

# My New Scientist

[Home](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Back to article](#)

## Why IQs are rising – and why it's deadly serious

05 September 2012 by [Liz Else](#)

Magazine issue [2881](#). [Subscribe and save](#)

For similar stories, visit the [Interviews](#) Topic Guide

---

*Worldwide, IQs have risen by up to three points per decade over the past century. At 78, James Flynn, the man this increase is named after, explains its implications and the effects of sex, culture and attitude on intellectual achievement*

### **Our IQs have risen. Does this mean we are getting smarter?**

Our brains have no more potential at conception, but because we have done different "mental exercise" throughout our lives, our brains would look different at autopsy, just as a weightlifter's muscles look different from a swimmer's. Our ancestors were just as good as we are at practical intelligence, at dealing with everyday life. But we have developed the mental skills needed to deal with the demands of the modern world.

### **Does that mean we should revise our definition of intelligence?**

Once we understand how our minds have changed, I leave it to you whether you want to say we are "more intelligent". There is no doubt that we need a new approach to the study of intelligence.

If one individual is better than average on one important cognitive skill, they tend to be better on all of them. Society, on the other hand, may change so as to demand enhancement of one important skill - say, the ability to use logic to deal with abstract symbols - but make no extra demands on the expansion of our everyday vocabulary. Writing the cognitive history of the 20th century, of how our minds have changed over time, is quite different from measuring how much one person's cognitive skills are superior to another's.

### **You caused a bit of stir talking about gains in women's IQ.**

[Women have gained on men over the past generation](#), to the point where they now equal or slightly surpass men. I don't think the advantage that women are showing is a genetic advantage for intelligence; I suspect it's down to extra mental exercise. Girls are more likely to use their mind in school than boys are. But at university, they really are two or three points below men, and that's because more marginal women, IQ-wise, qualify for university.

### **How come?**

---

A girl with an IQ of 100 thinks of herself as university material and has the marks. A boy with the same IQ hates school and doesn't have the marks. So you're much more likely to find girls with an IQ below 110 in university than boys. Even so, females do better than males at university.

### **What about the infamous remarks by Larry Summers, when he was president of Harvard University, that women have less innate ability than men for science and mathematics?**

This is a perfectly respectable hypothesis. Every hypothesis should be tested. He remarked that at the highest level of pure mathematics, women are under-represented. My answer is that if there is a difference, it's not cognitive but temperamental.

I'm convinced from my research that women can use logic just as well as men. It could be that thanks to the testosterone of males and the greater proclivity of women to be interested in human beings, there will always be fewer women in pure mathematics. Who knows?

I have an open mind. When I lecture on this, I say Summers was wrong to think that women are less gifted cognitively.

### **It's a sensitive issue. Why tackle it?**

We need to know. And if people like me didn't investigate it because it was politically incorrect, we never would know. It's not accidental that I'm the one who's overwhelmingly brought this evidence to bear on the gender issue. A lot of other people were too scared to go into it.

When feminists say to me that this is a great difficulty, I say, do you want women to be as competitive and soulless as men? I mean, is your ideal human being someone who neglects their family and kids and works 16 hours a day to be a corporate executive? You can't have it both ways.

### **Do these differences in outlook exist between cultures too?**

Yes. If you came home and told your Irish father [Flynn is Irish American] you'd made the football team, he'd be over the moon. If you told that to a Jewish parent, they might forbid you to play football. And if I came home with a good report card, my father would give me perfunctory praise. A Chinese parent, the kid knows he's over the moon.

In my book *Asian Americans*, I wrote that Chinese Americans who had come to America before 1950 as children, or had been born in the US, had IQs no higher than whites - they just outperformed them like crazy. That is, they could drop seven points on whites and still get the SAT scores and grades to get into Berkeley. A Chinese American with an IQ of about 93 looked as intelligent as a white at 100, in terms of their educational and occupational profile. Like women, Chinese are more adjusted to formal education. They don't skip class; they hand homework in on time; they don't get suspended.

### **What implications does the "Flynn effect" have for the use of the death penalty?**

In the US I'm going to be executed rather than exonerated if I have an IQ above 70 - because below that is where they deem "significant limitations", such as problems with literacy or social skills, set in. For 10 years I have been trying to educate judges about the Flynn effect and the need to restandardise IQ tests every generation or so. If I was tested in 1976 with an IQ test from 1948, it has been inflated by 28 years of IQ gains, which means that an IQ of 67 could be returned as one of 75.

### **Have you succeeded in changing things?**

At the beginning, I faced enormous resistance. Today, almost everyone who defends capital offenders is aware of my work. Given how conservative the judicial profession is, I'm not discouraged. I hope that before I die, I will see more progress.

### **You're now 78, but you're still working pretty much full time?**

I teach four-fifths of the time, two courses, and I have a lot more time for my writing than I did when I was department head.

### **Doesn't this run counter to the material in your new book about the "dark" side of old age?**

No, that is about analytical people losing more ground in old age. Most IQ tests divide skills into four categories - analytical skills, verbal skills, working memory and perceptual speed. Disturbingly, those who are most above the average analytically have the deepest fall-off between the age of 65 and 88. Retirement age is what really sets things off.

### **Why do people decline after they retire?**

Let's imagine that high-performance analytical brains are like high-performance cars: in old age, they need more servicing than the average car. It could be that evolution has not geared the high-performance analytical brain to keep its tone in old age, neuronally. Or it may be that most highly intelligent people mainly use analysis at work, and when they retire, they lose an analytical exercise advantage over the average person. But there's a bright spot for verbal skills: for people who are well above the mean, verbal facility decays slower.

### **How are you holding up?**

Oddly enough, I don't really feel I have fewer new ideas or am able to do less analysis than I could at 20. I do find my working memory has slipped a bit. I've remained intensely active. I still run.

## What do the next few years hold for you?

I'm on a crusade to salvage university education. I looked at students at a very good US university, one of the top 10, and found that only about 1 in 5 could do any critical thinking outside their major subject. Universities are in a position to correct this; every department could run a course that gave them these key tools. And I've just finished a little book on climate change. This seems to be an issue that any educated person would want to have an independent opinion on.

### Profile

[James Flynn](#) studied mathematics and physics at the University of Chicago before discovering political philosophy. He subsequently emigrated to New Zealand, where he became professor of political science at the University of Otago. His new book is [Are We Getting Smarter? Rising IQ in the twenty-first century](#) (Cambridge University Press)

From issue [2881](#) of New Scientist magazine, page 26-27.

As a subscriber, you have unlimited access to our online archive.

Why not [browse past issues](#) of New Scientist magazine?

Vind ik leuk  veert  



## MORE FROM NEW SCIENTIST



**I watched a flood of aid destroy a culture**



**Morality is rooted in the way societies get their energy**



**Hay fever: Can airborne allergies be cured?**



**I believe: Your personal guidebook to reality**

Recommended by

If you would like to **reuse any content** from New Scientist, either in print or online, please [contact the syndication](#) department first for permission. New Scientist does not own rights to photos, but there are a [variety of licensing options](#) available for use of articles and graphics we own the copyright to.

[Back to article](#)

Vind ik leuk  veert  

