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## Why are we all getting cleverer?

By Matt Ridley | 09 June 2009



Photo: Wired UK

I have been cheering myself up, in these dark times, by reminding myself how much better off the average citizen of planet Earth is than he was a century ago. Despite two world wars, a rash of genocidal dictators, several pandemics, great inflation, a great depression and a bunch of recessions, the average human being lives longer, catches fewer diseases, buries fewer of his children, works less hard and earns much more money than ever before.

Even intelligence has been increasing. For as long as IQ tests have existed, there has been a steady, progressive and ubiquitous improvement in the average scores people achieve at a given age, mainly because of a raising of the low scores. On average, IQ is increasing by 3 per cent per decade. The effect is so strong that it implies that half of children in 1932, if given today's tests, would score under 80 – the threshold for mental retardation.

Known as the Flynn Effect (after James Flynn), this phenomenon was initially dismissed as a result of changes in tests, or a reflection of better schooling. But the facts do not fit. Improvement is most marked in the types of test that relate least to educational content. Moreover, the effect is weakest in the cleverest children. It is a levelling-up phenomenon that results in a happy increase in equality.

After much agonising debate among psychologists, three explanations seem to make the most sense. The first is that (despite fast food) most children now get sufficient essential nutrients, vitamins, amino acids and oils to allow their brains to develop to their full potential. The second is that today's children grow up in a world full of graphics,

colours and chat, which stimulate their brains. Flynn prefers the third explanation: that the modern (smaller) family even at the low end of the income scale, is now riddled with technology and intellectually demanding work – from paying bills to setting up computers. You can argue that IQ may not be representative of intelligence. But you can deny that something is getting better – and more equal.

All right then, I hear you sneer, we earn more, live longer and are cleverer, but are we happier? A small cottage industry grew up at the turn of the 21st century, devoted to academic Schadenfreude at the fact that richer people are not necessarily happier. Beyond a certain income (£13,500 a year, according to Professor Richard Layard, the Government's "happiness tsar"), money did not seem to buy subjective well-being.

But is it true? The starting point of this debate was a study by Richard Easterlin in 1974, which found that, although within a country rich people were generally happier than poor people, rich countries did not have happier citizens than poor countries. Since then, the Easterlin Paradox has become the central dogma of the debate. Trouble is, it's wrong, according to a much more comprehensive study by two economists, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers. In 2008, they concluded that rich countries do have happier citizens than poor countries, and that people get happier as they get richer. The earlier study simply had too small samples. In all three categories of comparison – within countries, between countries, and over time – extra income does buy well-being.

Of course, it is possible to be rich and unhappy, as many a celebrity gloriously reminds us. Equally, it is possible to get rich and find that you are unhappy not to be richer still, if only because the neighbours – or the people on television – are richer than you are. Economists call this the "hedonic treadmill"; the rest of us call it "keeping up with the Joneses". Of course, some people will be cheerful even in poverty. Nonetheless, on average, across the board, on the whole and all other things being equal, more money does make you happier.

Still, as Eeyore would say, it is all in vain. Elaine Fox of the University of Essex has found that most people have at least one gloomy version of the serotonin-receptor gene that makes them see the world through half-empty glasses. What if the gene turns out to have a vitamin-D-deficiency onswitch on its front, like the newly discovered multiple sclerosis-susceptibility gene does? Then, sunbathing would make some people more cheerful. Which, come to think of it, it does anyway. Prosperity is a goal worth seeking. If we can rediscover it.

### Microbiography

*Matt Ridley's 23 pairs of chromosomes, plus a doctorate in zoology from Oxford University and a career as a journalist, have equipped him to write books – translated into 25 languages – about science, economics and the environment, most recently Francis Crick: Discoverer of the Genetic Code; The Agile Gene: How Nature Turns on Nurture; and Genome. For three years he was non-executive chairman of Northern Rock.*

Online editing by Michael Parsons 

### Comment

"Improvement is most marked in the types of test that relate least to educational content." Ah, no -- in fact the opposite is true. The Flynn effect is actually \*weakest\* when it comes to G-loaded tasks, i.e. the tasks that relate to abstract reasoning, rotating polygons, filling in incomplete information, etc. The above post fits into a recent line of well-intentioned thinkers (e.g. Malcolm Gladwell, Nicholas Kristoff) who read a blurb about the Flynn effect and then figure: IQ debate? Sorted! Would be nice if it were so simple, but it ain't...

Arnold Molain Wednesday, June 10, 2009 2:17:46 PM

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