

Article

Intelligence and Immigration

Christopher Heath Wellman^{1,*}

¹ Department of Philosophy, Washington University in St. Louis

* Corresponding author: kwellman@wustl.edu

Submitted: 3 July 2024, accepted: 15 August 2024, published: 30 October 2024

Abstract: The relative intelligence of prospective migrants likely does little to move the needle on the central issue in the ethics of immigration, namely, whether states are morally entitled to forcibly exclude outsiders. Even so, I argue that varying levels of intelligence may be relevant to a number of theoretically interesting and practically pressing issues. In particular, such variations may in some cases (1) affect the number of refugees a country is obligated to accept, (2) be relevant to the advisability of encouraging refugees to resettle rather than attempting to help them where they are, and (3) have implications for relational egalitarians who are especially concerned with inequalities among fellow citizens.

Keywords: immigration; intelligence; refugees; relational egalitarianism; brain drain; assimilation

How to cite: Wellman, C.H. Intelligence and Immigration. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2024, 4(2), 14; doi:[10.35995/jci04020014](https://doi.org/10.35995/jci04020014).

©2024 Copyright by the author. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.



I am not qualified to evaluate the very interesting empirical claims defended in Rindermann, and Thompson's paper "Intelligence of Refugees in Germany: Levels, Differences and Possible Determinants" in this journal, but I can say a bit about the potential implications for the morality of immigration if prospective immigrants are, on average, less intelligent than the citizens of the country they seek to enter.

The first thing to note is that the relative intelligence of prospective migrants likely does little to move the needle on the central issue in the ethics of immigration, namely, whether states are morally entitled to forcibly exclude outsiders. Those who defend a state's right to design and enforce its own immigration policy are unlikely to think that differences in intelligence are necessary to support the arguments in defense of their position, and those who insist upon open borders will typically deny that differences in intelligence defeat their arguments. Someone who believes that a political community's right to self-determination entitles it to control the community's membership, for instance, would insist that the community has a right to exclude prospective immigrants who are equally or *more* intelligent, so presumably any claim that some set of potential migrants are on average less intelligent is not required to vindicate this theorist's assertion of a right to exclude. Conversely, someone who believes, say, that restrictions on immigration contravene the human right to freedom of movement would presumably dismiss out of

hand the suggestion that one's human rights depend upon one's relative score on an IQ test.

Although varying levels of intelligence do not change the terms of this central debate, they may be relevant to a number of theoretically interesting and practically pressing issues. In particular, such variations may in some cases (1) affect the number of refugees a country is obligated to accept, (2) be relevant to the advisability of encouraging refugees to resettle rather than attempting to help them where they are, and (3) have implications for relational egalitarians who are especially concerned with inequalities among fellow citizens.

Refugees are often embraced for all they add to their host community. I live in St. Louis, Missouri, for instance, where there is widespread appreciation for the ways in which the roughly 70,000 people of Bosnian origins who immigrated in the late 1990s and early 2000s contribute to life in our city. In other cases, though, a political community might prefer to exclude prospective immigrants and admit some refugees only because its citizens feel obligated to provide refuge. If admission in these cases is conceived as a samaritan duty, the number of refugees a country is obligated to accept depends upon the costs of incorporating these newcomers into the community. And crucially, most believe that it is not enough to merely allow refugees to enter one's borders; the host country must assist the immigrants with their assimilation into the political and economic community. But as Rindermann et al. emphasize, these assimilation efforts can be considerably more difficult and costly when the newcomers are markedly less intelligent. It thus appears that, other things being equal, a host country may be permitted to accept fewer refugees in cases in which those who seek to migrate are less intelligent.

The main positions that have been staked out in the literature on the morality of immigration are arguably best represented in the work of Joseph Carens and David Miller.¹ Neither defends the status quo, but they disagree about the best way to remedy the existing injustice. Whereas Carens demands that we allow the global poor to move to the economic opportunities, Miller suggests that the best long-term solution will often be to move the opportunities to the global poor. As the extensive literature on economic development makes plain, there is considerable uncertainty about the prospects of either strategy. For two reasons, though, issues concerning the relative intelligence of prospective immigrants may be relevant. First, in cases where those most interested in migrating to the opportunities are less intelligent on average than the domestic population, it may be that the prospective immigrants could profit less from access to these opportunities than they otherwise might. Second, if Rindermann et al. are correct that there are cases in which refugees are on average more intelligent than the compatriots they left behind, we should worry about the negative effect of so-called "brain drain." Among other things, many now believe that the key factor influencing a citizen's prospects for a decent life is the quality of the state's political and economic institutions. And if we should expect that the relatively intelligent citizens are most likely to be the ones who design and implement these crucial institutions, we should worry about any policy that leads the relatively intelligent citizens to emigrate, since their departure would presumably

¹ See Joseph Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and David Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

impede the construction of the desirable institutions needed for more opportunities where they are already in desperately short supply.²

Finally, relational egalitarians are especially concerned about how inequalities can render people vulnerable to oppression, and so they attend not merely to the magnitude of inequality, but also to the relationship within which the inequality obtains. The same inequality may be more troubling if it exists between fellow citizens, for instance, than if it exists between foreigners. Relational egalitarians will thus be concerned not only to ensure that refugees are able to live minimally decent human lives, but also that they will not endure relative poverty that reduces them to second-class citizens. If some immigrants are considerably less intelligent on average than the citizens with whom they must compete for jobs, it is reasonable to fear that they will endure worrisome inequalities. Or at the very least, one might worry that these inequalities will persist in contexts in which there is insufficient political will to ensure that all newcomers have the resources necessary to become full and equal citizens.

Of course, when the potential migrants are on average less intelligent than the citizens of the country they seek to enter but more intelligent than their compatriots in their original societies, one might expect inequalities either way. This observation might be countered in one of two ways. First, any inequality stemming from differences in intelligence is likely to be magnified if those who are less intelligent face additional challenges, as migrants often do (even in the absence of anti-immigrant sentiment) when they must navigate a foreign cultural milieu, especially if there are language or even dialect barriers. Second, citizens may bear special responsibility for domestic inequalities. Many believe, for instance, that the imposition of the state requires that all those subject to the state's political coercion must be treated as free and equal citizens. Because foreigners are not equally subjected to one's state's coercion, there is no similar mandate to eliminate inequalities between one's compatriots and foreigners. If a country allows some foreigners to enter its political community, however, the host community thereby incurs a special obligation to ensure that these newcomers are not vulnerable to oppression because of their relative poverty. If this is the case, relational egalitarians may have an additional reason to explore the possibility of moving opportunities to those in need rather than encouraging the global poor to migrate to the existing opportunities, at least in cases in which the migrants are, on average, less intelligent than their new compatriots.

In sum, I am in no position to empirically assess Rindermann et al.'s very interesting claims, but it strikes me that – even if these claims do not do much to establish whether or not open borders are morally required – they may be relevant to how we might best respond to the plight of some refugees. In that event, we should welcome additional social scientific research into the possible presence and practical effects of a migrant's relative intelligence.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

² Gillian Brock emphasizes how the emigration of skilled workers can impede a society's capacity to develop desirable institutions in Gillian Brock and Michael Blake, *Debating Brain Drain* (Oxford University Press, 2015).