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WEEK IN IDEAS | NOVEMBER 6, 2010

Working and Thinking Longer

By [CHRISTOPHER SHEA](#)

ECONOMICS / PSYCHOLOGY

Americans are working later in life, a trend that may be "good news for the cognitive capacities of our aging nation," a new study reports. That's because working men and women dramatically outscore retirees of the same age on an intelligence test.

The idea that the brain slows down when not challenged ("use it or lose it") remains a contentious one. But two economists sought to get leverage on the question by making use of cross-national comparisons.



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Americans are working later in life, a trend that may be "good news for the cognitive capacities of our

The challenge in comparing workers and retirees has always been teasing out cause and effect: Perhaps people who experience cognitive decline decide to retire earlier, meaning retirement itself had nothing to do with causing the decline.

But retirement patterns in the U.S. and European nations are largely shaped by public policy. In the U.S., no 60-to-64-year-olds are eligible for full Social Security benefits; thus, roughly half are still working. In contrast, all French people are eligible for full public benefits at that age, and only about 15% of them work.

Singling out public policy as the driving force behind retirement allowed the researchers to focus on intelligence, as measured by a test of word recall in parallel American, British and European surveys of older citizens.

On a scale of zero to 20, not working was found to cause a drop in performance on that test by an average of 4.7 points.

"Mental Retirement," Susann Rohwedder and Robert

...the good news for the cognitive capacities of our aging nation," a new study reports.

J. Willis, Journal of Economic Perspectives (Winter 2010)

BIOLOGY

Sisters vs. Sex

Might the number of sisters a man has affect his sexual appetite—and attractiveness—later in life? Researchers have taken aim at this question by looking at rats.

First, the researchers took note of the gender ratios of 88 rat litters. Then they rejiggered the litters to contain equal numbers of males and females (four and four); three times as many males as females (six and two); or three times as many females as males.

When the males matured, each was placed in a one-on-one situation with sexually primed females. The prenatal, or original, sex ratios didn't affect behavior, but the composition of the litters in which males were raised did.

Males raised in "female biased" litters mounted their partners less often than their male-rat peers. The females also demonstrated less interest in males who had multiple sisters: They did fewer "hop-darts," a distinctive move signaling sexual readiness, for example.

As one explanation for this discrepancy, the authors suggest that females may seem less novel, and therefore less intriguing, to male rats raised among females.

"Deconstructing Early Life Experiences: Distinguishing the Contributions of Prenatal and Postnatal Factors to Adult Male Sexual Behavior in the Rat," Cynthia B. de Medeiros, Stephanie L. Rees, Maheleth Llinas, Alison S. Fleming and David Crews, Psychological Science (October)



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AFP/Getty Images

An Israeli army bulldozer demolishes a Palestinian house that was built without municipality permission in the Jerusalem Arab neighborhood of Isawiyya.

FOREIGN POLICY

Punitive Demolitions Work

Debates rage over the Israeli policy of demolishing the houses of suicide bombers, with critics saying the policy punishes innocent relatives. But three economists asked a more pragmatic question: Do demolitions work?

The short answer: yes, so long as they are retribution for specific terrorist acts. The scholars used data from the human-rights group B'Tselem and distinguished between punitive demolitions (linked to specific terrorist attacks) and preventative demolitions (undertaken largely to create "no-go" zones from which

mortar attacks could not be launched).

Once the researchers took into account factors such as the demographics and pre-existing levels of violence in the regions in which punitive demolition took place, they found the demolitions were linked to large, significant decreases in subsequent suicide bombings. Each house destroyed reduced suicide bombings from that region by 5% (though the effect was short-lived: it lasted about a month).

In contrast, preventative house demolitions seemed to inspire violence. Each additional house destroyed

increased the likelihood of a future attack by 6%, leading the authors to conclude that only "discriminate" violence is effective.

"Counter-Suicide-Terrorism: Evidence from House Demolitions," Efraim Benmelech, Claude Berrebi, Esteban Klor, National Bureau of Economic Research working paper (October 2010)



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Bryan Derballa

A woman at a block party at Monster Island on Metropolitan Avenue and River Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Marketing

It's Hard to Be a Hipster

Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, trucker hats worn ironically, affection for obscure musical genres like "shoegaze": These are the telltale signs of the species known as the hipster.

Based on extensive interviews with 21 young tastemakers (such as DJs and music critics) in Madison, Wis., two professors of marketing found that hipsters are very good at justifying their own tastes and explaining how they arrived at them through "a mix of serendipitous discoveries, social connections and 'fits-like-a-glove' aesthetic responses." (They were turned

on, say, by a mix tape from an older sister.)

The one thing they're sure they're not: hipsters. The first rule of hipsterdom, apparently, is that no one wants to be called one.

"Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths," Zeynep Arsel, Craig J. Thompson, Journal of Consumer Research (forthcoming)

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