

Ask A Genius 76 – The Dark Side of Smarts (1)
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Scott: Something a little darker, unfortunately, but necessary in the context of all the things we've been talking about is smart people going awry. One drastic story, for me, was a suicide by Nathan Rockwell Haselbauer of the International High IQ Society.

In the sessions with Marco, I brought up the Unabomber, too. As well, it's not bad because smart, or bad only comes with smarts, but only an emphasis on the smart gone bad while knowing bad comes with or without smarts. Any other cases?

Rick: A couple things, one thing is IQ is not necessarily intelligence. People who single themselves out for IQ may not have a lot of other things going for them. To some extent, I have that. The need to be recognized independent of having done anything worth being recognized for.

So, you probably get a higher number of misfits in high IQ societies than the general population, which means misfitty people may be less able to handle the normal tasks of life. Stereotypically, smart people may be more lacking in social skills.

Although, that may be more stereotype than truth. The stereotype may be closer to the fact that high IQ people are more like everybody else. Another thing is brains are more alike than they are different. The range of intelligence, a super smart person is not that much smarter than an average person.

In the same way the person with the best heart or lungs does not have a heart or lungs that much better than the average person, we don't have a tallest person as 8 ft. taller than the average person. The taller people are like 20% taller than the average person.

We are pretty genetically constrained. There's not that much variation. The tasks of life exist across a range of difficulty. Some things are really difficult. A very smart person who may only be not even twice as smart as an average person, but still has to confront all of the tasks of life.

They still run afoul of washing up on the rocks of difficulty. Smartness isn't magic. There have been studies. You have to distrust studies in general about things like intelligence because so much nebulosness creeps in. You have to figure out who is intelligent and what is intelligence.

Things are messy. There seems to be an optimal level of IQ or smartness, if you want to equate them, for succeeding at life tasks. That is not at the very highest level of IQ. It is not that the smarter you are in terms of IQ then the smarter you'll be.

There's a level below the very smartest, say when you're going to do IQ – like the 140s. There you'll find the most successful people. There are things that distract smart people or that make them less effective at some life tasks like not giving a crap about being a multimillionaire, social

awkwardness, finding out that your intelligence takes you down a bunch of rabbit holes or cul-de-sacs that doesn't help you succeed in life according to normal terms.

With smart people being more like regular people than not, bad things happen to regular people. Similarly, bad things will happen to smart people. Smartness isn't a vaccination to life.

You have to distinguish between actually gone awry and – it's a nice theme for a news story - *schadenfreude* news stories. They find a genius who is weird, then go, "Look how weird and miserable this guy is, aren't you glad you're not him?" It isn't fair.

There are some semi-spectacular cases of smart people messing up or doing creepy stuff. There's a guy named Keith Raniere, who has gotten in trouble over the years for running a cult. He is a super-high IQ guy.

Some of the exploits including financial exploitation of people such as Ponzi schemes, even sexual exploitation of people. He's been accused of having followers then banging the followers.

Scott: He exploited the Bronfman sisters too.

Rick: The heiresses to the Bronfman fortune?

Scott: Yea!

Rick: Then he is smart guy. He goes for heiresses.

Scott: He got millions of dollars from them. Then he gave himself the name NXIVM.

Rick: NXIVM? I guess he did it before the antacid drug. Brains don't work that great even among people with great brains. He may believe his own bullshit. It is possible to get sucked into it. If you take an IQ test, do well on it, and it says you're one-in-a-million, some people may become grandiose as if they have special powers.

In my most deluded moments, I will tend to want to think that, then all of the stupid shit in my life will bring me back down to semi-Earth. If you look at how many times I've tweeted, like 20,000, it takes someone with a certain amount of grandiosity to pollute the online airwaves with tweets. It is filled with things I somehow think people want to hear from me.

That's 3 or 4 thick books worth of twaddle coming from my Twitter feed. It is an ego explosion. At the same time, it my strategy to get enough followers to interest a publisher in giving me a book deal.

That's me being grandiose enough to think I have something people would be interested in as a book. I can use my track record as a comedy writer to say that I'm good, but not great. Is good but not great among the comedy writers good enough?

Among NBA teams, I'd be the 7th man on the team. I'd get pulled into the game mid-game into the second quarter. I'd do okay. I might average like 8.3 points a game with 2.9 assists. I'd be fine. Does that make me a super star that's worth being listened to?

Maybe, if I find a product in making the book that is tailored enough to my supposed strengths, the book could work. Anyway, a certain amount of grandiosity there. "Here's 20 tweets a day for 3 years everybody," that's a certain amount obnoxiousness associated with that.

Scott: What are some things smart people should keep in mind to buffer against high levels of egotism, narcissism, and grandiosity?

