

# behavioral sciences

## The best and the brightest?

The gods do not give all mortals similar gifts of intelligence, but the gods are not in complete control. Environmental factors play an important role in intellectual development. Some evidence, for instance, suggests that an only child or a child from a small family will perform better on intelligence tests and educational measures than a child from a large family. There is also evidence that within families a firstborn will perform better than a secondborn, a secondborn better than a thirdborn, etc. Some of these findings have been called "inconsistent" or "tenuous" but a recent study of nearly 400,000 19-year-old men born in the Netherlands shows that family size and birth order do have an effect on intelligence test performance.

In the Netherlands, all men are tested to determine their fitness for military induction. Lillian Belmont and Francis A. Marolla of Columbia University School of Public Health examined the data on the men born between 1944 and 1947. All had been tested in language, arithmetic, mechanical comprehension, perceptual speed and nonverbal intelligence. In the Dec. 14 *SCIENCE* the researchers report that "a relatively straightforward set of findings emerged." As family size increased, the level of ability decreased. As birth order position became greater, the level of ability declined.

## Triple your reading speed!

No one doubts that speed-reading courses can teach some people to read faster. Some psychologists, however, doubt whether the effort is worthwhile. They say that speed-reading courses teach skimming not reading and that comprehension goes down as speed goes up. Richard G. Graf of California State University in San Diego accepted the challenge of a speed-reading company and reports in the December *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY* "that while the students' reading speed increased, their comprehension fell severely."

Using a research design approved by the speed-reading company, Graf tested students before and after the course. On the average, reading speed shot up by 221 percent. Comprehension, tested on various types of literature, fell from 66.1 percent to 40.6 percent. Only five of the 62 students tested showed an increase in comprehension. Graf admits that skimming may be a useful skill, but he concludes that the results of his test are reasonably clear. An average reader cannot triple reading speed or even double it without missing large chunks of the message. "The claim that most of us can increase our reading speed dramatically without loss of comprehension," he says, "remains unsupported."

## Sanity in the energy crisis

It has been pointed out that the incidence of mental illness takes an upswing when the stock market takes a dive (*SN*: 11/10/73, p. 296). Now the Department of Health, Education and Welfare is predicting that the energy crisis will have the same effect on national mental health. Based on this prediction, HEW says the following problems are expected to increase proportionately with the energy shortages: unemployment, mental-illness admissions to hospitals, suicide, serious crimes including homicide, alcoholism and drug abuse. To make matters worse, HEW says that personnel shortages and government budget ceilings will bring about reduced health services. HEW assistant secretary for health, Charles C. Edwards, did note that lower temperatures in homes and offices will have some benefits. The affluent, overweight person may lose some weight.

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