Review of: "The Intelligence of Nations. National IQs. Update 2023."

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This article by R. Henss essentially shows that national IQ test scores by Lynn and Vanhanen (2012) are correlated with the mean results in standardized school test scores (PISA, TIMMS). The correlations between these tests have been showed by previous studies -which should be mentioned by the author- (Rindermann, 2007; Lynn and Mikk, 2009; Lynn and Meisenberg, 2010). The topic covered is complex and has many implications. In my opinion, it can hardly be summarized without considering the debate concerning: a) the measurement of IQ; b) the causes of international differences in IQ.

Let's start with this second aspect. The article states that: "Already thousands of years ago, people noticed that ethnic groups differ from each other in their cognitive abilities, even if a scientific concept was still a long way off". This statement - which, moreover, is not supported by any reference - assumes that the differences in IQ measured between ethnic groups/populations and, ultimately, races depend, at least in part, on genetic factors. This thesis has been supported by some scholars, in particular by Richard Lynn in some books and papers (e. g. Lynn and Vanhanen, 2006). As it is known, this is a controversial thesis because, to date, there is no direct (scientific) evidence that differences in mean IQ test scores (or in alternative measures) reflect genetic differences between populations (Hunt, 2012). In his article, Henss states that Lynn's book "was bitterly attacked from all sides. The accusations ranged from Measuring national intelligence is meaningless! to the inevitable screaming of Racism! Racism!" It can be noted that Lynn's research was "bitterly attacked" not because it contained national IQ data but, instead, because Lynn and co-authors proposed a genetic explanation of racial differences in IQ.

The causes of international IQ differences are debated. It is documented that education rises individuals' intelligence (Ritchie SJ, Tucker-Drob, 2018). Moreover, there is evidence that racial differences in IQ are related to differences in literacy skills (Marks, 2010). The importance of environmental factors is evident considering the increase in average IQ scores over time - the Flynn effect – documented for many nations (Flynn, 1987) and regions (Roivainen, 2012). On the basis of these evidence, one can wonder if differences in mean IQ test scores really reflect differences in populations' intelligence.

Similar questions arise when data on school achievement tests, such as OECD-PISA, are used to proxy national IQs. These tests are aimed to measure students' proficiency in some subjects. Although, clearly, at the individual level, educational achievements also depend on intelligence, differences between groups are influenced by socioeconomic and cultural factors, including school quality and educational curricula. After all, it is evident that children from socially and

culturally disadvantaged families have, on average, lower performances in school tests than their peers with better social and cultural backgrounds (von Stumm and Plomin, 2015).

Rindermann (2007) provided convincing evidence that, at the international level, IQ test scores and PISA test scores are strongly correlated. Thus, one might think that OECD PISA tests are a reliable measure of intelligence (even though a study based on four national datasets showed how the correlations between IQ and grades as well as between IQ and achievement tests are far from perfect (Borghans et al. 2016).

Alternatively, one might also think that international differences in average IQ test scores ultimately depend on the same environmental factors (social, cultural, in educational systems) that influence PISA test scores. The importance of environmental factors is evident both at the international and regional levels: for example, across Italian and Spanish regions, average score in OECD-PISA tests and the share of households in relative poverty within each region are strongly related (Daniele, 2021).

In other words, one may agree that both average IQ test scores and educational achievements measure “human capital”, but we do not know to what extent they actually measure populations’ intelligence. Even more so, we cannot state that international differences in IQ scores or educational achievement tests are due to genetic factors: reliable estimates of any genetic differences in average IQs would only be possible if the environmental conditions of nations taken into account were identical. But, as is evident, this is not the case when we look at countries or regions with different socioeconomic development levels. Given the magnitude of international socioeconomic disparities, in principle, IQ differences between populations could be entirely due to environmental factors (Dickens and Flynn, 2001; Hunt, 2012). If so, are IQ and PISA tests really a measure of population intelligence or, instead, are they an alternative measure of socioeconomic differences between nations?

I agree that the research on the determinants of international differences in IQ is of considerable interest. But equally, I believe that oversimplifications should be avoided.

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