Rick: History is always helpful. If you look at people through history, people have limited competence. Even the most competent of super smart people don't live spotless lives, Einstein had peccadilloes of various types including sexual.

Feynman was notorious for trying to put his penis in everybody. He seemed to be pretty good at it. Still, he left a certain amount of sexual chaos around him. William Shockley, a Nobel Prize winner, invented the transistor, changed our world, and crazy ass racist – just an asshole.

Including LA in the 70s, they tried to open a Nobel Prize sperm bank. If you wanted to make a baby with a Nobel Prize winner or a really smart person, you could go to the Nobel Prize sperm bank.

He was the only Nobel Prize guy to think highly enough of his sperm to donate to the bank. If you read a bunch of biographies about super smart people, super smartness is no substitute for modesty and decency. That we're all flawed creatures.

Everything that has evolved has limitations because you're only as good as evolution needs you to be plus some extra for some wiggle room. So, you take humans. You push them beyond their average abilities in any direction and you're going to find failure.

Scott: What about things we see as flaws in our nature that aren't?

Rick: Starting with we only evolved to be good enough plus a little more, the operative definition includes that we're pretty good at a lot of everyday tasks because we're the product of billions of years of evolution and have a number of resources to address everyday life.

Evolution is the boss of us. It is an absent boss. It is like Charlie from Charlie's Angels. You never see him, but can get him on the answering machine. Evolution doesn't have any goals. It is not teleological. It is sloppy. You let it go on long enough and you end up with well-adapted organisms, but organisms that are adapted to the boss's goals and not necessarily our individual goals.

As a species, we are good at reproducing. There are 7.3 billion of us. We dominate the planet to the detriment of the planet in many instances, but that doesn't mean that we as individuals get to all be as successful as we want to be.

Evolution needs everybody to be perfectly successful. Society doesn't work like that. Evolution just needs us to have more sex and make more people. Things that are flaws for individuals that lead to us not getting what we want out of life aren't so much flaws in terms of the species.

Also, there are life goals that are mutually contradictory. Financial success and being a nice person aren't perfectly correlated. I live in LA and sometimes drive through Beverly Hills, where you drive through a street that is 70 feet wide. It is a residential street, but wide as hell because it's Beverly Hills. You're flanked by multi-million dollar houses.

You can drive by them, but can figure, as I do, that there are moral compromises to those that live in those houses living in those houses. There's a saying, "Behind every great fortune, there's a great crime." It isn't 100% or even 70% true. There are plenty of nice people who succeed.

However, even if people don't succeed greatly, everybody gets dirtied up through the processes of life. So, yea, there are things that can be seen as failures in one framework, which measures success.

Somebody active in their church and lives a decent life in Bemidji, Minnesota. They go out and does a bunch of charity work, is a decent an tolerant person, and hasn't made more than \$38,000 per year. That person be seen, in some frameworks, as more successful than the person with a 7- to 8-bedroom house in Beverly Hills on Roxbury Drive.

In one sense, all of us fail. If living a good, healthy, long life is the criterion for success, then we all fail because we all eventually become so unhealthy that we become dead. We are limited creatures. We are driven by drives that aren't entirely our own.

That are imposed by our evolutionary history. Even when they are our own, when we appropriate the evolutionary drives, we are still driven by arbitrary drives. There are no ultimate rules. You can attempt to derive some rules for success based on the idea that orderly structures are preferable to chaos and destruction.

But that's still having to build an entire philosophy out of not nothing, but there's no 100% solid foundation for moral judgments or judgments of success, which means citing what is a good quality or a flaw is not 100% thing.

When you look at the lives of great people, people who can serve as examples of success. We like those people to have flaws. It makes for a more interesting narrative. The people themselves, I'm sure, don't want to have to have had to struggle with their flaws, but we as society like to see great people have flaws and struggle.

Schadenfreude should not be the criterion for evaluating the success of someone's life. The idea that they might have something in their life that makes us glad that we're not them. It can serve as a moral lesson. There's a good side of *schadenfreude*.

Instead of gloating that you're not this person, that it can teach you that we're all flawed, struggle with ourselves and with sad, and bad, things in our lives, and should be tolerant of other people and ourselves.

Scott: It forms a two-dimensional spectrum too. You can infer or derive the opposite valuation just by putting it up to a mirror. If you look at an individual, like a Nelson Mandela, you can see someone living a good life.

You need merely place that to the proverbial mirror to see what would comprise, not in all but, in many respects a bad life.

Rick: Yes, but whether a good life or a bad life, with the same drives for the most part, you strip away everyone's individual quirks and even the weirdest people are responding to the same drives as everyone else, which have been hardwired into us.

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