

ONCE UPON A TIME.....

# CRIMES OF INTELLECTUAL EGOTISM

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We engineers are a group of people who usually do well on an IQ test. Many of us, at one time or another, might have also been told that we were very smart by Mensa or some other organisation. Don't let such nonsense go into your head. Such testing has its uses, but it is unfortunately frequently misused and misunderstood.

Instead of taking the whole business of intelligence testing at face value, people should take a look at the history of this monstrous thing. The late Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* is a masterful exposé. It is a story of a bunch of egotists who have essentially perpetrated a crime against humanity.

The roots of intelligence measurement dates back to the mid-19th century, when predominantly white scientists sought to explain racism using the theory of evolution, which was in vogue back then. Without much scientific data, even people who had sincere intentions were biased due to the practice of slavery and the influence of culture. Thus, even enlightened people like Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin did not think that whites and blacks were biologically equal. Quite shocking, but true.

Louis Agassiz and Samuel Morton did much to promote the theory of separate species, or polygeny, during that period. Their work was hopelessly biased by personal prejudices. Morton attempted to explain the superiority of Caucasians by measuring skull capacities. That he did, by marvellously creative manipulation of raw data. Of course, he found that Caucasians were superior. A reexamination of Morton's data showed no significant statistical difference whatsoever.

In Italy, Cesare Lombroso convinced himself that he could determine whether a person had criminal tendencies using facial features alone. Chillingly, some supporters proposed preemptive measures to curb "born criminals", since such individuals can be identified using Lombrosian methods. That is to say, if you are not born beautiful, you stand a chance of being forcibly selected for free institutionalisation, plus a lobotomy thrown in at no extra charge.

At the turn of the century, Alfred Binet worked on measuring intelligence among school-going children. Binet started with measuring skulls, then later switching to psychological methods. In 1905, Binet published a basic test, and in 1912, W. Stern created the intelligence quotient, or IQ. To his credit, Binet never intended for IQ to be a measure of inborn intelligence. The original aim was to test children so that those who do poorly can get extra attention. Unfortunately, others took IQ testing and ran with it. Lewis Terman and Robert Yerkes had unbridled ambition, and did much to turn IQ testing into the monstrosity it is today.

Some researchers were so arrogantly enamoured of their methods that they confidently tagged people with labels like idiots, imbeciles and morons. They believe that such feeble-minded people cannot be trusted with responsible work. Their results were also used by élites to justify their illusory superior status, to argue that the general public should be subservient to them, or to promote eugenics. The cost of this perversion against humanity isn't clear-cut, but it is enormous.

Even today, many people continue to abuse the use of IQ testing in education. There is a difference between helping weak students and a pure popularity contest. And science continue to be twisted. Sir Cyril Burt, a famous psychologist and avid intelligence tester, is a sad example of science gone awry. Burt engaged in wholesale fraud, to the extent of creating non-existent collaborators and data. He too, saw what he wanted desperately to see.

An engineer or person who touts his or her IQ score or Mensa membership is merely showcasing ignorance. The person may be logical-mathematical smart, but even that is very much dependent on socio-environment setting and opportunities. Pity the foolish and deluded who value IQ scores too highly. Those who actually call themselves geniuses need to be bashed on their heads. Free your mind from the tyranny of intellectual measurement. Artificial barriers should not be erected to stifle human potential, which is limitless. ■