

# Mensa: My Enlightening Nerd Saturated Adventure

*Nikki Mueller*

*Writer's comment:* An excerpt from an email sent to John Boe after I took his class (English 104 C Journalism):

You won't believe it but I got into Mensa!! I was dumbfounded. Actually, I've lost a little respect for the "genius" club now; if their tests show that I am eligible, they must not be as smart as I thought they were. Even though I didn't get the news in time for my paper, I didn't let the acceptance letter go to waste. I framed it and gave it to my dad for his birthday. He loved it. In fact I got an email two weeks after giving it to him saying, "Welcome to Mensa." My dad had signed me up as a member! He is so proud. I am so embarrassed. I had no clue what I was doing when I decided to write my feature article on Mensa. I hoped to learn about a society from an outsider's perspective. I took the admission test to acquire more material. I never dreamed I'd actually be one of them. But John Boe always believed I would qualify. In fact, he believed anything was possible—that's what made his class so entertaining and his approach to writing so refreshing. He made writing fun. This article is about my interactions with the members of the high IQ society called Mensa. But more importantly, it's about learning to have fun with writing after four years of technical research papers.

– Nikki Mueller

*Instructor's comment:* When Nikki first mentioned that she might write about Mensa, I, like the rest of the class, was interested. As she got into the work of the article, going to the Mensa regional meeting, interviewing members, doing research, and even taking the test for membership, we all grew more excited. She ended up writing a model article, with personal voice, personal commitment, and personal stories, but also with objective analysis, research (from interviews, experiences, and reading), an abundance of specific detail, and wit. I'm not sure this last quality can be taught, but it sure gives this piece an extra sparkle. I'm pleased that Nikki had fun in writing this article, but I am even more pleased that others will have fun in reading it.

– John Boe, University Writing Program

**T**o the extent of my twelve-year-old knowledge, Mensa consisted of a membership card, a magazine subscription, and bragging rights—my dad taking full advantage of the latter. He sure got his money's worth out of that forty-five dollar fee. He was smart and we knew it. And so at Christmas my stocking was stuffed with brainteasers, in grade school my favorite father daughter activity was verbal math problems, and when I was eleven my dad paid me one hundred dollars to memorize all the presidents by number in office. Looking back I realize he was determined to raise a fellow Mensan.

### **Sacramento's Regional Gathering**

Businessmen, artists, retirees, scientists, housewives, and soldiers listen attentively as quirky names for the male genitalia are rattled off. "Lingum, sword, Oliver Twist, sugar stick, flowering rod, Mr. Happy, and Little Elvis" are all listed. "I just can't get the visual of a blue suede condom out of my head!" Bonnie Gabriel laughs.

It's the 28<sup>th</sup> annual Regional Gathering (RG) for Sacramento's chapter of Mensa, and "The Art of Erotic Talk" is just one treat. Mind Candy is this year's theme and geniuses from throughout California are indulging in some delectable data. Lectures on Fuel Cell Technology, Cosmetic Surgery, Bioterrorism, Middle East Politics, Raelean Culture, Space Propulsion Technology, and the Auto Defibrillator highlight the menu. This weekend,  $E=MC^2$  translates to Energy= Mind Candy<sup>2003</sup>.

"Regional Gatherings are the funnest," Tom, a forty-two year old Marine from Kentucky explained. "An RG is like an all-you-can-eat buffet. We have philosophical disputes and fun games." He came to Mind Candy because he loves to talk and meet interesting people.

Mensa also has a larger version of the RG called an Annual Gathering (AG). Every Fourth of July, Mensans from all over the country come to enjoy each other's company on a larger scale. "At an AG there are multiple buffets like Mexican, Mediterranean, Italian, Chinese, all mixed together," Tom said, then extended the analogy. "There's so much going on you can't even 'eat' one tenth of it!" Tom is definitely making room for 2004's "Las Vegas ExtravAGanza."

At one seminar, Mensans heard from atheists who believe aliens created all organisms. But the Raelean speaker had it coming when he proposed that these aliens were made from aliens, who were made from aliens, who were made from aliens, and so on. Listeners were chomping at the bit to disrepute this theory. A wave of voices came crashing down with rebuttals concerning the Big Bang theory, the quark, and

Catholicism's financial motives. Tangent arguments began breaking out on the definition of infinity and the essence of spirituality. Then finally the tension was broken, "So why the hell did they make the duck-billed platypus?"

