have little sympathy for his needs. The child knows that something is terribly wrong, but may not realize what his problem is. He may, in desperation, turn rebellious, lashing out at a world that isolates and tortures him. Surrounded by unfeeling and stupid adults, he may acquire a contempt for authority that will carry over into adulthood, causing him lifelong problems. Nor does he have the support of his intellectual peers, as do those with IQs falling in the optimum range.

Because of the rarity of his ability, he often has to contend with loneliness and isolation throughout the period of his immaturity. If he manages to resist forming attitudes of rebellion and cynicism, he may find companionship in learned societies and the like when he
reaches adulthood. But even so, he frequently never overcomes the habits of solitude, shyness, and self-depreciation that were forged for him in childhood.

The threshold dividing the gifted into optimum and suboptimum adjustment ranges is not a fixed boundary, but may vary from place to place depending on environmental conditions. In small, isolated communities the threshold will form lower than 145 IQ, whereas in sophisticated urban areas with a large professional class it will form at a somewhat higher level. The 145 level, however, is probably a good average for the nation taken as a whole. But wherever it forms, it is not due simply to chance. It forms at the level it does as a consequence of what might be called the communication theory of intelligence. Leta Hollingworth made the following observation in her book, Children Above 180IQ:

Observation shows that there is a direct ratio between the intelligence of the leader and that of the led. To be a leader of his contemporaries a child must be more intelligent but not too much more intelligent than those to be led.

But, generally speaking, a leadership pattern will not form - or it will break up - when a discrepancy of more than about 30 points of IQ comes to exist between the leader and the led.

If a leadership pattern will not form - or will break up - when the intelligence span is greater than about 30 points, then the implication seems to be that there is a limit beyond which genuine communications between different levels of intelligence become impossible. This concept should then carry over into all aspects of social interaction, not just those between leader and led. This explains why the optimum-suboptimum threshold forms where it does.

The individual with an IQ of 140 is within communication range of 25 percent of the general population. An individual with an IQ of 150 has access to only about 10 per cent of the human race. The truly exceptional individual with an IQ of 180 will find himself cut off from all but one-tenth of one percent of his own kind. The threshold appears to form, then, at the level at which only about 15 percent of a person's contemporaries are like-minded enough to make congenial companions. In essence, the threshold is a communications barrier that isolates the exceptionally gifted individual from those around him. For this reason, his childhood is not too unlike that of the deaf or neglected or even the feral child. If, in addition, he is exploited as a prodigy - treated as an object - then all these soul-searing conditions may unite to destroy him. Little wonder that child prodigies are mistakenly thought to burn out at an early age.

They don't burn out; they're cremated alive.

Gifted people are especially vulnerable to four kinds of adjustment problems not often faced by other people. As a result of their abilities, they are likely to fall into the habit of leading an effortless existence. They often fail to acquire that habit of disciplined, persistent effort that is necessary to accomplish anything of real importance. Mensans are especially noteworthy for this failing. In fact, Mensans do their best to make their frivolity into a virtue: keep it light, keep it simple, have fun! Where two or three are gathered together in Mensa's name, it will always be time for a party. This is not fostering intelligence, whatever Mensa may claim for itself publicly. This is contempt for the human mind.

Another adjustment problem faced by the gifted is the result of their uncommon versatility. They are capable of doing so many things well that they have a tendency to spread themselves too thin. No one, however gifted, has the time and resources to do all the things
he would like to do. To be effective, he must make some choice among the numerous possibilities. Mensans frequently succumb to this problem, too. Their many career changes, as well as their passion for trivia, are legendary, and both are diagnostic signs of this adjustment problem. The feeling prevailing among many Mensans - "If I'm so smart, why can't I do better with my life?" - is due mainly to this failing and the one just discussed. Many Mensans have never learned that the secret of success is to put all of one's eggs in one basket - and then to watch that basket.

Among the more serious problems faced by the gifted is that of learning to suffer fools gladly: to tolerate in some reasonable fashion the unreasonableness of others. Mensans actually do this far better than they believe, and the reason they do is that few of them were ever subjected to a gifted-education program. To learn to suffer fools gladly, one must have some of them in his environment on whom to practice. Removing a child from the ordinary schoolroom and isolating him in a special class denies him the opportunity to learn the most important lesson of his life. To learn this lesson is far more important than that any school subject be mastered. Contrary to what many Mensans believe, gifted education has neither a positive nor a negative effect on a child's academic achievement. Nor does it prevent boredom in the classroom. Gifted children who have been in both kinds of classes will often say that both are equally boring. So, if gifted programs do not aid the child academically or spare him tedium, and if they hinder his social adjustment, then on balance they deserve to be jettisoned. But the value of gifted education depends to a large extent on the uses made of the adjustment threshold. For those falling below the threshold, which includes most Mensans, gifted education makes no sense and may in fact be detrimental. For those scoring above the threshold, however, inclusion in an ordinary classroom also makes no sense, as they are incapable of benefiting in any way from the experience. In fact, the experience may prove permanently injurious for reasons already discussed. Gifted education appears to make sense, then, only when giftedness is defined as having an IQ falling in the suboptimum adjustment range of intelligence.

