

---



---

## Letters to the Editor

---

### TRUTH IN THE BALANCE? A COMMENT ON ESTES

To the Editor:

William Estes' postscript to September's Special Section on ability testing (*PS* 3(5), 1992, p. 278) conveys an unfortunate message: Discourage the communication of politically awkward facts.

In recounting "several firm propositions [which] emerge" from the three essays in the Special Section, Estes omits key but unpopular findings (high within-race heritabilities and large black-white phenotypic differences, regardless of social class).

Instead, he introduces the overly general but highly popular claim, which does not appear in the essays, that social background affects one's opportunities to learn. It is but a short step, then, for Estes to impugn the fairness of using tests in selection for jobs or education (because they "penalize" individuals with fewer such opportunities), despite the fact that he has just acknowledged their considerable validity and utility ("intelligence tests . . . are excellent predictors of performance in many domains, ranging from school to a wide variety of occupations").

The egalitarian spin that Estes gives to the essays' "firm propositions" provides a false plausibility to his next unsubstantiated claim—that "efficiency in selection and placement conflicts with considerations of justice." (Is "justice" better served by less efficient selection procedures, slighting merit, which misclassify and thus "penalize" even larger numbers of deserving individuals?) Merely by posing this false dilemma, Estes transforms the undisputed strength of ability tests (efficient selection) into a grave weakness (injustice).

Estes next suggests that unfettered exchange of results among scholars of intelligence may itself conflict with the public good. The "need" for free exchange must be "balance[d]," he says, against the "need" that no group in society feel "threatened" by such research or dissemination.

Academic freedom, which is the right to be free from political or ideological interference in one's research and writing, stems from the Western conviction that truth is superior to ignorance, and thus that the search for truth must be protected. It cannot be balanced against any "need" not to give offense.

In fact, generating and sharing knowledge about ability differences is essential if we hope to eventually reduce racial tensions and social inequalities. As in medicine, misdiagnosing a problem or administering the wrong treatment may worsen the problem, not cure it. There are indeed better and worse bedside manners, so to speak, in communicating diagnoses and suggesting treatments, but

communicate we must—openly and honestly. It is patronizing and irresponsible (and typically only self-serving) for scholars to censor themselves or each other, or to discourage, in Estes' words, the "spread [of research findings] outside scientific circles." Knowledge is not the disease; it is the path to a cure.

LINDA S. GOTTFREDSON  
*Department of Educational Studies*  
*Willard Hall Education Building*  
*Room 219*  
*University of Delaware*  
*Newark, DE 19716*

---