This seemed to be the routine with Mensans. Arguments flowed freely and passionately without sore feelings or fistfights. When the speaker's time was up he was complimented for defending such an unpopular view and everyone vigorously applauded.

"Mensans tend to be shy, without great social skills," John Reiger explained. But Mind Candy's non-judgmental atmosphere, where anything goes, allows these introverts to talk about their passions without restraint.

### **Stereotypes**

Mensans are very aware of the stereotypes that surround the high IQ society. "You ever seen the movie *Rain Man*?" Tom joked. "Everyone thinks we're all brain surgeons, mathematical geniuses, and scientists with photographic memories."

But John Reiger explains "It's a misnomer to think Mensa is an intellectual society." In fact John doesn't like to tell most people he's a member of the top 2%.

"People see me in a different light. It changes what people think of you," he explained. "They don't feel like you're one of them... and often I'm not, and not for intellectual reasons," John said laughing.

Tom only tells his closest friends that he's a member: "I don't want people to have unrealistic expectations of me." Tom fears his boss would say, "Well now, you should be able to learn this in two days instead of two weeks," if his membership was common knowledge. But mostly Tom doesn't want people to think he's stuck on himself or better than the next guy.

"Most people think we are very high brow, starchy," Jim Werdell, Director of Administration, acknowledged. Dave Tozier was no stranger to this thought. Before he was an active member, Dave was writing critical letters to the SacraMensan newsletter. "I'd been put off by a lot of people with their noses in the air," Dave confessed and he was letting these "pseudo-intellectuals" know it. But when someone responded to one of his letters with "this guy sounds like one of us," Dave took a second look at the club. Just recently he celebrated a decade of membership. Carl Schroder admitted, "We're just people who do well on a certain kind of test."

### **History and Statistics**

Though the word Mensa means “crazy woman” in Spanish, the society prefers the Latin translation: table, mind, and month (Spanish speaking countries call it Mesa instead). Mensans suggest the title stands for “monthly meetings of great minds around a table.” Mensa is not an acronym.

Ronald Berrill and Lancelot Lionel Ware founded Mensa on October 1, 1946 in England. And by 1960, there were enough members (twenty-two) to form a National Mensa in the United States. “One out of 50 people qualifies for American Mensa... are you the one?” asks the Mensa brochure. Mensa is a high IQ society whose only requirement is that its members rank in the top 2% of a standardized intelligence exam. Mensa’s membership outranks all competing high IQ societies such as the “One in a Million Society’s” whopping seventeen members. Today there are more than 100,000 members of Mensa worldwide and 50,000 are American Mensans. Sacramento’s membership is estimated at (as a Mensan would put it) fifty percent of one fifth of two thirds of 7,500 (that’s 500 for all you laymen).

Because IQ is the only consideration for membership, Mensans are an eclectic bunch. Ages range from 5-95 and occupations range from truck drivers to rocket scientists. Some members are even in prison. But according to Dr. John Gieniec’s research in 1987, Mensans have more in common than IQ levels. Mensans also score similarly on another famous test, the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator. He found that 73% of Mensans are Introverted and 27% Extroverted, compared to the general population’s 25% Introverted 75% Extroverted. A mere 10% of Mensans are Sensing, but 90% are Intuitive, while only 25% of non-Mensans are considered Intuitive. So most Mensans are intuitive introverts.

## **Traditions**

Each chapter of Mensa has a local flavor. Tom describes Sacramento’s chapter as culturally liberal, “Don’t know if there’d be a Raelean speaker at the South Carolina chapter.” With a career in the Military, Tom has been involved with many different chapters of Mensa. “Let’s see, there’s South Carolina, Nebraska, Great Britain, Illinois, and California. I tried to get involved in Saudi Arabia, but that was unsuccessful,” Tom said with a chuckle.

People in the service work weird hours. Fortunately, Mensa’s schedule is varied, so Tom can always find time to squeeze it in. For Tom, Mensa is a point of contact, a social group— something familiar in an unfamiliar place. “Mensa has given me a circle of friends everywhere I go.”

