

Unequal fates for maths superstars

The fates of US child prodigies of the 1970s reveal great accomplishments but strong gender differences.

Chris Woolston

03 December 2014

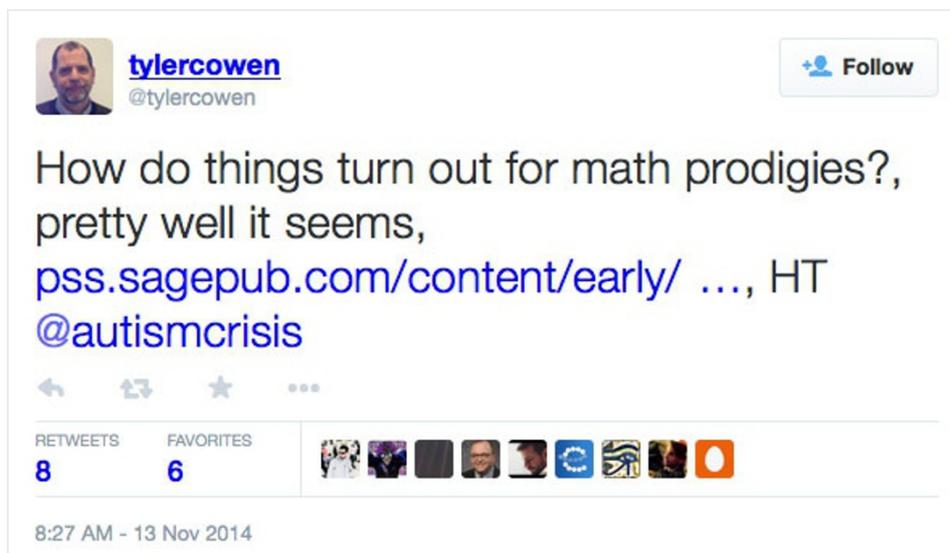
A gift for numbers can take a person far in life, according to [a report getting plenty of online attention](#). A survey¹ of 1,004 men and 601 women who were identified as 13-year-old mathematics prodigies in the 1970s found above-average levels of accomplishment in fields that included business and academia.

Tyler Cowen, an economist at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, tweeted:



Altmetric

Based on data from Altmetric.com. Altmetric is supported by Macmillan Science and Education, which owns Nature Publishing Group.



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How do things turn out for math prodigies?, pretty well it seems, pss.sagepub.com/content/early/ ..., HT @autismcrisis

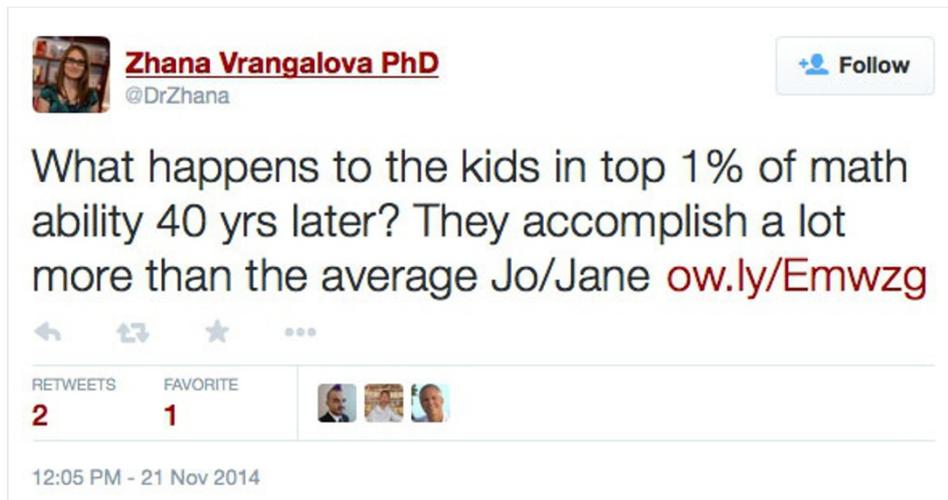
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Cowen told *Nature* that he shared the report on Twitter because he suspects that many of his followers have gifted children. “I was delivering good news,” he says. However, success wasn’t evenly distributed, with men earning more than their female cohort-companions.

Surveyed in 2012 and 2013, the group — all Americans who had scored in the top 1% for maths ability in their youth — had collectively published 85 books and 7,572 peer-reviewed articles and secured 681 patents and US\$358 million in grants. About one-third of them had obtained doctorates, an accomplishment achieved by less than 2% of the general US population. Slightly more than 4% were tenured faculty members at major research universities; about 2% were leading executives at major companies; and another 2% were high-level attorneys.

Zhana Vrangalova, a sexuality researcher at New York University in New York City, summed it up on Twitter:



The survey also uncovered a significant gender gap in income. On average, women in the survey earned about \$80,000 a year. That's more than double the amount that US women with full-time jobs typically make in a year, but about \$60,000 less than the men in the survey.

There were also strong gender-related differences in goals, interests and overall approach to life. Women reported spending significantly more time on family and home life, and, on average, they were less focused on their careers. Whereas 30% of the women said they would be unwilling to work 40 hours a week even if they had their ideal job, only 7% of men agreed with that statement.

Vrangalova says it is intriguing that despite these differences, both genders reported unusually high levels of satisfaction with their lives and careers. "It seems that both sexes got what they wanted from life, even if those things were somewhat different," she says.

Colin Camerer, one of the prodigies included in the survey, who is now an economist at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, says that he was impressed with the overall accomplishments of the group, especially because not all smart children have a chance to really develop their talents. "They have to deal with a lot of crosswinds that can push them in different directions," he says.

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References

1. Lubinski, D., Benbow, C. P. & Kell, H. J. *Psychol. Sci.* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0956797614551371> (2014).