Long-lived fellows

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In many parts of the world, Oxford and Cambridge Universities epitomize privilege, and the life of an Oxbridge College Fellow is viewed as being especially congenial. Fellows dine off Georgian silver, live amid world-class architecture, sit on their College’s Governing Body which, inter alia, manages substantial endowments, and teach some of the UK’s best students. We wondered whether the life style is in fact so life enhancing that it leads to longer life spans among Fellows than among control cohorts. Such a longevity advantage, at least at Cambridge, has been predicted in fiction[1].

Our sample of Fellows comprised 311 men who were born between 1900 and 1920, elected to Fellowships by the 20 Cambridge Colleges founded before 1900, and who are now deceased at an age of 60 or greater. Their ages at death are recorded in the Cambridge University Reporter magazine.

We had two control groups. The first comprised 558 men, also born between 1900 and 1920, who were undergraduates at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and who had now died at an age of 60 or greater. This College maintains particularly thorough records of its alumni, and was chosen simply for this reason. We assumed that this control group closely matched the Fellows group for social background. The second control group was the wider UK population, whose life expectancy is recorded by the UK Office of National Statistics (http://www.statistics.gov.uk). For this second group, we noted the mean life expectation of further life for 60-year-old males born in 1911 (the mid-point of our 1900–1920 birth era for Fellows and undergraduates). By comparing the life expectancy of individuals who had already reached 60 years of age, we aimed to minimize any differences between groups that might have been due to workplace accidents, car crashes and war.

At age 60, the median expectation of further life of Fellows was 19 years, significantly more than the undergraduates (16 years: Mann-Whitney U-test, W = 150901, P < 0.001) and the national males (mean 15.3 years: Wilcoxon Z < 32473, P < 0.001). The undergraduates were not significantly longer lived than the national population. Because a few Fellows born between 1900 and 1920 are still alive, and at least 83 years of age, the difference between the Fellows and national group will eventually be slightly larger than reported here. Within the Fellows group, a GLM analysis failed to identify any of the following as significant predictors of longevity: age at start of fellowship, subject (arts or science), College age, College wealth or Fellowship category (such as ordinary Fellow or Master of College). Data about the Fellows’ marital status and number of children were not available.

It seems unlikely that the enhanced longevity of Fellows seems is due to childhood background, because the undergraduates are no longer lived than the national population. It could be due to the (assumed) greater intelligence of Fellows, if there were a link between intelligence and longevity, or it could be due to features of the College lifestyle that enhance longevity. Such features might include a secure job, accommodation and pension, a supportive community and the esteem of one’s peers. They are features shared with a monastic life style, and earlier work has demonstrated enhanced life spans among monks [2]. Whether this longevity advantage will also be enjoyed by Fellows elected during the late 20th century remains to be seen.

References

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God and nature revisited


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In 1981, David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers convened a group of fellow historians to reconsider old assessments of the relationship between science and religion, and published the results in a scholarly