

## Has Verbal Ability Declined in America?

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### Abstract

Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1974-1996, researchers have debated whether the observed intercohort decline represents an actual intercohort decline in verbal ability in the U.S. population. Some researchers speculate that the observed intercohort decline in verbal ability in GSS data is spurious since previous literature has shown that verbal ability increases over the life span and peaks in old age. Other researchers, however, maintain that aging effects on verbal ability are not large enough to explain the steep decline in verbal ability observed in GSS data. By identifying some of the

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Received July 2, 2003; accepted September 9, 2003; last revised October 6, 2003.  
Proofreaders: Hui-Wen Ko, Hsin-Wen Fan

\* This research was supported by Academia Sinica through the Learning 2000 Project. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author, not those of Academia Sinica or any other funding agencies. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2001 American Sociological Association annual meeting in Anaheim, California, USA. Data from the General Social Survey is available from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, or at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu:8080/GSS/homepage.htm>. I greatly appreciate the comments of Duane F. Alwin, Norval D. Glenn, Walter R. Gove, Tony Tam (譚康榮), the members of the *EurAmerica* Editorial Board, and two anonymous reviewers. I also thank Yu-Ling Lin (林毓玲) for research assistance and Audrey Chen (陳慧文) for English editing. The author alone is responsible for any inadequacies remaining in this manuscript. Direct correspondence to Min-Hsiung Huang (黃敏雄), Academia Sinica, Institute of European and American Studies, Nankang, Taipei, 11529, Taiwan (tel: 886-2-3789-7246).

inadequacies of earlier research and considering a strategy that takes changes in the selectivity of education over time into account, this study attempts to reconcile some of these disparate findings. The findings from this study did not support an age interpretation. Intercohort decline in verbal ability began with persons born in late 1940s and ended with persons born in early 1960s, independent of aging effects on vocabulary acquisition. The intercohort decline in GSS vocabulary test scores resembles the widespread test score decline observed in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s in its onset, end, and magnitude.

**Key Words:** vocabulary test scores, test score decline, verbal ability, cohort analysis, aging