

13. Does smarter mean happier?

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We live in a competitive world, and one that's likely to stay so for the foreseeable future, as free markets appear to be the most efficient and effective way of organising ourselves. Enhancement technology will be used to make us better at things where there is already a sense of competition, and we will strive most to enhance ourselves in the most competitive areas of life.

This means we are more likely to focus on making ourselves smarter (because there are exams to be passed and promotions to be garnered) than on prioritising making ourselves more kind. There seems little competition for kindness or obvious reward for it (at least in a free market).

This skew in thinking about enhancement means, bluntly, that helping ourselves be smarter will be the priority – but are there downsides to being cleverer which might be overlooked in the race for elevated brain power? Also, given that new technology rarely benefits everyone equally, what are the problems inherent in a society where greater inequality in cleverness beckons for particular groups who can afford new enhancement technologies?

Smartness and suicide

These questions may appear abstruse to those outside the field of psychology and psychiatry, but within these disciplines real questions have been raised about the possibility that smart people are more

prone to suicide. If that is the case, seeking to raise IQ generally, regardless of the social or emotional consequences, would be cavalier.

The issue of whether having a higher IQ raises your chances of suicide is an intriguing one that psychologists have been grappling with for many years. A definitive answer may have been provided recently by one of the biggest studies conducted in the area by Martin Voracek, an academic at the University of Vienna Medical School, Austria. Voracek, in a study published recently in the prestigious journal *Personality and Individual Differences*,¹ compared suicide rates in 85 countries across the world with intelligence levels. The curious result is that the higher the average IQ in a country, the higher the suicide rate. The association is extremely statistically significant.

Voracek got the idea for his survey from the long-recognised fact that suicide rates are higher among college students than for same-age but less-educated young adults. One study even found that those at university who kill themselves tended to have had above-average grades compared with the general student body. Voracek argues that perhaps the strongest evidence that those with very high IQs are more likely to kill themselves comes from the 'Terman Genetic Study of Genius'. For this unique study, 1528 gifted children (857 boys and 671 girls), who were on average 11 years old, were identified in Californian public schools during the 1921/22 school year and were followed up over their entire life cycle. The inclusion criterion was an IQ of 140 or higher, meaning that all study participants ranked within the top 1 per cent of the population for intelligence. The average IQ of the group was 151.

During the observation period, 34 participants committed suicide, a rate almost three times that of the enrolment site for the study – California – and roughly four times the suicide mortality for the general population. But Voracek points out that the high suicide mortality in the Terman study is even more interesting in light of the fact that this sample was also found generally to live much longer and be in better physical health, relative to the corresponding general population. As a consequence, one in 11 male deaths and one in 19

female deaths in the Terman sample were from suicide, which is an extremely skewed cause for mortality compared with the general population.

The burden of being brainy

If the accumulating evidence points to a higher suicide rate among the intellectually talented why might that be? Those with higher IQs tend to be more successful in life generally, across several domains, than those who are less smart. Indeed, Charles Murray, co-author of the best-selling book on IQ, *The Bell Curve*,² which controversially argued that there were profound racial and gender differences in IQ, points out that as society becomes more technological, IQ will increasingly determine success in life. Being smart is going to matter more and more in the future, whereas in the past being physically strong or being born to powerful or rich parents was the key. As technological advances ensure that complexity, speed and change will increasingly be the key features of our society, we will all need to be smarter to contend with these changes.

If this is the case, why then the higher suicide rates among smarter people? One theory is that perhaps the unusual amount of self-awareness and desire to excel among the brainy means they put more pressure on themselves. Yet surely the clever should have the insight to see what they are doing to themselves?

Robert Sternberg, Professor of Psychology at Yale University and one of the world's leading authorities on IQ, isn't so sure. He argues that smart people can act foolishly by virtue of thinking they are too smart to do so. He points out some key cognitive fallacies that those with higher IQs are paradoxically more prone to which result in foolish behaviour.

The first is 'unrealistic optimism', whereby Sternberg argues the clever believe they are so clever that they can do whatever they want and not have to worry about it. Another feature of the brainy, according to Sternberg, is 'egocentrism', whereby they focus on themselves and what benefits them while discounting or even totally ignoring their responsibilities to others, who are less smart. A

particularly grave cognitive error the intellectual commit is that of ‘omniscience’, whereby they believe they know everything, instead of realising that they don’t know everything.

Sternberg proposes that the key to life is not to strive to be clever, but rather to be wise. This requires, he contends, an interest in the common good as a way of surviving in a world full of less intelligent, but no less worthy, people. The curious implication of Sternberg’s thesis is that the smart may find it tough living in a non-smart world, and need therefore to be aware of how to get on with those with lower IQs as a key life skill. Ironically, then, highly intelligent individuals may on average be less adapted to general living contexts, and as a result could be more prone to alienation from others, and therefore to suicide.

So it seems once you realise you are smart, the next key challenge is to find a way of getting on with those around you who don’t share your IQ, without dumbing down to an extent that depresses you. This could explain why those with high IQs cling on to each other for dear life – literally – when they find each other.

Enhancing emotional intelligence

Given the problems inherent in raising IQ or producing more IQ equality in society, perhaps it might be better to focus more on raising ‘EQ’ or emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence was a concept introduced to explain why so many with obviously high IQs do not seem to advance as expected in the real world, away from academia or the IQ testing station. The notion is that some people are brainy when it comes to pencil and paper tests but don’t know how to get on with others. They lack social skills, and this explains why they can checkmate you in four moves but can’t necessarily work out what to say or wear at an interview.

