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# The Intelligence Paradox

Intelligent people are more likely to binge drink, take drugs and cheat on their partners. And that is the least of it... Because intelligent people – and intelligent women in particular – are “committing the ultimate crime against nature” by remaining childless or having fewer babies. These are among the conclusions of an astonishing new book, *The Intelligence Paradox*, by Satoshi Kanazawa. A book which immediately upon reading the subtitle – “why the intelligent choice isn’t always the smart one” – you suspect might not be a Mensa-friendly work.

**Text:** Brian Page  
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Why the intelligent choice isn't always the smart one

“In this book I want to break this equation of intelligence with human worth,” Kanazawa writes in the introduction, “by pointing out that intelligence (and intelligent people) may not be what you think. While more intelligent people can do many things better and more efficiently than less intelligent people, there are many things that they cannot... intelligent people tend not to be good at doing things that are most important in life.”

Given that sweeping premise, it might come as a surprise, then, to find that Satoshi Kanazawa is himself a Mensa member. So when it comes to our interview and I ask, as an opening question, what has he got against intelligent people, Kanazawa is keen to get things straight. It’s not about people, it’s about science. And the science of intelligence in particular. “I have absolutely nothing against intelligent people, or anybody else. What I do not like, however, is people’s irrational response to intelligence research and some of its key findings. For example, both academics and civilians alike dismiss out of hand any finding in intelligence research that shows that there just may be observable group differences in intelligence. As I argue

in the book, I believe this is because people equate intelligence with human worth and believe that to say that some individuals are less intelligent than others is tantamount to saying that these individuals are less worthy humans. I want to break this equation of intelligence with human worth and show that intelligence, while a positive trait, is one among many such positive traits that humans possess and vary on. I want to show that more intelligent people are not ipso facto more worthy, better human beings, any more than taller, more athletic, or more beautiful people are.” That’s certainly a challenging position – but then this is a book rich in challenging ideas. And some of them, as we will come to later, highly controversial. It’s an utterly absorbing read and one which Kanazawa believes also goes some way in explaining why some people choose to do certain things – what are our guiding preferences and values and how did we acquire them? Explaining that he had two goals in writing the book, he says: “I hope that my readers will gain some understanding of why different people want and like different things and how such differences are related to intelligence. And I hope that my readers will stop equating intelligence with ultimate human worth. Yes, intelligence is a good thing, but then so are height, health, and beauty. Intelligence is just one among many positive traits on which humans vary, and it’s okay that they do.”

To look more closely at Kanazawa’s theories it is first important to understand that they are based on what he describes as the ‘Savanna Principle’. This, in brief, is that the human brain has difficulty comprehending and dealing with entities and situations that did not exist in the ancestral environment. Or, to put it another way, the human brain has not changed since the first anatomically modern man emerged on the African Savanna and still responds to its environment as it did then. You, the person, might know that you are living in the 21st Century as a doctor in Leeds, a teacher in Bristol or a computer programmer in London – but your brain does not know that.

Kanazawa explains: “It is true that we are no longer living in a hunter-gatherer bands of 150 people on the African savanna, as our ancestors did for hundreds of thousands of years; we are instead living in a metropolis of ten million people in London. But our brain doesn’t know that. Our brain – in fact, our entire body from head to toe – is exactly the same as it was 200,000 years ago, when the anatomically modern human first emerged on the African savanna. Our brain therefore cannot truly comprehend anything that emerged since then, and our brain still assumes that we are hunter-gatherers living on the African Savanna. In other words, while our environment has changed dramatically in the last 10,000 years, we haven’t. For example, this is why, according to the Oxford evolutionary psychologist Robin I. M. Dunbar, we send Christmas cards to about 150 people every year, and soap operas in their entire broadcast histories have about 150 characters. Our stone-age human brains cannot keep track of more than about 150 people at a time.” And this is where the way in which intelligent people behave in a more modern world become interesting – and obviously fascinates Kanazawa.

The way in which intelligent people act is, in certain circumstances, different from the actions of their less intelligent compatriots. And not always for the better. Again, in basic form, intelligent people respond to “evolutionarily novel” situa-

tions – that is events and circumstances which have arisen only in the last 10,000 years or so – in a different way than less intelligent people. “The distinction between the evolutionarily familiar – entities and situations that existed more than 10,000 years ago – and the evolutionarily novel, those that came into existence in the last 10,000 years, is very important,” says Kanazawa, “because the human brain responds to them differently.” Back on the Savanna, people who strayed from the evolutionarily familiar – what in its most absolute form might be called ‘common sense’ – tended not to last long. If, for instance, they strayed from the normal domain they were more likely to fall prey to predators; or if they rejected the taste of sweet and fatty foods in favour of a vegetarian diet they died out before leaving many offspring. Interestingly, Kanazawa believes that it was in this era that what is now known as general



Satoshi Kanazawa



intelligence may have evolved as “a domain-specific adaptation to deal with evolutionarily novel, non-recurrent problems.” Because generation after generation lived their hunter-gatherer lives on the savanna with precious little change over tens of thousands of years they did not really have to think to solve adaptive problems. But, occasionally, evolutionarily novel problems occurred which needed thought to be solved. How do you prevent a fire spreading to the camp and help the family escape? How do you find new foods to eat safely in a severe drought? What do you do when a flash flood cuts you off from your rest of your band? These problems would have arisen often enough and would have posed a significant enough threat to survival and reproduction that a genetic mutation would occur which allowed its carriers to think and reason – and this would have been ‘selected for’ in successive generations. The evolution of intelligence.

