



PART VI

SOME OUTSTANDING ETHICAL ISSUES

Although some extremely serious ethical issues were raised in the earlier chapter on “Intelligence, Engineered Invisibility, and the Destruction of Life on Earth”, we now return to the question of the ethical application of tests – and the role of Psychologists in relation to them.

In the first chapter, “Too Dumb to Die”, Kim McKinzey highlights some issues associated with the fact that, crudely over-stated, the laws relating to the death penalty for murder in some States of the US Union allow that the actions of mentally retarded murderers can be excused because they are likely to have failed to understand the implications of their actions.

So how to determine whether someone is mentally retarded or not? As McKinzey shows, a host of tests, ranging from the Wechsler Intelligence Tests to the Vineland Social Maturity scales, have been deployed by forensic Psychologists, their relevance disputed in court, and the results compared with “common sense” assessments of “real life” behaviour.

But behind such activities lies another set of disputes: How good are the samples on which the norms are based? If prospective participants in such studies have exercised their “informed consent”-based rights not to participate, what effect has that had on the norms? What is the effect of the *date* on which the norms were collected? (Judged against yesterday’s norms one should die; yet, given today’s norms, one may live). And what statistical procedures have been deployed to compile the norms? (As Dockrell¹ has shown, the IQ of the same person on the same test judged





against the same norming sample can vary dramatically depending purely on the assumptions made by the *statistician* who processed the data.)

Yet even such questions seem somehow to miss the point. That point has two facets – one to do with ethics; the other with competence.

One of the most surprising conclusions to emerge from both our own work and that of others (such as Donald Schon), is that incompetence in modern society stems above all from an inability and unwillingness to engage with the wider social forces which *primarily* determine behaviour and thus what people *can* do in their jobs. In this case, this implies that we, as psychologists, need to get together with others (perhaps through our professional organisations) to influence the social and legal contexts in which we work instead of accepting those contexts as givens. Furthermore, unless we do this we *cannot* behave ethically.

In the second chapter we return to Jim Flynn for a remarkable discussion of issues typically touched on only superficially in discussions of topics having to do with such things as “fairness in testing” and, in particular, the assumed viability and ethics of a meritocracy (which often informs discussions of “fairness in testing”).

1. Dockrell, W. B. (1989). Extreme scores on the WISC-R. *Bulletin of the International Test Commission*, 28, April, 1-7.