Having a high EQ means you can manage your emotions, and better recognise and influence the emotional state of others. Empathy and persuasion are key characteristics of those with high EQ, so maybe we should be trying to enhance EQ rather than IQ, as EQ helps us to cope better with differences in each other.

There is already a group of people among us who appear to have superior skills in this arena. Yet if these people are currently sidelined, what hope do we have of producing higher EQ generally in society at large? Their relative marginalisation or lack of success suggests EQ is not valued in the way it needs to be for it to be part of a human enhancement programme. This group of people are technically referred to within the field as women.

Gender, conflict and happiness

An example of the benefits of being a woman when it comes to reducing conflict was effectively demonstrated by some intriguing research conducted by two political scientists in the United States (one of whom was a man incidentally). The researchers looked at all the countries involved in international conflicts around the world over the last 50 years and found that the more women were involved in the leadership of a society, the less militarily aggressive the society was, and the lower the probability of violent conflict with other countries.

The researchers, Mary Caprioli and Mark Boyer, argue that their study, which was published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*,³ is strong evidence for the proposition that, generally, women work for peace and men wage war. Women are more likely to use a collective or consensual approach to problem-solving, rather than an approach that focuses on the unilateral imposition of solutions.

Psychologically, at quite a profound level, men tend to engage in power struggles for personal gain, whereas females tend to attempt to minimise power differences, to share resources, and to treat others equally. Yet despite these advantages of female leadership, according to the research conducted by Caprioli and Boyer, only 24 countries around the world have placed a female leader in office since 1900. Only 16.6 per cent of these countries led by a woman were involved in international crises at any point during the period of female leadership, and none of these female leaders initiated the crises.

The researchers used political equality, measured as the percentage of women in parliament, as a measure of gender equality within

society. Put simply, their finding is that as the percentage of women in the legislature of a country increases, the less severe is the violence between countries. Indeed, if the percentage of women in the legislature increases by 5 per cent, a state is nearly five times less likely to use violence internationally.

In terms of the current warlike position of the USA compared with more pacifist Europe, it is interesting to note that the US has far fewer women in its legislature compared with most European countries – for the US the figure is just over 14 per cent compared with Sweden at 42 per cent. Indeed, Scandinavian countries take the top six consecutive spots in the world league table for highest female representation in parliament – followed by Germany with 32 per cent. The UK, which has arguably been more aggressive in recent conflicts than the rest of Europe, is down at 17.9 per cent.

One theory behind this, argue Caprioli and Boyer, is that competition, violence, intransigence and territoriality are all associated with a male approach to international relations. Women, on the other hand, are less likely to see crisis negotiation as a competition or to advocate the use of violence as a solution. That said, female leaders are often perceived to be just as aggressive as men. Leaders of recent years such as Margaret Thatcher, Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi and Golda Meir were seen as hawks rather than doves, and all were caught up in violent conflicts.

But perhaps female leaders must also contend with negative perceptions from male opponents. For example, gender was a factor in the events and resolution of the 1971 Indo–Pakistan war in which Indira Gandhi had a key role. Caprioli and Boyer remind us that President Yahya Khan of Pakistan stated that he would have reacted less violently and been less rigid as the leader of Pakistan in the conflict with India if a male had headed the Indian government. Indeed, President Khan was quoted as saying: ‘If that woman [Indira Gandhi] thinks she is going to cow me down, I refuse to take it.’ So the behaviour of male leaders when faced with a female opponent becomes a factor – a sense of macho pride which makes them unwilling to ‘lose’ to a woman, lest their masculinity be questioned.

Female leaders who have risen to power through a male-dominated political environment may well need to be more aggressive than their male counterparts in crisis, argue Caprioli and Boyer. Although differences exist in male and female leadership styles, women in positions of power may find themselves compelled to convey their strength in traditional male terms. And they may also work harder to 'win' in a crisis for the same reasons, because to respond in a more feminine way would be seen as 'weakness' and would be political suicide.

Caprioli and Boyer's research suggests that we don't just need more women in parliaments and legislatures, but also to live in societies that embrace more feminine values, so that women who succeed will feel less pressure to be more like men. This view is supported by Ruut Veenhoven of Erasmus University, a leading expert on happiness who recently published a study that found all over the world people are happier in more feminine nations.

Veenhoven defines masculine cultures as those which expect men to be assertive, ambitious and competitive, to strive for material success, and to respect whatever is big, strong and fast. These cultures expect women to serve and to care for the non-material side of life, for children and the weak. Feminine cultures, on the other hand, define relatively overlapping social roles for the sexes, in which men need not be ambitious or competitive but may go for a different goal in life than material success; men may respect that which is small, weak and slow.

So, in more masculine cultures (such as Japan, Austria and Venezuela) political and organisational values emphasise material success and assertiveness, whereas in more feminine cultures (like Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands) they accentuate other values, interpersonal relationships, and sympathy and concern for the weak.

If people are happier in feminine societies and these countries tend to get involved in less conflict with their neighbours, maybe the key enhancement that will produce most well-being in the future would be for us to become in some senses more feminine. This, in the sense conveyed by this research, means more empathic, kind and caring,

more aware of others' emotional states and more able to influence our own and others' emotions.

This should be our priority rather than merely aiming to raise IQ. Ironically, this enhancement strategy requires us not to become different in order to improve, but rather to become more like the good parts of ourselves. Enhanced people are already walking around among us, but we tend to ignore them. We do this at our peril and new technologies will not save us from this mistake.

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Notes

- 1 M Voracek, 'National intelligence and suicide rate: an ecological study of 85 countries', *Personality and Individual Differences* 37 (2004).
- 2 RJ Herrnstein and C Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
- 3 M Caprioli and M Boyer, 'Gender, violence, and international crisis', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no 4 (2001).