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PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

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March 5, 1971

Dr. F. H. C. Crick
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Hills Road
Cambridge, England

Dear Francis:

I am glad to see that the British postal strike is about over, for I can now send an answer to your letter of 22 February, concerning the National Academy and our statement of Shockley's proposals. I realize that some of the inferences you have drawn from our statement are actually quite different from my personal beliefs, and I would deeply regret being misunderstood, by you or others.

Let me say immediately that I consider inquiry into the role of genetic and environmental factors in the development of intelligence as a valid and important field of research. It is also inherently difficult and complex. I think that, even with a good deal of effort by able people, it will be a considerable number of years before we have any substantial body of well established scientific data, and it will be some time after that before it will be possible to apply the scientific evidence to wise programs of social action.

The trouble with Shockley, as I see it, is that he is calling on the National Academy to sponsor and push what is essentially a crash program, formulated in very simplistic terms, to study the genetic basis for the inferred differences in intelligence of whites and blacks. Moreover he urges it on the ground that this is a matter of the highest priority in providing a basis for urgently needed social action. He has repeatedly called for this at Academy meetings, and has berated the Academy for not sharing his views. I believe his view to be totally unrealistic; the answers to the questions he is asking will not come quickly or easily, and the premature application of data from scientific reports in social action programs is almost certain to do more harm than good. A decision, by an official body like the Academy, to devote a large amount of funds and manpower to a particular kind of project, on the ground that it is urgently needed to deal with important practical problems, is certainly in large measure a political decision. Some such political decisions are good, some bad. We believed that the political decision

that Shockley wanted us to make was a bad one, and had virtually nothing to be said for it. Our reply, as you correctly remark, was political also; it was a political reply to a political proposal. The sharpness of our tone was perhaps excessive, and reflects the exasperation of many members of the Academy at having to listen to Shockley pushing his demands again and again at Academy business meetings, when there was also other urgent business to be done. It did not spring, on my part at least, from any desire to suppress research into the genetic basis of intelligence. I certainly believe that Shockley has every right to present his views in papers presented at National Academy Scientific sessions, or other meetings. I think his approach is rather superficial and naive, and he certainly presents his material in such a way as to arouse a maximum of antagonism. Nevertheless, if I happened to be chairman of a session at which Shockley was presenting a paper, I would do my utmost to see that he was heard without disturbance, and that the discussion was orderly and not disruptive.

In your letter you mentioned Jensen several times. You will note that our statement says nothing about Jensen and I would draw a clear distinction between him and Shockley.

Last year, while taking part in a General Education course on biology and social issues at Harvard, I read Jensen's famous and controversial article with some care. It did impress me as a thoughtful, careful, and scholarly piece of work. (When I said this in class, without commenting on Jensen's conclusions, I was denounced as a racist by some of the students, both white and black, though quite a few others backed me up). I think there is some evidence in it of emotional bias, but in any case it is very hard to avoid that in this field. I certainly believe that such an article should be dealt with by the usual methods of scientific criticism and controversy, and not by emotional outbursts. Lewontin (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, March 1970) has offered a number of criticisms of Jensen, some of which appear to me quite searching. At the same time he makes his own emotional bias very plain.

There is one point in Jensen's article--not the only one--that exemplifies possible weaknesses in his approach. (I speak from memory, as I have no copy here). He points out that I.Q. tests on American Indians have given higher average scores than for negroes of certain groups, even though the negroes were distinctly better off from an economic point of view. He concludes, not surprisingly, that the better performance of the Indians reflects a better genetic makeup, at least from the point of view of intelligence as reflected by I. Q. values. However, I can think of at least one other possible explanation here. The Indians--particularly the major tribes of our Southwest--in spite of living in often desperate poverty, are the inheritors of a long and unbroken cultural tradition; this surely has a stabilizing and strengthening influence on the development of the individual. Our negroes, on the other hand, suffered a virtually complete destruction of cultural continuity during the centuries of slavery. Different tribes were mixed; families were broken up again and again, by selling some slaves and keeping others. The damage so done may take generations to repair, and it could deeply influence scores on

I. Q. tests. I do not say that this hypothesis is adequate to explain Jensen's data; I mention it simply as one possible approach to the problem, and to illustrate the complexity of any attempt to disentangle the genetic and the environmental factors in the development of intelligence.

tests are the best
We have to keep in mind also the question whether I.Q./tools for exploring the fundamental problems of heredity in relation to intelligence. They are very useful for many practical purposes, but they clearly have their limitations too. At present we have nothing better for research purposes either, and I have nothing better to suggest myself; but they are tools that one must use with constant awareness of their limitations.

I think that, in studies in this field, much more needs to be done in characterizing the gene pool that various populations represent. You have indicated your agreement with the last paragraph of our statement, and we should certainly get away from simple minded classifications of "whites" and "blacks." I am no expert in this field, but it seems to me that the administering of I.Q. or other tests to various populations should be accompanied by much more detailed characterization of known genes within these populations, so as to give a clearer picture of the variety (or lack of variety) of the gene pool in the population studied. As we get better maps of human genes, the process can be improved. I recognize that comprehensive research of this sort can become very expensive.

Jensen has proposed that people with different kinds of mental ability need different kinds of schooling for their best development. There is certainly nothing inherently unreasonable in the general idea; indeed, stated in this general form, it is practically a truism. Whether Jensen's particular proposals are wise I am not competent to judge. In any case, if school pupils are to be assigned to different kinds of training, they should be judged as individuals, not as members of racial groups. From what you say, I gather that Jensen agrees with this.

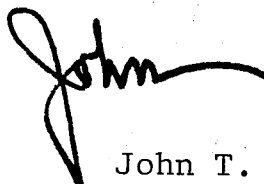
→ I have now seen the report of the Academy Committee headed by Kingsley Davis. The general tenor of their report, and particularly the summary, seems to me to make very good sense. Last spring, at the Academy meeting, they gave a preliminary report verbally, which seemed to me and at least some others to be so noncommittal as to say almost nothing. Their final report is a vast improvement, to my mind.

I do hope that this letter will serve to clarify what I really believe. It is of course just my personal view; I do not know how far other signers

of the statement would agree with what I say here. I have not mentioned this correspondence to any of them, but I will keep some copies of this letter to send to them later, in case you decide to write to them all

Do tell me if you have further questions or criticisms. I do want to clear up any possible misunderstandings; and of course, without necessarily agreeing, I value your thought and judgment immensely.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John", with a stylized, cursive flourish extending to the right.

John T. Edsall