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From the issue dated January 30, 2009

NOTA BENE

Irrational Intelligence; Get Smarter

By KACIE GLENN

Ever bought a 12-foot Christmas tree for a 10-foot-high apartment? Picked up a hitchhiker in a nasty part of town? Or, perhaps, taken out a mortgage you couldn't afford? The good news is that poor decision-making skills may have little effect on your IQ score, according to Keith E. Stanovich, author of **What Intelligence Tests Miss: The Psychology of Rational Thought** (Yale University Press). The bad news? He thinks you'd lose a few points on a more-accurate gauge of intelligence.

Stanovich, an adjunct professor of human development and applied psychology at the University of Toronto, believes that the concept of intelligence, as measured by IQ tests, fails to capture key aspects of mental ability. But that doesn't mean he discounts the tests' credibility: "Readers might well expect me to say that IQ tests do not measure anything important, or that there are many kinds of intelligence, or that all people are intelligent in their own way," he writes. After all, theories about emotional and social intelligence — which weigh interpersonal skills, the ability to empathize, and other "supracognitive" characteristics — have gained popularity in recent years, in part by de-emphasizing the importance of IQ.

Instead, Stanovich suggests that IQ tests focus on valuable qualities and capacities that are highly relevant to our daily lives. But he believes the tests would be far more effective if they took into account not only mental "brightness" but also rationality — including such abilities as "judicious decision making, efficient behavioral regulation, sensible goal prioritization ... [and] the proper calibration of evidence."

Our understanding of intelligence, he writes, has been muddled by the discrepancy between the vague, comprehensive vernacular term, which encompasses all the functions and manifestations of "smarts," and the narrower theories that "confine the concept of intelligence to the set of mental abilities actually tested on extant IQ tests." The latter conceptualization allows intelligence to coexist with foolishness because IQ tests do not measure the rationality required to abstain from dumb decisions, according to the author. Casual observers, however, usually define intelligence broadly and are confused by inconsistencies: "Blatantly irrational acts committed by people of obvious intelligence ... shock and surprise us and call out for explanation."

The author notes that because most people — even educators and psychologists — accept test-defined intelligence as a fair assessment of mental faculties, we tend to dismiss inconsistencies between a person's IQ scores and rationality as indicators of a disorder or learning disability. So persistent is that faulty logic that "we are almost obligated to create a new disability category when an important skill domain is found to be somewhat dissociated from intelligence." As long as we continue to worship IQ tests that do not assess rational thought processes, we will continue to misjudge our own and others' cognitive abilities, warns the scholar.

In an earlier work, Stanovich coined his own term — dysrationalia — for "the inability to think and behave rationally despite adequate intelligence." That "disorder," he suggests, might afflict some of the smartest people you know.

In an age of Baby Einstein DVD's and French lessons for 5-year-olds, it may seem passé to suggest that a child's IQ is determined primarily by genetics. But until recently, writes Richard E. Nisbett in **Intelligence and How to Get It: Why Schools and Cultures Count** (Norton), most scientists who studied intelligence believed "that the overwhelming importance of heritability meant that the environment could do little and that social programs intended to improve intelligence were doomed to failure." Nisbett argues that a variety of social, cultural, and economic factors can significantly affect a child's IQ, and suggests ways to improve intelligence scores, as well as grades, by manipulating those factors.

Often-cited studies have shown that the difference in IQ between identical twins raised apart is only

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slightly less than the difference between twins raised together, whereas the correlation between the intelligence scores of a parent who adopts a child and that child is slim. Yet, Nisbett reminds us, even separated twins are likelier to grow up under similar economic and social conditions than two people chosen at random, and they might even be treated similarly because of shared looks and other characteristics in common. At the same time, most adoptive families are well-off and nurturing. The consistency of those environmental factors makes their impact on a child's intelligence seem smaller than it really is.

Opinions have changed over the last few years, and many scientists would now agree, "If you were to average the contribution of genetics to IQ over different social classes, you would probably find 50 percent to be the maximum contribution of genetics," says Nisbett, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Class is a crucial determinant of intelligence; adoption studies, for example, have indicated that "raising someone in an upper-middle-class environment versus a lower-class environment is worth 12 to 18 points of IQ — a truly massive effect," he says. Children of middle-class parents are read to, spoken to, and encouraged more than children of working-class parents, all experiences that influence intellectual development.

Intelligence and How to Get It also examines how better schooling boosts IQ scores and how school systems can improve. Nisbett cautions that more money does not always equate to higher-quality education, and that parents who take advantage of vouchers to move their children to better schools are a self-selecting group of people who are motivated to help their children excel academically, which leads some researchers to overestimate the vouchers' effectiveness. On the other hand, he finds that class size and teachers' experience and skills can make a big difference, especially for poor and minority children. He notes, too, that children who are exposed to "instructional technologies" in the classroom benefit intellectually; working with word-processing programs, for example, can help students learn to read faster, which leads to further advantages.

The psychologist maintains that there are myriad ways to enhance a child's intelligence by changing his or her learning environment. Young kids who emulate their parents' self-control go on to achieve better grades and higher SAT scores than those who don't. They also learn better, and therefore are more successful in school and have a higher IQ, when they are praised for working hard but not offered incentives to do activities they already show interest in: The danger is turning play and learning into work. It couldn't hurt to angle for access to the best schools and most-experienced teachers, either, Nesbitt suggests.

"Intellectual capital" — which more fully captures academic potential than IQ, he says — "is the result of stimulation and support for exploration and achievement in the home, the neighborhood, and the schools." Nurturing young people's minds might not override their DNA, the author admits, but it does help them achieve their intellectual potential.

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