Although there are slight differences from chapter to chapter, some

Mensan customs are universal. Each year in April, Mensa conducts a board game invention contest. "More than 150 members of the high IQ society play the year's newest board games in a 40-hour gaming marathon," boasts the American Mensan website. Games are judged on aesthetics, instructions, originality, play appeal and play value. At the end of the event, Mensa judges rank their favorite games, and the top five earn the coveted Mensa Select® distinction and may use the Mensa Select® seal in their advertising. Past winners include Scattergories, Taboo, and Tri-Bond.

Extensive acronym use is another Mensan idiosyncrasy. Here are some of the most commonly used Mensan abbreviations: AML (American Mensa, Ltd.), M (Mensan), Ms (Mensans), MM (Male Mensan), FM (Female Mensan), YM (Young Mensan), GC (Gifted Child), MERF (Mensa Education and Research Foundation), NC (No Children at this event), RG (Regional Gathering), AG (Annual Gathering), SIG (Special Interest Group), Sexyg (Sexuality SIG), SRM (Sacramento Regional Mensa). MMs, FMs, and YMs, alike, were especially fond of using M abbreviations at SRM's RG.

Name badge stickers are also abbreviated forms of identification. At Mind Candy, everyone was required to wear name badges for admission into the seminars. Just by looking at a Mensan's nametag one can tell if that person is single or married. A simple "Hand" sticker indicated whether a particular person was unmarried, divorced, widowed, or separated – AKA available.

Hugging is a peculiar Mensan tradition. Hugging has been described as the official Mensa secret handshake. The "Bear" sticker indicated one's "hug status." The presence of one or more bears on a name badge meant that you welcome hugs. The absence of bears meant, "ask me first," and a cancelled bear meant "no hugs."

"Many Ms are avid, some would say 'professional,' huggers; others, of a more introverted persuasion, are not," reads the Mensa Handbook. There were even hugger's competitions at RGs until there was a reaction to overdone hugging. Now there are unspoken rules for hugging: if an Ms isn't recognized as an Active Hugger – ask before you clasp, do not abuse the right to hug, and don't become a compulsive hugger. Still, the majority of Mensans don't mind being hugged more-or-less indiscriminately.

Victor Serebriakoff, author of *Mensa: The society for the highly intelligent* and longtime leader of Mensa, describes Mensans as having "a body-love and physical approval problem, an unsatisfied hunger." "It is right and proper that Mensa members should have a permissiveness about bodily contact and reassurance between them," Serebriakoff

writes regarding hugging. Many Mensans have feelings of rejection, and to Serebriakoff's amazement "one of the real advantages that members found in Mensa was in this unexpected area."

### **Love in Mensa**

"And yes, the physical side goes a bit further than hugging and some wicked members sleep around a bit after the numerous fairly alcoholic but friendly parties in private rooms. This is an unvarnished tale and I shamefully admit that a Regional Gathering is to a small extent, the place where the eggheads get laid," Serebriakoff writes.

With all the Mensa jargon and customs to keep track of, it's no wonder Debra Reiger broke a few rules when she first joined. At an SRM meeting twelve years ago, Debra exposed herself as a new member when she failed to adhere to the "no-knocking before you enter a room" rule. It was quite possibly the best mistake she ever made. Debra is now married to the man who reluctantly answered the door, John Reiger. "She was a hot commodity," John said, remembering the constant flock of guys surrounding her. "Any single woman in Mensa is likely to get a lot of attention," John admitted.

The single in search of love is a typical Mensan story. Carl Schroder joined in 1975 because he was "single... again." His top three significant relationships have all been with FMs. Carl finds FMs to be more articulate and challenging than non-Mensan women.

After thirteen years, Tom said he'd settle for someone outside of Mensa, someone of average intellect. He's found that it's "slim pickin's at Mensa." According to Tom "the average Mensan is male, at least fifty, and retired." But this statistic wasn't the picture *Playboy* magazine painted. The November 1985 issue of *Playboy* featured "The Women of Mensa," a photo story of seven attractive members of Mensa. Not surprisingly, membership saw a significant surge the following year.

