Lessons Beyond ‘The Bell Curve’

By Christopher Winship

A meeting of social scientists at the Harvard Business School last month, Richard Herrnstein’s and Charles Murray’s controversial book, "The Bell Curve," has come up. One group reported that in an earlier conversation they had thoroughly “trashed” the book. A second group of people was around the room in a spirited debate. I asked the room at large — about 20 people — how many had actually read the book. Two raised their hands.

The condemnation of "The Bell Curve" in the media has been clearly decisive and definitive, but some people have been more informed.

Most of the analysis has focused on the question raised in the book of whether I.Q. is hereditary and whether racial differences in I.Q. are predominantly due to environmental or genetic factors. The consensus appears to be that the book’s argument is inherently racist and that Mr. Herrnstein (October 11) and Mr. Murray are academic charlatans.

Yet, while their treatment of these issues has been bitterly criticized, much of "The Bell Curve" is not about race at all, and parts of it have been misrepresented. For example, a frequent assertion about "The Bell Curve" is that it argues that intelligence is essentially inherited. In fact, the authors make the weaker claim that, according to existing research, between 40 and 80 percent of differences in intelligence is in the genes. They adopt the middle of this range, 60 percent, as reasonable. If you think this amounts to arguing that intelligence is essentially inherited, ask yourself whether you would be essentially "receiving" the same pay if you received a 60 percent cut in salary.

Mr. Herrnstein and Mr. Murray have been rightly attacked for their shoddy and partial use of contradictory analysis of the relationship between race and intelligence. They are knowledgeable, for example, that there is no scientific way to determine even within broad ranges what proportion of the difference is due to environmental and what proportion due to genes. After offering this critical warning, however, the authors conclude that the racial gap is more likely genetic than environmental — a divisive and irresponsible line of argument.

Yet, in spite of its serious flaws, "The Bell Curve" offers three potentially valuable insights that should not be easily dismissed. The first is that social scientists have been increasingly cautious about linking intelligence and behavior, isn’t further study of a possible causal relationship needed? The second important point in "The Bell Curve" is that cognitive ability is largely immutable. Although the authors may well be overly pessimistic about the possibility of improving intellectual ability, surely we would be naive to think that simply increasing funding for early childhood education and job-training programs would be sufficient to compensate for the increasing gap between the highly educated and the barely literate in American society.

The book is flawed. But rage should not block important research.

The book has been made by others from widely different political perspectives, including Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. The dramatic increase over the last two decades in the differences in incomes between high school and college graduates is strong evidence of this trend.

The second important assertion is that limited cognitive skills are strongly associated with myriad social problems. The authors find that among the poor, the unemployed, high school dropouts, those in prison, women on welfare and unwed mothers, 80 to 95 percent fail in the bottom 20 percent of mental I.Q.

Most of these groups, by the way, contain more whites than blacks. Indeed, seeking to sidestep the race question altogether, the authors restricted a large part of their analysis to whites. They find, as other social scientists have using the same data, that cognitive ability is a strong predictor of various social problems even when other factors such as family background are taken into account. Given the strong suggestion of a link between intelligence and behavior, isn’t further study of a possible causal relationship needed? Others will be inclined to present only findings consistent with the thesis that I.Q. and social differences of any kind are largely environmentally determined. This is hardly an atmosphere conducive to objective, rigorous scientific study.

Few of the most controversial assertions in "The Bell Curve" can be shown with any certainty to be either true or false. Only better, more unbiased and more sophisticated research can help us to do so. We need to ensure that neither the irresponsible statements in "The Bell Curve" — nor the media’s vitriolic response to the book at a whole — prevents this research from being done.

In an era of increasing stratification, by level of ability and income, it is critical that we understand what the relationship is; if any, between intelligence and entrenched social problems if we are to develop sensible public policy.

As a business

Patagonia

stands to gain from GATT