

# Psychological comments

Intelligence, differences, explanations, and other perplexing matters

Thursday, 14 November 2013

## My letter to Scientific Dishonesty Minister

Dear Minister Morten Østergaard

I write to you in some alarm, hearing that in Denmark there is a procedure in which your Ministry establishes committees which judge whether a researcher is behaving in a scientifically proper manner, and that these committees may demand the recall of published papers.

The usual practice is to debate these matters in scientific journals, in which critics make their points and the author can make their replies. As part of this process authors may alter their views, correct errors, and provide further explanations and data. Critics may concede that they have misunderstood a point, may alter their criticisms, or may reserve judgment until the finding has been replicated. This may require many exchanges of views, many publications, and many years. As part of this process other researchers gradually come to their own conclusions as to which findings can be relied upon. Typically, arguments about major issues in social science may last for decades.

It is unusual in academic circles for one scholar to accuse another of scientific dishonesty. There is a strong preference for testing one argument against another, and assessing the arguments without attacking the person. When much of what we research is uncertain and subject to different interpretations we need to be respectful of different opinions, particularly when those opinions are opposed to our own preferences and beliefs. We want scientific debates, not religious ones.

Sadly, there are occasions when a researcher fabricates results. When this is suspected then a most careful academic enquiry is carried out, excluding any persons who are known to be involved in arguments with the scholar, and with the accused person being given every opportunity to explain themselves. It is usual for them to have legal representation, and a right of appeal if they can find procedural or evidential flaws in the decision. If such fundamental dishonesty is proved then it is usual for the Journal to withdraw the paper. Their University or Institution may then decide to take disciplinary action against the dishonest author.

In summary, both Journals and Universities have procedures to deal with the rare cases of scientific dishonesty.

Appointing a Committee in a national Ministry seems an unwise and potentially dangerous precedent. Ministers will have to ensure that they appoint experts of very high standing in the very many fields of academic endeavor for which there are scientific journals. That will not be an easy task for any national Ministry since research is now international, and many fields of research are extremely specialized. There is also the problem of ensuring that the committee members are not compromised by prior disagreements and conflicts. Journals usually draw upon an editorial board and a set of agreed reviewers, setting aside any who are known to have an adversarial history as regards the scholar in question. The accused person must have legal representation, and there must be recourse to appeal for procedural and evidential shortcomings.

I now turn to the specific case of Professor Emeritus Helmuth Nyborg. I have not been able to read the conclusions of the committee in your Ministry, because it is published in Danish. Of course, a Danish criminal court would publish its judgment in Danish, but this is an example of the problems which arise when a political and

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legal process is used in science. English is now the language of science. Professor Nyborg publishes in English to an international audience. At the very least, given the impact on international science of your committee, you should have an English language version of the judgment available for all scholars to read. I hope you will be able to provide an official translation promptly. I am particularly interested in finding out how you took evidence and evaluated it, and whom you called to participate in the process. I would have been willing to give evidence.

I have read Professor Nyborg's replies and explanations and although I do not have access to an English version of the conclusions, the judgment of the committee seems extremely strange to me. The authorship issue has been explained by Professor Nyborg. A colleague did not want to be a co-author. This happens. Even more common is a colleague who demands to be a co-author, despite having contributed little apart from access to some data. As you will be aware, there are often disputes about the order of precedence of authors. His disputed reference is to the correct data set, but did not add a simple birth rate calculation which has now been referenced. The Nyborg case is that he did not explicitly state a correction he had applied to birth rate calculations. That can be handled by a published clarification, which has already been done. This happens all the time, and improves our research.

If these judgments were to be applied to research in Denmark and internationally, few scholars would be able to avoid appearing before your committee.

Contrast this with a case in Holland in which a researcher fabricated his results. He was dishonest. Under the usual procedures the university and the journals made that fact known to the academic community. His papers have been investigated and are no longer relied upon by scholars.

I hope you will abandon your current structure, withdraw these inappropriate interventions, and not determine scholastic debates by recourse to Ministerial committees.

Posted by **James Thompson** at 11:23

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Reactions:  very good (0)  good (0)  neutral (0)  poor (0)

## 1 comment:



**Andrew Sabisky** 14 November 2013 11:40

My version read as follows:

Dear Minister Østergaard

I am writing to protest the treatment of Dr Helmuth Nyborg by one of your department's committees for scientific dishonesty. It is abundantly clear that Dr Nyborg is being repeatedly raked over the coals not for any scientific dishonesty or even any serious unwitting errors - he is patently guilty of neither - but for his right-wing political views and research into unpopular topics such as dysgenics.

Academics should be free to sort out their disputes in the relevant forums, such as the renowned journals in which Dr Nyborg frequently publishes. If he is demonstrably mistaken about the empirical questions that he addresses in his research, the scientific community will swiftly make this known. State committees reminiscent of the Inquisition should play no part in this process. Such disgraceful nonsense leaves Denmark's reputation as a nation of liberty severely damaged and casts a shadow over ever-threatened academic freedom worldwide.

I ask that the condemnation of Dr Nyborg be published in English and promptly reconsidered by your department. I also ask that in future such fraudulent investigations of researchers cease, and that the scientific process be allowed to function as it normally does. State direction of research is sure precursor of intellectual sterility and death, if history is anything to go by.

Yours sincerely,

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### About Me



[+](#) **James Thompson**

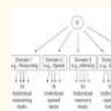
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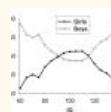
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Andrew Sabisky

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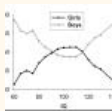


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Jason Richwine and a bottle of Rich Wine

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ORIGINAL PAPER: "A response to Prof Rabbitt – The Victorians were still cleverer than us" by Woodley, te Nijenhuis and Murphy

A response to Prof Rabbitt – The Victorians were still cleverer than us By Michael Woodley, Jan te Nijenhuis, and Raegan Murphy Prof...

Jason Richwine, and an unclaimed bottle of rich wine

Unaccountably, no-one has taken up my challenge issued on 10th May of this year. "So here is the challenge: a bottle of fine French win...

ORIGINAL PAPER: Strong genetic influence on a UK nationwide test of educational achievement at the end of compulsory education at age 16

Yesterday I was able to post an item, "We mustn't label children, or educationalists" about a particular piece of research on the heritab...

Maths is a man thing\*

We have talked about greater male variability before, <http://drjamesthompson.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/are-girls-too-normal-sex->

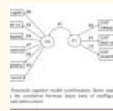
This is a note about heritability estimates and the analysis of variance, but if you want the inessential background, Dominic Cummings has...

Genetics made very simple

There is a code which, properly interpreted and implemented, serves as a blueprint for living things, and is required for all living, reprod...

All you ever wanted to know about intelligence (but were too bright to ask) Part 4 final

Finally, Deary goes on to discuss the "so-named Flynn effect, whereby the absolute scores on intelligence tests have been rising since te...



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A reader (Panjoomby) commenting on the previous post asked a question about the 0.81 correlation between intelligence and scholastic attainm...

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<http://www.isironline.org/meeting/> I hope we know what we are doing. The genetic material of several hundred highly intelligent people in t...

differences-...

**Breast feeding, intelligence, and confounded researchers**

In a decade or two, people may look back on us as having lived in the dark ages, blind to the obvious, and bound up with delusions, angel...

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