Het verantwoorde verschil. Intelligentiemeting in de Verenigde Staten. Historische wortels van een hedendaags vraagstuk
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Summary

The central question in this thesis is why standardised intelligence testing plays such a dominant part in the lives of citizens in the United States and also leads to such vicious debates between believers and non-believers of intelligence testing.

Over the years a number of studies where written on this subject. Some studies suggested that the popularity of biological determinism and scientific racism at the beginning of the twentieth century gave rise to the popularity of intelligence testing in the United States. The interpretations of the test results seem to underline the biological and racist discourses of the time.

Other studies sought the answer in the rise of political movements such as progressivism. Intelligence testing was exemplary for the new political and social thinking by which societal problems needed to be dealt with in a scientific way. Intelligence testers portrayed their discipline as a scientifically informed investigative practice that could alleviate and even solve certain problems troubling society at large. Scientific racism and progressivism however were not exclusive to the United States but had a broad reception in the World. This by itself however did not imply the same success of the intelligence test as in the United States. Current studies don’t give a satisfactory explanation for this.

In this thesis I argue for a more broad historical perspective on the history of the United States to understand the reception of intelligence testing in this country. The vicious debates on intelligence testing entail different aspects all routed in the early history of the republic. Episodes such as the founding of the republic, slavery, Romantic thought, civil war,
and religious reform movements all played a role in the success of intelligence testing in the United States.

Three different central themes link these episodes together. The first theme is thinking in terms of individual differences in cognitive capacities and the relationship with ethnicity. The second theme is the specific American focus on the relationship between cognitive capacity and morality. The third theme is the need for standardised procedures in research as well as policy making.

The first chapter shows that the vicious debates concerning *The Bell Curve* were a revival of earlier debates in the nineteen twenties on intelligence testing. In this chapter a brief history is given of the intelligence test in the United States and the ensuing controversies between intelligence testers and eugenics on the one hand and journalists and anthropologists on the other. These controversies where to become exemplary for later debates on intelligence and testing. Issues such as the relationship between intelligence and ethnicity, the relationship between cognitive capacity, societal status and morals and the validity of the tests were recurring theme’s in later debates on intelligence. To better understand the viciousness of the debates this chapter suggests to go further back in time.

Chapter two addresses the events during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This chapter argues that the current preoccupation in the United States with individual differences have their roots in the founding of the American republic in 1776. The principal of equality as defined in the Declaration of Independence became a central notion in the new republic. Inspired by the Enlightenment all aristocratic notions on classes were abandoned in favour of a meritocratic view on differences based on talents and morals.
Chapter three focuses on developments in American society during the first half of the nineteenth century. A growing economic prosperity and secularisation gave rise to a strong religious countermovement. This revival movement focused on the individual to revitalize Christianity in society at large. Personal virtuousness became a central theme and many revival advocates emphasised the development of personal virtue in order to become a valuable member of society. Intelligence was considered key in this approach. The revival movement can be considered as the fore runner of twentieth century psychological intervention practices, especially intelligence testing.

Chapter four describes the naturalisation of human differences in the nineteenth century. It investigates the historic context of the emotional response in the United States on discussions about differences in intelligence between Black and White Americans. In a society that claims a premium on equality, discussions on the heredity of individual differences arouse strong feelings. Institutions such as slavery increased this sensitivity. But slavery by itself does not explain the strong feelings amongst proponents and critics of heredical theories on individual differences in intelligence. In this chapter different historical lines such as the civil war, the rise of American Romantic thought, and scientific racism are scrutinized in order to understand the current sensitivity.

Chapter five deals with the standardisation of intelligence testing at the beginning of the twentieth century. Using insights of various historians of science, this chapter investigates the transition of disciplinary objectivity to mechanical objectivity. This transition not only occurred in social sciences but also became important in public policy making. With the coming of Progressivism a new perspective on social policy emerged. Science was to become essential in defining policy measures to counter and
solve societal problems. In the new bureaucratic order resulting from progressivism the psychometric approach towards individual differences had a strong appeal to policy makers because of its mechanical approach towards objectivity.

In the concluding chapter the study of Herrnstein and Murray forms the starting point for the conclusions of a round trip past three centuries of history of the United States of America. Its success but also the current controversies surrounding intelligence testing in the United States are the result of a specific American focus on individual differences regarding talents and virtue that has its roots in the declaration of the republic in 1776. The notion of intelligence as self evident and the belief in the standardised psychological intelligence test as an objective means to determine someone’s intelligence turn out to be the result of a long standing American tradition in which the individual is considered the starting point of maintaining order in society.