

How much do genes shape your psychology?

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Are poor people poor because of inferior genes? This notion is especially popular with members of the ruling elite, who like to think their position is the result of genetic superiority rather than the fact they have privileged backgrounds.

Low intelligence and high rates of mental illness are more common in poor people. Geneticists maintain that genes play a major role in causing both. But if they were right there would be an inexorable logic that suggests inferior DNA caused poor people to sink to the bottom of the gene pool.

In the light of the findings of the [human genome project](#), however, that idea is no longer defensible – as the [leading psychologist Ken Richardson](#) recently pointed out in the house magazine of the psychology profession. On the contrary, the implication of the unimportance of genes is that if we changed society in the right ways, we could virtually eradicate not only low academic performance and mental illness but also criminality and problems such as substance abuse.

Since the [project published its results 16 years ago](#), genes have been found that have a significant influence on physical traits like height and weight, so you might have expected the same for psychology by now. But Britain's leading geneticist – Robert Plomin, of King's College, London – [hasn't found any](#) specific DNA variants that have a significant effect on differences in our psychology.

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