

# Retarded children mislabeled

## Basic ability found in California tests; apparently immune to poor environment

Except for a short period during infancy, the human brain is protected against the effects of starvation. While the body wastes away from lack of food, the brain, by all indications, remains physically unchanged.

Now it seems there is also a type of intelligence that is largely immune to the effects of a poor environment.

This basic learning ability or practical intelligence is equally distributed among social classes, and racial and ethnic groups, despite great disparities in economic and cultural background, according to evidence from a new set of mental tests developed in California.

Many apparently retarded children from lower-class minority groups possess a normal quota of basic learning ability. But because of abnormally low I.Q. scores—in the 60 to 90 point range—they are classified as retarded.

These children, however, do not look like other retardates, regardless of their I.Q. similarity. They seem brighter socially and on the playground. They can hit a ball and follow the rules of the game. Once out of school, they no longer appear mentally retarded and are usually able to perform normal blue-collar work without apparent handicap.

Retarded children from the middle class, on the other hand, invariably lack basic learning ability and are consequently far more disabled.

It was this obvious difference between social classes that led Dr. Arthur R. Jensen, psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and member of the National Academy of Sciences, to look for another level of ability not tapped by conventional intelligence tests.

He found what he calls "level 1 learning ability"—meaning the capacity to recall strings of items such as numbers and to make associations among them. Shown a series of paired pictures, the child with level 1 ability can later recall both pictures although he sees one of the pair. He has made an elementary association.

From his tests of retarded children, Dr. Jensen believes that as many as two-thirds of those from poor backgrounds have normal level 1 abilities. Moreover, scores taken from a suburban middle-class school were no higher than those from a ghetto school, de-

spite an average 19 point I.Q. gap between the two.

"To whatever extent environmental deprivation affects mental abilities, all abilities are not equally affected," says Dr. Jensen. Apparently level 1 ability represents a practical intelligence that has been essential for survival in every human culture.

Why this ability should be evenly distributed among all groups, varying only by individuals, while the more abstract intellectual processes measured on intelligence tests apparently are not, is a mystery yet to be solved.

Standard intelligence tests have consistently shown about a 20 point difference between middle- and lower-class children. Few scientists will attribute any of this difference to genetic inheritance.

As an alternative, some blame the I.Q. test for giving a culturally distorted view of intelligence. A more common explanation, however, holds that cultural training forces intellectual disparities between classes.

By this view, middle-class children with their cultural advantages are able to build level 1 learning ability into level 2 intelligence. This is the rational underlying Project Head Start and other preschool programs aimed at compensating lower-class children for their cultural disadvantages.

Dr. Jensen, however, questions both explanations. For their comparisons, the California researchers used a non-verbal intelligence test, supposedly culture-free. I.Q. gaps between the classes were as wide as ever.

Further, Dr. Jensen doubts that cultural background is all that powerful an influence on intelligence. He says there is good evidence that intelligence tests tap innate ability, not just cultural training. He further proposes that the two levels of mental ability are genetically independent, with level 1 ability acting as a necessary foundation for intelligence, but no guarantee of it, no matter what the child's cultural background.

Whatever the explanation, Dr. Jensen's measurement of a human mental ability that cuts across cultural lines, providing individuals with the native capacity to meet many demands outside school, should further reduce the dictatorial sway of the I.Q. tests.

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