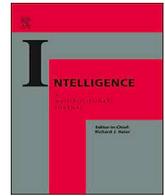




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Editorial

Academic freedom and social responsibility: Finding a balance



Controversies abound in all areas of science research as a natural outcome of the scientific method. Skepticism is integral. Although there are some legendary feuds among a few scientists within a discipline, most controversies are collegial and confined to interpretations of data. Personal attacks are rare and few researchers outside a scientific discipline feel compelled to weigh in on a controversy on which they have little expertise. If they do, it is typically with at least a modicum of trepidation. Public discussion of scientific controversies is another matter, especially on social media.

Controversies abound for many aspects of human intelligence research. Most are collegial among experts in the field, and even from related fields. Intelligence research, however, has a history of intense criticism from non-experts who assert with a certainty not typically found in any branch of science that research on intelligence is bogus and even racist. Many reasons for these views have been asserted over decades but, in our view, most stem from a desire to disavow the intensely uncomfortable, if not incendiary data from studies reporting average group differences on mental ability test scores.

The renowned experimental psychologist and editor of *Psychological Science*, William Estes, framed the problem this way: “To allow research on intelligence to advance and to generate its long-term contributions to the public good, the use of tests in research must be unhindered. In return for freedom to conduct the research, however, scientists need to shoulder a heavy responsibility, not only for protecting the rights of the individuals tested, as is now routine in research though not yet routine in applications, but for developing an ethical code regarding the publication of research findings that bear on group differences in intelligence and other psychological characteristics - findings that often prove inflammatory when accounts spread outside scientific circles. **Somehow** [emphasis added] a balance must be found between the need for free exchange of research results among scientists concerned with intelligence and the need to be sure that no segment of our society has reason to feel threatened by the research or its publication.” (Estes, 1992). Nearly three decades later, we are still searching for workable solutions to the challenge of “Somehow a balance must be found.”

Since its inception in 1977 as a scientific journal, *Intelligence* has provided researchers an opportunity to publish peer-reviewed empirical studies investigating different topics, theories, methods, and hypotheses. *Intelligence* began at a time when other journals were reluctant to review any papers on intelligence. This likely was due in large part to the vicious controversy surrounding Jensen's, 1969 paper on compensatory education as it related to boosting IQ and his hypothesis about a possible genetic component to average group differences (Jensen, 1969). The reluctance continues to this day for some journals and even at universities and colleges, tenured academic faculty are reluctant or not permitted to teach courses on intelligence. A welcomed positive change was an editorial in *Nature* that acknowledged the importance of

intelligence research and teaching about it, especially in the context of progress in genetic research with respect to individual (not group) differences (Editorial, 2017).

Over the years, *Intelligence* has been criticized for publishing papers that report controversial findings about average group differences (defined by race or nationality) by a few authors thought to be sympathetic to racist ideas. Such papers, it is argued, give aid, comfort, and justification to extremist groups defined by vitriolic hatred of minorities. Some of these authors were on the Editorial Board and this has caused some critics to paint *Intelligence* as a racist journal or at least one that is sympathetic to racism. These are stinging accusations about *Intelligence* that go beyond the general problem of racism in science (Editorial, 2020). We take them seriously, not because they are true, but because they speak directly to Estes's challenge to “somehow” find a balance between valid social sensitivities and the free exchange of research findings that may offend those sensitivities. Not everyone may agree with how that balance has always been achieved at *Intelligence*, but assuming malintent or racist sympathies is not justified on the basis of publishing empirical studies that test controversial hypotheses based on peer-review made without knowledge of the authors' identities.

Empirical data about average group differences are not inherently racist, but they are used and misrepresented by racists. To date, *Intelligence* has published more than 1650 empirical research papers that span the full range of intelligence topics. Combined, they have over 45,000 citations excluding self-citations (as per Web of Science Core Collection, 7/15/20). For perspective, the number of controversial group difference papers is quite small and citations to them often are from papers that report contrary data and alternative interpretations. This is exactly the way science is supposed to work. Some of the strongest critics of some group difference findings are members of our Editorial Board.