Also, interestingly, Kanazawa points out that flash floods, fires and droughts aside, this ‘intelligence’, or thinking differently from the norm, could actually be a drawback. In certain situations, for instance, more intelligent people tend to “over-think” the issue at hand. Because ‘common sense’ is evolutionarily familiar it quite often presents us with the simplest and easiest solution to a problem. ‘Evolutionarily novel’ people, however tend to reject such simplistic answers and instead adopt unnecessarily complex ideas simply because their intelligence allows them to – even when their solutions might be completely wrong. Back on the savanna this could have dire consequences for the band – when instant action was needed the last thing called for was a long and unnecessarily complex plan of attack! And today, while we may no longer live in hunter-gatherer bands, this kind of ‘non common sense’ thinking displayed by intelligent people – going against what we have been evolutionarily designed to do – could also have dangerous results, both for society and the individual, says Kanazawa. This is at the heart of what Kanazawa calls the Intelligence Paradox of the book title, described as: “More intelligent

individuals are more likely to acquire and espouse evolutionarily novel preferences and values that did not exist in the ancestral environment (and thus our ancestors did not have) than less intelligent individuals. In contrast, general intelligence has no effect on the acquisition and espousal of evolutionarily familiar preferences and values that existed in the ancestral environment (and thus our ancestors had).” Or, put another way, the Intelligence Paradox is that more intelligent individuals are more likely to acquire and espouse ‘unnatural’ preferences and values which we are not evolutionarily designed to have. “More intelligent individuals are more likely to go against their biological design, escape their evolutionary constraints and limitations on their brains and hence have unnatural and often biologically stupid preferences and values,” Kanazawa writes. “Yes, more intelligent people are more likely to be stupid and do stupid things.”

So how do these ‘stupid’ choices manifest themselves? Kanazawa has drawn intensively on a series of research studies and data in drawing some interesting conclusions. Several of these – including studies showing intelligent people are more likely to smoke, to binge drink and take drugs – are detailed in panels around this article. In these examples any resultant ‘damage’ is caused, largely, to the individuals themselves. It is those that have a more ‘societal’ effect, however, with which Kanazawa appears most concerned – and those that are “unnatural biological decisions” in particular. And it is here that Kanazawa not just flirts with controversy but throws himself over a cliff with it!

Intelligent women, he says, are “committing the ultimate crime against nature” because they are more likely to remain childless or have fewer babies than less intelligent women. This, he says, “is the worst thing you could possibly do in your life”. It should be said, here, that Kanazawa is speaking strictly from a genetic perspective and is making no ‘moral’ conclusions. Even so, his conclusions are likely to cause offence, even if rooted in scien-

tific logic. His findings are based on several major research studies, in particular the UK-based National Child Development Study, which is one of the world’s oldest longitudinal studies and has followed the lives of 17,000 babies born in March 1958, with interviews carried out eight times at intervals between the ages of seven and 51 and a range of multiple intelligence and cognitive tests at the ages of seven, 11 and 16. Among the many areas examined was a link between childhood intelligence and a desire (or in this instance lack of it) to have children. More intelligent girls were more likely to respond that they did not want children. Interviewed at the age of 23, the respondents were again asked if they wanted children. Those who again said no had a higher IQ than those who said yes. And the difference was significant. Those who said they wanted no children had a mean childhood IQ of 105.5. Those who said they wanted children had a mean childhood IQ of 99.9.

There was a similar picture when the number of women who had had children was analysed (when they were aged 47). The mean childhood IQ figures here were 105.3 for those who had not had children as against 101.7 for those who did have children. Intriguingly the same situation did not apply for intelligent men; despite wishing to have fewer children at the age of 23 they did not actually have fewer children at the age of 47. This, the book points out, is significant. The genes thought to influence general intelligence are located on the X chromosomes, which means that boys inherit their general intelligence from their mothers only while girls inherit their general intelligence from their mothers and their fathers. Because their fathers inherit their general intelligence from their mothers, women strongly influence the general intelligence of future generations. And if intelligent women are having none or fewer children, the conclusion is obvious. “The average level of general intelligence in society may decline over time,” Kanazawa writes. It is not just women having no or fewer children which Kanazawa highlights. More intelligent women who do have children tend to do so later in life, he reports – and that, at

least in one review of American life, leads to lower birth weights and motor and social development as well as higher incidences of behavioural problems. “This is precisely my point. Women with higher intelligence are not using their intelligence to marry early and have healthier children, which are the direct means to reproductive success,” Kanazawa writes.

In his conclusion to the book, Kanazawa is particularly hard-hitting. He notes that intelligent people make more money and attain higher status in organisations – because the capitalist economy and complex businesses are entirely evolutionarily novel and they are better equipped to do well in these circumstances. Intelligent people also make better physicians, astronauts, scientists and violinists for the same reason. “But,” he says, “these are the unimportant things in life.” And intelligent people fail, he says, at the most important things. “They do not make better friends, they do not

make better parents, precisely because these are things that our ancestors have done for hundreds of thousands of years on the African Savanna. Intelligent people, especially intelligent women, make the worst kind of parents, simply because they are least likely to be parents.” And intelligent people – especially intelligent women – have fewer children and are more likely to remain childless for life than less intelligent people. Strictly from the perspective of your genes, however, not having children, or having fewer children than you can safely raise to sexual maturity, is the worst thing you can possibly do in your life. You are failing at the most important task in life, the one thing – the most important thing – that you are evolutionarily designed to do. “Reproductive success is the ultimate goal of all living organisms, including all humans. That is what all humans are evolutionarily designed to do. It is the meaning of life itself. Voluntary childlessness is therefore the greatest crime against nature, which is why intelligent people do it.”

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