In the final analysis, though, no problem is more severe or more long-lasting than that of social isolation. It is a problem seldom faced by those in the optimum adjustment range, and only a few Mensans have ever experienced its full force. For the person scoring above the adjustment threshold, however, the problem can be acute. For him, the problem of social isolation may indeed be insoluble. Except in large metropolitan areas, there may not be enough others like him in the same age range to compose even a moderate-sized class. The exceptionally gifted individual, therefore, must come to terms with a world in which he is unlikely ever to meet his peer. His strategy for adjusting to his world must include a stoic acceptance of lifelong solitude. For him, being a loner is not the sign of maladjustment it is for others, but a realistic adaptation to an intractable world.

Nevertheless, being a loner does not preclude his making friends or caring about other people; it only means that he will often feel like a visitor from another planet, or like an adult surrounded by children. He may love those around him, but he must learn that he is separated from them by a gulf that cannot be crossed.

The kind of social adaptation made by the exceptionally gifted adult is far more subject to the accidental features of his youth than that of the more moderately gifted. If he is born into a family of professionals with a tradition of education and accomplishment, then he will probably be recognized at an early age and some provision made for his abilities. What's more, he will have role models of talented, educated adults to serve as a guide for his values and to provide some of the intellectual companionship he might otherwise lack. But all too often the exceptionally gifted individual is born into an environment in which these features are lacking. Consequently, due to his social isolation, he tends to acquire his values
and role models exclusively from books. Because his reading is usually unsystematic, these values tend to be a mélange of often contradictory ideas that become fused into an idiosyncratic world view. Not having feedback from mentors or peers to correct these ideas, he will often become an eccentric adult, sometimes to the point of appearing bizarre to others. Because he lacks feedback, he may come to place such implicit trust in his own judgment that he will ignore or execrate all opinions but his own. If he fails to acquire the critical skills of the scholar, which is often the case, he may even become an utter crackpot, living in a kind of self-made dream world.

At some point in his life he must decide what he should do about the "real world." He may decide to conquer it. If he does, then he may become the most competitive of men, especially if he had many frustrating experiences with authority figures in his youth. If these left a residue of resentment and cynicism, he may indeed become truly ruthless. Often, however, he will adopt the same isolated lifestyle he was forced into when young. He may prefer solitude and books for the rest of his life. He often turns out to be a shy, inhibited, lifelong bachelor. He may even choose his life's work on the basis of which career will provide the most solitude. In fact, this need may prove so overpowering that he will willingly accept low-paying and even menial occupations to preserve his isolation. Moreover, he will typically be found to suffer from chronic or cyclic bouts of depression. Whether this is the result of his lifestyle, or whether he differs metabolically from others, is hard to say. What is certain is that the exceptionally gifted individual is especially vulnerable to some of the most severe forms of social maladjustment.

On the other hand, scoring in the optimum adjustment range does not produce absolute immunity to problems of social adaptation. As pointed out above, many Mensans have fallen victim to two minor forms of maladjustment: lack of self-discipline, and spreading themselves too thin. Most people in Mensa's IQ range have escaped these traps and made better use of their talents. But even a quick, informal survey will show that Mensa is very much underrepresented in all of the professions. Those that have acquired their PhDs or other necessary credentials find ample stimulation from their colleagues and from belonging to professional organizations. They have no need of Mensa. In fact, in some fields, acknowledging one's membership in Mensa would prove the kiss of death, professionally.

What all of these people have proven is that they are capable of prolonged, disciplined effort. Mensa, on the other hand, tends to attract those that are equally talented, but who are incapable of focusing their efforts for any length of time. It may be that by the time a person becomes a Mensan his habits are already so firmly set that they can no longer be changed. But if Mensa as an organization took its goal of fostering intelligence seriously, it would strain every nerve to do so. Instead, it does everything it can to reinforce these bad habits and to rationalize them. Simply by presenting an unfocused lifestyle as acceptable behavior for the intellectually gifted, it does its members an injury. Make no mistake: Membership in Mensa can prove hazardous to one's fullest self-development.

There is nothing inevitable about social maladjustment at any IQ level. The risks may be greater at high levels, but they can be reduced by discovering their causes and doing something intelligent about them. Simply recognizing them for what they are is half the battle.

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