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Genome common sense?

The debate continues, with a letter from John Raven.

My first reaction to Oliver James's letter ('Not in your genes', December 2015) was to think 'Oh. No. Not again'... and to dismiss the thought of making yet another attempt to instil some common sense into the nature–nurture 'debate'. But there are two good reasons for not letting it pass.

The first is that James's extreme 'nurture' position leads to policies that are every bit as dangerous and Draconian, even fascist, as the misuse of the hereditarian data. For example, 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. A state servant appointed to ensure a child's 'well-being' will have access to all family health, criminality, and educational records. They will visit the family for hour-and-a-half long assessments 11 times, eight of them in the child's first year to monitor not only 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, permeated by 'middle-class' biases and values, unquestioningly endorsing the doubtful benefits for all children of the so-called 'educational' system, and accepting the misleading popularised interpretations of the (actually meagre and mostly seriously flawed) research into the 'importance of the first three years'. The 'named person' will have the right to initiate procedures to compel parents to attend parent-'education' courses and, in the last resort, have them sent them to prison for failing to follow state-prescribed guidelines.

Unfortunately, we, as psychologists, must accept some responsibility for this disturbing development because, by and large, we have not promoted awareness of the detrimental effects that our current 'educational' system has on many children or research into the 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. These positions have become embedded in successive swings of 'educational' policy. But it is mainly because – and here is my second point – psychologists have, without much protest, accepted current funding arrangements that, by-and-large, corrupt 'evidence-based policy' into 'policy-based evidence'. Furthermore, the seemingly ultra-scientific stance of the genome research project has syphoned off virtually all the research funds and it is nigh impossible to obtain funding for research that challenges the dominant zeitgeist and, particularly, the current 'measurement' paradigm, especially the 'g and not much else' image of human abilities.

We ought to be conducting research using a more descriptive, biology-and-ecology-like framework to document the range of human talents, abilities, and other characteristics and their complex interactions with their ecological settings. Grow the seeds from a number of strains of wheat in different environments, and those that are tallest in one environment may not be the tallest in another. 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.

Without better frameworks for thinking about the diversity of human characteristics and the environments in which they develop, the dominant hopes and expectations of the genome project are indeed dangerous. Yet the funds needed to develop such frameworks – so urgently needed in schools – have in part been swallowed by the vast, seemingly unarguably 'scientific', genome project.

Now here'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?

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Editor's note: The debate between Oliver James and Stuart Ritchie (January 2016) continued online, with additional contributions from Richard Bentall. Read it at tinyurl.com/jamesritchie

This is an edited version of a longer commentary which is available at <http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/fulllist.html>