We endorse and stand for academic freedom. This is our core policy for *Intelligence* and it mirrors principles articulated by two reports from the University of Chicago (https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf) and (<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>).

We do not hide behind the principle of academic freedom to alleviate our responsibility with respect to those who feel this research is unnecessarily provocative or detrimental. We use it as the shield it was intended to be: to protect the ability of researchers to have their empirical work entered into the scientific marketplace for skeptical scrutiny, after the journal review process. If the review process is flawed, we have a range of options to correct it. We believe that no one study is definitive, especially for understanding anything as complex as intelligence, and that it takes many studies over time to sort out inconsistent and contrary results to establish a compelling weight of evidence

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for any research question. This is especially true for questions about intelligence and group differences like those enumerated by the American Psychological Association (Neisser et al., 1996), most of which remain unanswered. For these reasons, we maintain no list of banned authors or topics within the journal's stated scope of intelligence research. We depend on the editors to manage good faith peer review from domain experts to determine what is published (usually after revisions) and what is rejected, with all final decisions made by the Editor-In-Chief. All papers are considered for peer review although the Editor routinely rejects papers without review if the research subject is deemed inappropriate for this journal (e.g. submissions on artificial intelligence algorithms or on emotional intelligence without any connection to cognitive intelligence), or has obvious design or analysis deficits (e.g. samples too small or arcane for robust results or generalization, inappropriate or deficient statistical analysis, lack of unique findings). We do not prejudge or reject papers because their findings may be controversial or upsetting outside the context of scientific exchange as long as they are not purposely offensive. We have published critical reviews of research topics and commentaries about broader issues. We will continue to do so along with studies that fail to replicate previous findings we or others have published.

We condemn and stand against racism and any misguided or malign use of the research we publish. We firmly believe that sunlight, not censorship, is the best disinfectant for malevolent interpretations of research data that are cherry-picked to support a political ideology. Not publishing on a particular topic only gives validity to conspiratorial explanations of “what they don't want us to know.” Hate groups should not have a *de facto* veto on what research is published nor should fair criticism be exaggerated to justify banning topics or authors from publication. We also stand against protestors from political extremes who threaten researchers or shut down speakers with intimidation or violent tactics. We deplore personal attacks and arguments based on guilt by association, and their use to incite outrage mobs on social media.

The intelligence field is growing and the total number of submissions is now about 250 yearly. In the last five years, the acceptance rate averaged about 25%. The field is evolving from a focus on psychometric methods to a melding of psychometrics with neuroimaging, genetics, and other neuroscience methods. There is also growing interest in

applied aspects of intelligence research in educational contexts, the work place, for lifelong learning, and in clinical settings. Our newest additions to the Editorial Board reflect this evolution and the diversity of the field. When relevant, we and our reviewers are not shy about requiring authors to remove unwarranted speculation or discussion about possible political implications of findings or over-generalizations.

Intelligence will continue its focus on the nature of mental abilities, how they develop, and why they matter. We are not naïve or indifferent about our social responsibilities. We expect some findings will be controversial with the potential for being politicized or used by extremists. Our responsibility is to publish the best quality studies we can to elucidate human intelligence. In our view, publishing empirical data, along with clear explanations of what the data mean and what they do not mean, is the only basis for reasoned discussions about what intelligence is and why it is important. Our editors, authors, Board members, reviewers, readers and critics also have a social responsibility for explaining and discussing intelligence research findings with clarity, appropriate skepticism, and professionalism without injecting personal opinions, political bias or rancor.

Estes's “somehow a balance must be found” challenge is a work in progress for this journal and for the field. We are committed to bending the arc of our scientific and social responsibilities to the benefit of scientific inquiry and its impact on societal progress.

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