### **My Test Experience**

Rod Baker of Dixon, California has been administering the Mensa Admission Test on the third Saturday of every month for the past eighteen years. Two hundred and sixteen Mensa Admission Tests later, Rod advised me to "dress comfortably and get a good night's rest," the day before the test. I heeded the expert advice. With hopes of joining the ranks of Geena Davis, F. Lee Bailey, Dr. Albert Ellis, Buckminster Fuller, Stephen Hawking, Donald Peterson, and The Amazing Randi, I arrived at Baker's home the next morning wearing jeans and a Harvard t-shirt.

After Rod's wife took my coat, I found Matt Gandley seated

patiently at the dining room table. Matt is a 16-year-old high school junior who can't remember the last time he got a bad grade. He's always done well in school, especially in math, so his dad thought he had a good shot at passing. Matt thinks Mensa will be nice lifetime organization and social outlet. "Plus it can't hurt my college resume," Matt added.

Jessica Davis arrived at Rod's after Matt and I started filling out our applications. Jessica is a 25-year-old student earning her teaching credential at a local college in Sacramento. Jessica's dad is a member of Mensa (just like mine), and she thought Mensa would provide them with a fun way to get together.

When the clock struck ten, it was Rod's cue to begin his spiel. "You will be taking two tests, but you only have to pass one to qualify," he started; "you can only take the Mensa Admission Test once." Apparently this wasn't your standard SAT test. I reassured myself that if I failed I could always submit "prior evidence" by taking the GRE and scoring an 1850 or a Stanford Binet IQ test and getting a 132. Rod then collected our thirty-dollar test fee and handed us our complimentary Mensa pencils, which he joked "aren't smarter than ordinary pencils."

For the memory segment of the test Rod grabbed a Dr. Pepper. He had to read us a short essay, and his throat often dries out. We would have to recall some of this information at end of the test. My fellow test takers closed their eyes for this portion, but mine remained open, curiously drifting around the walls of Rod's home. I became particularly intrigued by a knitted owl throw pillow. Once Rod finished, the test began, and it was a race against the clock. I didn't find the questions exceptionally difficult, but finishing them in time was another story.

About three-quarters of the way through the test my Mensa pencil broke. I quickly grabbed another and tried to keep the "bad omen" thoughts out of my head.

### **Controversy within Mensa**

Usually when a Mensan shouts "Retest!" it's a joke. A Mensan says it when they feel that a fellow Mensan has done something so dumb that the test that qualified them for Mensa must have been in error. Nowadays the remark isn't taken so lightly.

While riffling through my dad's bathroom stash of magazines, alongside *Miata Magazine*, *Time*, and *Consumer Reports*, I found the October 2003 issue of the *Mensa Bulletin* (the official magazine of American Mensa). Retesting was a hot topic in the "Letters" portion of the *Mensa Bulletin*. Some Mensans are concerned with the legitimacy of the calling Mensans the top 2%. As of now, if an active member's IQ

drops into the lower 98<sup>th</sup> percentile no actions are taken.

But if Sandy Kral were calling the shots, members would be retested annually. "Retesting is certainly the right choice," Sandy writes. "We must keep up with Mensa standards." Otherwise, "Mensans might be left with an organization that encompassed the top 3 percent, or even the top 5 percent." Sandy thinks Mensa could do without the "IQ hasbeens." "[Retesting] would have the side benefit of ridding our activities of some of the older or ill members who insist on attending. They make Mensa look so much less attractive," Sandy's letter continues.

But retesting doesn't evoke such pleasant thoughts for James Cronholm. James is apprehensive about the possibility of a retest: "Now in my autumn years, Mensa is all I really have." James joined Mensa because it gave him "the right to look at [his] wife, kids, co-workers or whomever right in the eye and say 'Cause I'm a freaking genius, that's why!'" When asked what's so great about Mensa, James' response was simple, "I passed a test. I'm now a certified smart-ass." With the recent notion of retesting, James' reputation is at stake. "Personally, I don't even want to think about the raw tonnage of crow I'll have to consume if my wife, kids, co-workers or whomever finds out I've been booted from the organization because of a deteriorating intellect."

George Appleton also did reasonably well on his qualifying test... forty years ago. Now, at 77, George admitted, "I have a mind like a computer. With a very large 'Delete' key in the center of the keyboard."

Dean Simonton, Ph.D. and Professor of Psychology at UC Davis, explained, "There are two forms of intelligence: Crystallized and Fluid." Crystallized Intelligence continues to grow throughout life (e.g. grammatical structure, conceptual knowledge, vocabulary, or one's raw learning ability). Fluid Intelligence is a person's ability to solve new problems; "This peaks in our thirties," Dr. Simonton said.

