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Intelligence – time for open debate

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Paul Devonshire's suggestion (Letters, January 2013) that the Society prepare an agreed statement on the meanings, uses and abuses of 'Intelligence' is both enticing and problematic. The breadth of what he might have in mind, and the potential difficulties of doing so, are revealed in the sentence 'I feel that we are caught in the expectations of the general public for whom IQ remains a potent meme, and, rather than attempting to move them on, we collude with them'. The collusion he refers to in fact follows from what is not said in the APA document he refers to – Intelligence: Knowns and Unknowns. This, very usefully, terminated much unproductive debate and litigation. But it did little, in its discussion of 'unknowns' to move us/the public on.

Devonshire reports that he ran a seminar with a title virtually identical to that of our 2008 book *Uses and Abuses of Intelligence*. Yet the abuses he mentions – such as psychologists using 'intelligence' tests with little understanding of either their theoretical basis or predictive validity – while serious, are far from the most important. In reality, it has proved almost impossible to provoke discussion of the abuses. Because of arguments with, and between, reviewers we never managed to get what became my chapter 'Intelligence, engineered invisibility, and the destruction of life on Earth' (which essentially argues that most practical uses of 'intelligence' tests are unethical because they contribute to, and cement, an environmentally destructive hierarchical society) into mainstream publications. And the chapter itself has been virtually ignored by reviewers of the book. Colluding with the public 'rather than attempting to move them on' – by Jove, yes, indeed! It is more than a century since Spearman wrote that neither the tests from which his *g* had emerged, nor *g* itself, had any place in schools. This is because they deflect the attention of teachers, parents, and politicians from the business of education. As he saw it, the purpose of education is to nurture ('draw out') and recognise the huge range of talents that are available. What have we, qua psychologists, done about this issue in the intervening century?

However, to return to Devonshire, whilst eschewing the use of the slippery word 'intelligence', even Spearman failed to note that nurturing the diverse talents available and harnessing them to a common task results in the emergence of a collective intelligence of much greater importance than any variant of individual intelligence.

In short, while I agree that it would be extremely valuable to set out to produce an agreed statement of the kind Devonshire appears to have in mind, getting agreement on the abuses of the term is likely to be both controversial and difficult.