

Nature or Nurture?

The 19th century scientist Francis Galton was one of the first to study human intelligence seriously. Galton wanted to discover if it was hereditary or if it was a product of people's environments. In other words, were people born intelligent or could intelligence be improved through education? Following years of research, Galton concluded that most of our brain power comes from our genes and that our surroundings don't have much effect on how clever we are.

Galton's theory that intelligence was hereditary dominated psychology throughout the 19th century. In fact, studies in the 1960s of identical twins succeeded in reinforcing Galton's views. The twins in the study had been separated at birth and adopted by different families, so they had never lived together. In some cases, they didn't even know about each other. Researchers interviewed the twins when they had reached adulthood and discovered that they had all achieved remarkably similar positive results in their studies. This seemed to be clear proof that intelligence was passed on from generation to generation. However, one professor of psychology, Richard E. Nisbett, was not convinced.

For years, Nisbett had adhered to the belief that most of our cerebral skills, or lack of them, were inherited. However, he soon realized that there was a flaw in the study on the twins. There was no information about the families who had adopted them. Through his own research he discovered that the adoptive families all had middle-class backgrounds. In other words, they were families who were able to provide children with a good education. Nisbett discovered that all the sets of twins had been brought up in almost identical environments and had each received a good education. Couldn't this be the reason for the similarity in results between them? Nisbett believed that this was the case.

Further studies by a university professor in New Zealand, James Flynn, confirmed the idea that the environment greatly affects how clever we are. Flynn had studied lots of IQ (Intelligence Quotient) tests that were carried out around the world during the 20th century. These tests are used to measure a person's intelligence and someone managing a score of 100 is said to have an average level. Flynn noticed that people who had regular access to education and a good diet had been able to increase their average IQ by thirty points.

Nisbett and Flynn have shown that although our ancestors' genes have a lot to do with intellect, it also depends on the opportunities we get to develop our brains. But of course parents have a big influence on that too. Parents can help their children to realize their potential by speaking to them, by reading to them and by encouraging them to be aware of the world around them. It's no use being born with innate intelligence if nobody encourages you to make the best of it.