A diminishing Fluid Intelligence is what causes the elderly have a hard time operating computers. It's also the reason my mom can't work the VCR to save her life. But aging Alzheimer's patients see a decline in both forms of intelligence. Perhaps this is what James and George are worried about; IQ doesn't change much after the age of 10. "IQ is malleable to some extent, but you have to practice a lot to increase it," said Dr. Simonton. Just to be sure, if I make it into Mensa, I'm siding with James and George.

Although intelligence is highly influenced by genetics, the environment also plays a strong role. The Flynn Effect shows that people are growing smarter and smarter than previous generations. The average IQ today is much higher than it was twenty years ago. Dr. Simonton believes the intelligence spike is due to a more stimulating

environment. "Even cereal boxes have more information than they did twenty years ago," noted Dr. Simonton.

An average IQ is 100. But an IQ score is meaningless without the name of the IQ test. Different tests are normed differently, so an IQ of 130 on one test could be the equivalent of an IQ of 140 on another test. Some common IQ tests are the Stanford Binet, Wechsler Adult and Children Scales, and the Otis-Lennon.

### **The Purpose of Mensa**

My dad told me never to ask a Mensan, "So, if you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" A high IQ is not necessarily an indicator of wealth, ambition, or career success. It simply indicates that a person has higher-than-average reasoning abilities.

Dr. Simonton's theory is that Mensans are people who were bright growing up and told so. Later, these kids were pressured with high expectations. They always assumed their intelligence would be used efficiently. "Now these people are in their thirties, and maybe have a job that requires some intelligence, like an engineer, but they aren't using their intelligence in a creative way." In other words, they aren't making any impact on society. "They are burdened with need to make some sort of impact because they are neither rich nor famous, and feel they haven't used their full potential. So they take these tests to see if they can get in as a form of recognition." Maybe that's where my dad's advice originated.

Dr. Simonton teaches a psychology course entitled "Genius and Creativity" at UC Davis. In his class, Dr. Simonton stresses that there are two definitions of genius. Students also learn about the history of IQ tests. The original intention of Lewis Terman and Alfred Binet, inventors of the first IQ tests, was to diagnose scholastic performance. Terman and Binet wanted to make a test that would show how kids ranked amongst their peers. Kids who scored below a certain level were considered special education and those who scored above were deemed geniuses. "The tests are good predictors of scholastic achievement like college GPA, but education is relatively irrelevant, as we've seen in many cases."

Because there are many different kinds of intelligence, Dr. Simonton prefers to think a genius is someone who has a major impact on one field, "Like Einstein's on Physics, Shakespeare's on literature, or Hitler's on History." The more recent definition of genius is less valid to him: scoring above a certain IQ level. We needn't be reminded of Marilyn Vos Savant, who scored a record high 228 on the IQ test, but never made a major contribution in a specific field.

“Then again, people might join because they want to find a smart woman or man,” said Dr. Simonton. That’s why he joined SRM about 20 years ago. He was single and looking. To his dismay, Dr. Simonton found that Mensa was just a bunch of “people joining together based on an IQ test. There was nothing else they had in common.” He didn’t enjoy their “useless activities.” So, without much success in the relationship department, Dr. Simonton dropped out.

Dr. Simonton’s third theory is that people with high IQs may just want intellectual stimulation: “They have a poor work environment and want to speak with someone who uses words larger than a single syllable.”

I prefer Serebriakoff’s interpretation: “Mensa is like the hologram. It is an exciting idea in search of a use.”

If I am in fact that *one* in fifty, I wonder what my Mensa story would be. Would I join with fervor, fizzle out, and rejoin later in life? Would I find true love? Would I simply enjoy the bragging rights and magazine subscription? Would it be a stimulating social outlet that I can get involved with where ever I live? Would it I pose nude for *Playboy* or invent a board game? Would I write a highly opinionated letter to the *Mensa Bulletin* rejecting the Retest? Would I convince my dad to accompany me at next year’s Annual Gathering?

Then again, if I’m one of the other forty-nine, there’s always Densa with membership offered to anyone with a self-professed low intelligence and willing to pay a ten dollar membership fee.