

The Volokh Conspiracy

If it becomes possible to safely genetically increase babies' IQ, it will become inevitable

By **Eugene Volokh** July 14

A [Pew poll](#) asked,

Would you say that changing a baby's genetic characteristics to make the baby more intelligent is making appropriate use of medical advances OR is it taking medical advances too far?

The result: **83 percent of Americans said it's not appropriate**, and only 15 percent said it was appropriate. Now I'm most certainly not an expert on such questions, so take what I say with a grain of salt. Still, this seems too interesting a topic not to speculate about, so let me offer my guess: If such genetic modification proves to be possible (and safe for the baby), that lopsided poll result won't matter at all.

I appreciate that people might feel that we shouldn't mess with nature that way. I appreciate that intelligence enhancement may increase the gap between rich and poor, and even between the rich and the middle class, at least at the outset. I appreciate that Congress might outlaw it, if it becomes viable. I just think all that will prove irrelevant.

Intelligence is, generally speaking, good, and more is, generally speaking, better. It's better for the person in question. It's better for society to have more intelligent people. It's not the most important thing. But ask yourself: All else being equal, would you rather have your child have an IQ (for all the limitations of that measure) of 85, 100, 115 or 130?

So here's how it will happen. Say the 83 percent poll results hold, even once safe genetic modification is available (it's not clear they will, given that at this point they reflect a purely hypothetical question, but say they do), and Congress bans such modification. Or say there is worry — understandable when it comes to a new technology — that the modification won't be safe and will cause the birth of children with various birth defects or other problems, so Congress bans it because of that.

Now it's gone! No more of this awful technology. Except, wait: Say the Chinese don't see things the way we do.

Out come some number of babies with horrible birth defects (truly a tragedy, and as a purely ethical matter, possibly a reason against such experimentation; I'm just saying the ethics won't matter much). And then things get worked out, and now the new generation of Chinese, or Japanese, or Russians becomes on average much smarter than the new generation of Americans. How long will American public opinion remain opposed to a technology that seems vital to national success, and perhaps even national independence?

Plus, of course, many of the rich will want the technology for their own children. They're rich, so they can go overseas to get it (even if they don't want to risk the domestic black market). Hard to stop that without some pretty intrusive monitoring, even if there was the will to try. Now the upper middle class will ask: Why are we being left behind? Even if there is an equality problem with having only the top 20 percent have access to this technology (or, soon enough, only the top 50 percent or top 80 percent, if the pattern of technologies becoming more affordable holds), the alternative is having only the top 1 percent have access to this technology.

Of course, one can imagine some genetic modifications that will face too much social opposition to overcome such competitive factors. Yes, it would be convenient to have four arms — but who wants a baby with four arms? But it's not as though intelligence looks icky, or inherently comes with massive countervailing baggage. Indeed, there are actually people who are considerably more intelligent than average *walking amongst us even today*. By all accounts, they are often happy, and even occasionally socially tolerated.

Some genetic experiments might be dangerous or might be costly in various ways. (Double your child's intelligence by doubling his head size!) But tweaking genes to basically copy known and successful genetic patterns should just yield intelligent people much like the intelligent people who seem to be pretty successful in the world today, at least once the (possibly tragic) initial kinks are worked out. As I understand it, the genetic component of high intelligence isn't just a matter of one gene or a couple of genes. Still, whatever it is, we know it occurs in nature, and there seems to be no reason in principle why replicating even a complicated mix of genes will necessarily yield harmful side effects. Maybe that will no longer be so if we try to get extraordinarily high intelligence, beyond the highest well-functioning level we have found naturally occurring. But there are a lot of intelligence increases we can get up to that point.

There is of course also the possibility that intelligence increases, even if beneficial for individual human beings, will be so harmful for societies that all countries will cut off such modifications. For instance, maybe if a society provides such enhancement for 20 percent of the population, it won't be able to resist providing it for 100 percent — and then maybe a society in which everyone is very smart will be a society in which certain jobs that need to get done will be frustrating for smart people, in ways that are socially damaging.

But one advantage of intelligence is that it can help solve problems like that. As the number of smart people markedly increases, so likely will the number of inventions, such as robotics, nanotechnology and the like. Indeed, since these inventions can spread worldwide, this will create a still further incentive for genetic intelligence increases throughout the world: Imagine what it will be like if America is committed to a no-enhancement policy, while other countries produce reject the policy, and thus produce more inventions that further reduce the market for relatively unintellectual labor.

Again, none of this responds to the ethical, philosophical, or religious objections to genetic modification of intelligence that are driving the high current hostility to such modification. (A response could be made, I think, but it's not my goal here to offer it.)

My point is simply that competitive pressures, on the international level as well as the individual level, are pretty likely to swamp such objections in practice, at least unless someone shows that the objections are so overwhelmingly compelling that we are willing to risk permanent second-class (fifth-class?) status in order to adhere to them. And, rightly or wrongly, settling for permanent second-class status is not something to which America takes easily.

So that's my thinking. But I might well be wrong — I'd love to hear yours.

Thanks to [InstaPundit](#) for the pointer.

Eugene Volokh teaches free speech law, religious freedom law, church-state relations law, a First Amendment Amicus Brief Clinic, and tort law, at UCLA School of Law, where he has also often taught copyright law, criminal law, and a seminar on firearms regulation policy.
