



# Self-estimates of intelligence: culture and gender difference in self and other estimates of both general (g) and multiple intelligences

A. Furnham \*

*Department of Psychology, University College London, London, UK*

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## Abstract

This review paper examines two related areas of research: studies dating back over 50 years on lay theories of the nature and measurement of intelligence, and more recent research on sex and culture differences on self-estimated intelligence. The latter focus is on the nearly 20 published papers on estimated intelligence. Studies have shown consistent sex differences with males rating themselves higher than females. There are also consistent generational effects with adult participants believing around a half standard deviation difference in intelligence with their grandparents being least intelligent and children most. Self-estimated and psychometric intelligence only correlates weakly. Studies looking at self and other estimates of multiple intelligence indicated that participants seemed to believe that intelligence was male normative in that it was specifically those types of intelligence (mathematical and spatial) that most differentiated between the sexes that were themselves more predictive of general overall intelligence. Implications of these findings for intelligence testing are considered. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The definition and measurement of intelligence have always been academically controversial (Eysenck, 1998). However, even more than the topic of the heritability of IQ and environmental effects on IQ, it has been group differences in IQ (especially sex and race) that have produced considerable academic (Flynn, 1987; Lynn, 1998, 1999; MacIntosh 1998; Rodgers, 1999) and popular debate (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Hence there are now a number of popular books aimed at explaining various theories of intelligence to the layman (Gardner, 1999; Sternberg, 1997).

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\* Tel.: +44-20-7679-5395; fax: +44-20-7436-4276.

*E-mail address:* a.furnham@ucl.ac.uk

Issues incite considerable passion and even academic writers seem disposed to biting criticisms of their opponents. Thus, in one chapter Eysenck (1998) attacks Gardner (1983): “No wonder he gained high academic acclaim and a strongly partisan following — you only have to attack the IQ to become famous and popular; however nonsensical the attack, and however weak the alleged evidence for your system!” (p. 109); and Goleman (1996) “So the whole theory is built on quicksand; there is no sound scientific basis” (1996, p. 109).

The fact that academics write popular books about intelligence and lay people have long been interested in the topic suggests that they may be relatively well informed about it. Books on how to assess one's own IQ have been very popular (Eysenck, 1981) and it is now possible to find books aimed at parents which gives one an accurate estimate of their children's IQ as well as how to improve it (Eysenck & Evans, 1996; Schoenthaler, 1991). Newspapers often print “brain teaser” type questions and it is therefore likely that the average person has been well exposed to IQ tests of one sort or another.

This paper examines two features of intelligence — first lay theories and beliefs about intelligence and secondly recent studies on self- and other-estimates of intelligence. This is a non-trivial area of research for various reasons (Beyer, 1998; Beyer & Bowden, 1999). First, public beliefs and opinions can have significant social and educational consequences. Thus, if people believe intelligence and related ability tests are seriously biased or flawed they can put pressure on business and educational institutions who use them in selection, streaming or training to stop using them. It is equally true, but possibly rarer, for some people to campaign for the use of tests to prove their ability. The internationally well-known organization MENSAs seems to cater for people eager to get some comparative metric on their intelligence (Serebriakoff, 1985). A second reason why lay theories of intelligence of the self and others matter is that these can affect expectations and evaluations which, through various processes, can affect performance (Pomerantz & Ruble, 1997). As Beyer (1999) who has studied gender differences in self-perceptions of exam success has noted: “Self-perceptions that are out of touch with reality not only reveal a lack of self-knowledge, but may also impede effective self-regulation and goal setting in academic, professional and interpersonal situations” (p. 280). Thus, if one group of individuals in society erroneously believe they are generally or specifically less intelligent than others (the norm) they may confirm this hypothesis through their behaviour. On the other hand erroneous beliefs about superior intelligences may lead to arrogance and complacency.

Both of the above reasons suggest it is important to have a well informed and critical public when it comes to the concept and measurement of intelligence. This review will focus first on studies of lay theories of intelligence which have been done for over 50 years but secondly on the more recent research on group differences (sex, nationality) on the self and other perception of intelligence. The latter studies also throw light on lay theories of more recent concepts of intelligence like emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) and multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983, 1999).

## **2. Lay theories, models and metaphors of intelligence**

Studies on implicit studies of intelligence span over 50 years (Flugel, 1947; Shafer, 1999). Goodnow (1980) specified various ways in which one could investigate how lay people defined intelligence: by asking them, analysing local proverbs, checking the connotations of a term by

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