A nicely edited version of this letter was published in *The Psychologist,* Feb. 2016, vol 29 no. 2, p87

## Response to a highlighted letter entitled ***Not in your genes****, The Psychologist,* Dec. 2015, vol 28, no. 12, p 950-951.

My first reaction to Oliver James's highlighted letter in *The Psychologist* for December 2015 was to sigh and think "Oh. No. Not again" … and to dismiss the thought of making yet one more attempt to instil some common sense into the nature-nurture "debate".

But there are two good reasons for not letting this matter pass.

The first is that James's position leads to policies which are every bit as dangerous and Draconian, even fascist, as the mis-use of the hereditarian data. The second is that the seemingly ultra-scientific stance of the genome research project has syphoned off virtually all the research funds which might have been available for the fundamental research which psychologists should have been conducting into the nature of human talents and developmental environments (although "no one" was actually promoting it.)

To take up the first issue first. At this very time, the Scottish Government is in the process of introducing the **Children and Young People (Scotland)** Bill. Justified on the basis of offering every family a "first point of contact" with the plethora of "care" agencies nominally available to "help" families and children, this Bill actually provides for extraordinary State intervention into the lives of every child and family. The state will appoint a single state servant to ensure the "well-being" of every "child" under 18. That person will have access to all family health, criminality, and educational records. He or she will be required to visit the family for hour-and-a-half long assessments 11 times, 8 of them in the child's first year and 3 more between 13 months and 5 years. In the course of these visits they will monitor, not just the health and development of the baby, but also a range of aspects of parental attitudes and family life, including finances and mental health. The assessments include two sets of tightly-printed 16-page Questionnaires. The selection and wording of the questions is permeated by "middle class" thought-ways, biases, and values, embody unquestioning endorsement of the doubtful benefits for all children of the so-called "educational" system, and acceptance of the misleading popularised interpretations of the (actually meagre and mostly seriously flawed) research into the "importance of the first three years". The "named person" has/will have the right to initiate procedures to compel parents attend parent-"education" courses and, in the last resort, send them to prison for failing to follow state-prescribed guidelines.

Readers unfamiliar with the research showing that conventional education seriously damages about one third of children and fails to identify and nurture most of the most important talents of most children may not find all this too unacceptable.

And therein lies a fundamental problem. For, by and large, psychologists have not promoted research into the nature of multiple talents or the nature of the developmental environments required to nurture them. This is partly because they have accepted one or other of the positions in this polarised debate about "ability" (AKA "intelligence") and environment and the embedment of those positions in successive swings of "educational" policy. But it is mainly because they have, without too much protest, accepted current funding arrangements which, by-and-large, corrupt "evidence-based policy" into "policy-based evidence". It is neigh impossible to obtain funding for

research which challenges the dominant zeitgeist and, particularly, the current "measurement" paradigm. And therein lies the problem with the genome research perspective.

To illustrate the problem, let me re-state the elementary.

If one grows the seeds of a number of strains of wheat in different environments, the average height and yield of harvest from the different strains varies. Those that are tallest in one environment may not be the tallest in another. Furthermore, the correlations between height, yield, and other characteristics all change. What is "best" in one environment is not "best" in another … but the differences between them are still genetically determined.

One might find a gene which is responsible for the height variance. But it is unlikely that one would find a single collection of genes that are responsible for the variance in the overall characteristics of the strains.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Would one expect to find a single gene responsible for the variance between all the plants and animals living in a forest? Obviously not.

And therein lies the problem of studying the genetic and environmental factors which influence the variance between human beings.

It is true that one might, just possibly, find a gene responsible for the variance in "intelligence" or "criminality".

But what of the variance in all the other human characteristics which do not show up as scores on "variables" like height and "intelligence" but require for their recognition an agreed *descriptive* framework akin to that used in biology? There is no more hope of the sources of that variance showing up in single cluster of genes than there is of the variance in the animal kingdom showing up in a single cluster of genes.

In other words, the genome enquiry, as framed by some of its most vocal supporters and detractors, is absurd.

Unfortunately, the seemingly "scientific" nature of that enquiry has, as I have mentioned, had the effect of syphoning off virtually all the funds which might have been available for the huge range of research which ought to be conducted using a more descriptive, biology-and-ecology-like, rather than physicist-like, viz variable-based, framework to document the range of human talents, abilities, and other characteristics and their complex interactions with their ecological settings.

Not nipping the bud at its source (as Spearman tried to do), not exercising common sense, has had enormous social consequences especially via the actions of those prone to insist on imposing what they believe to be good and right on others by force.

Now there's a thought: What are the genetic and environmental bases of the variance in scores on (improved versions of) the "f" (fascism) scale? What lies behind "totalitarianism", "fundamentalism", and the tendency to criminalise all behaviours which are currently regarded as objectionable?

John Raven.

Those interested in following up on some of the remarks made above might like to turn to Raven, J. (2008). Intelligence, engineered invisibility, and the destruction of life on earth. In J. Raven & J. Raven (Eds.) *Uses and Abuses of Intelligence: Studies Advancing Spearman and Raven's Quest for Non-Arbitrary Metrics*. Unionville, New York: Royal Fireworks Press; Edinburgh, Scotland: Competency Motivation Project. Also available at http://www.eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/UAIChapter19.pdf