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When James Flynn (1984) first reported that American children and adolescents scored higher on IQ tests than did their peers from an earlier generation, that finding generated few ripples in the literature or in clinical practice. Indeed, how would any other result have made sense? The first sets of data compared children from the mid-1930s with the early 1970s on the Stanford-Binet Form L-M and from the late 1940s with the early 1970s on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). The advent of television, the mass media explosion, the increasing awareness of the importance of a stimulating early environment, and other societal changes during the intervening years provided a simple and handy explanation for the 3 points per decade gain that Flynn observed in the United States.

Flynn’s (1987) next publication, however, started to rock the empirical and clinical foundations of the nature of intelligence and cognitive development and the psychometric measurement of IQ. The gains in IQ from one generation to the next (which would come to be known as the Flynn effect [FE]) occurred on a worldwide basis, according to data from 14 developed nations, and the 3-point-per-decade American gain paled in comparison with the larger gains in most other nations studied. In fact, gains about twice that large occurred in Japan and in European countries such as Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. These gains defied easy explanation (Neisser, 1998). So did the fact that the 3-point-per-decade gain in the United States was not limited to post–World War II societal advances, but continued to occur into the 1980s (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983), the 1990s (Wechsler, 1991), and the 2000s (Roid, 2003; Wechsler, 2008). FE has apparently stopped, and even reversed, in some Scandinavian countries (Teasdale & Owen, 2008), but it has remained a virtual constant gain for children and adults in the United States for the past eight decades.

Researchers differ on why the FE occurs. Some claim that genetics is the key variable (Rodgers & Wanstrom, 2007), though most stress environmental factors such as nutrition (Colom, Lluis-Font, & Andres-Pueyo, 2005), education (Teasdale & Owen, 2005), or improvement in public health (Steen, 2009). Flynn (2007, 2009), in What Is Intelligence?, explains the effect named after him in terms of a societal shift from concrete to abstract thinking, whereas other scholars and researchers maintain that the so-called effect is nothing more than an artifact of statistical or methodological origin (Beaujean & Osterlind, 2008; Rodgers, 1998). And, in fact, the dispute about the scientific validity of the FE has entered the U.S. courtrooms in a big way as a burgeoning array of law cases asks whether the FE should be considered when sentencing low-functioning criminals convicted of a capital crime. Ever since the Supreme Court’s decision in Atkins v. Virginia (2002), which stipulated that a criminal who is mentally retarded cannot be executed,

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whether or not to adjust IQs for the FE (i.e., by subtracting 3 points for each decade that the norms are out of date) has literally been a matter of life or death for some individuals. If a convicted criminal in a capital punishment case earned a global IQ of 73 on a test with 20-year-old norms, should that IQ be adjusted by 6 points to account for their datedness? Is the best estimate of the person’s mental functioning 73 or 67? Of course, standard errors of measurement and adaptive behavior enter the equation as well, but the questions that arise from the FE are intriguing.

In this special issue of Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment (JP A), we explore the many theoretical, clinical, practical, and societal implications of the FE. Each of us has authored an article on the FE to serve as the centerpiece of this special issue. Kaufman challenges Flynn’s interpretation of the FE, which he bases in large part on generational changes in specific subtests, most notably Similarities; and Weiss (with Zhou and Zhu) answers probing questions about the FE, such as whether it remains a constant 3 points per decade across ability levels. We asked leaders in the field to respond to these two articles, and their thoughtful responses appear following the two featured articles—a prominent theorist (Robert Sternberg), researchers who have published cutting-edge articles on the FE (Stephen Ceci and Tomoe Kanaya), the coauthor of a major cognitive and achievement test, the Woodcock-Johnson III (Kevin McGrew), and James Flynn himself. Because of the controversial application of the FE to capital punishment cases, we deemed it of critical importance to confront this thorny issue by asking three stellar psychologists to write essays on whether or not IQs should be adjusted for the FE in the courtroom: Jack Fletcher, Leigh Hagan, and Cecil Reynolds. In the final section of the issue, each of us has prepared a separate rebuttal to the four articles written in response to our articles, and we address the three capital punishment essays as well, as we try to provide an overview of the diverse topics and controversies that pertain to the FE.

This special issue of JP A provides a scientific forum on the FE that is relevant to theory, clinical practice, empirical research, and public policy, and that will serve as a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners in the fields of clinical psychology, neuropsychology, school psychology, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, special education, criminal justice, and related fields. As Cecil Reynolds (personal communication, March 13, 2010) commented, this special issue of JP A “will undoubtedly be used, by both sides, in many future capital punishment cases. Whether to apply the Flynn Correction is a dire matter with implications we seldom encounter in psychology.”

References


