

Re: Shrinking brains in evolution

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- *From:* j.wilkins1@xxxxxxxxxx (John Wilkins)
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Perplexed in Peoria <jimmenegay@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

"John Wilkins" <j.wilkins1@xxxxxxxxxx> wrote...

Perplexed in Peoria <jimmenegay@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

"Anthony Campbell" <ac@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote...

Jared Diamond, in (I think) *Guns, Germs and Steel* says that he found the inhabitants of New Guinea to be often more intelligent than many Westerners. He also thinks that since the invention of agriculture there may have been a decline in intelligence over-all.

Which is a bit odd, since he also says that New Guinea is where agriculture was invented.

No he does not. He clearly says it began in the fertile crescent (and in Mesoamerica independently). New Guinea may have been early, but its domestication of local species of crops occurred c7000BCE, while southwest Asia and the fertile crescent date to around 8500BCE (acc. to his book).

I'm uncertain if his dates are all that good, and also whether there had been diffusion between some of the Eurasian and African sites.

Corrections accepted. Still, I dislike the hypothesis that the invention of agriculture has led to a general decline in intelligence. While I am more tolerant than many of the idea that there is a real characteristic being measured by Spearman's 'g', I also believe that technologies like

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agriculture or writing have transformed the selective pressures for general intelligence rather than weakening them. A hunter–gatherer needs to know many things and to plan and reason effectively. An agriculturalist or pastoralist needs to know different things, and an urban merchant or artisan needs even different skills. It happens that the aspects of intelligence which I happen to admire the most are in the domains of numeracy and literacy. And I really doubt that these aspects of intelligence have declined since the advent of agriculture and pastoralism. Still, a big part of what we call 'intelligence' lies in the social skills needed to make effective use of the spoken word, and I doubt that our hunter–gatherer ancestors were deficient in this regard compared to us.

I think that intelligence is related in part to the inconstancy of the environment. Foragers have to deal with a range of conditions, and so intelligence is going to be selected for. Agriculture is less inconstant. However, I really cannot think that a few thousands of years is any real time in which to make major changes here. I suspect the difference in intelligence (and I do not accept the biological reality of what Spearman's "g" stands for) is based on the culture – in an agrarian society, culture is less diverse than in a society in which each village or clan can generate its own culture and each individual is a substantial contributor to it.

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John S. Wilkins, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Biohumanities Project
University of Queensland – Blog: scienceblogs.com/evolvingthoughts
"He used... sarcasm. He knew all the tricks, dramatic irony, metaphor, bathos, puns, parody, litotes and... satire. He was vicious."

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