

January 30, 2002

Dr. Catherine Ball  
Office of the Inspector-General  
National Science Foundation  
4201 Wilson Blvd. , Suite 1135  
Arlington, VA 22230

Subject: Followup: cross-agency comparison of scientific independence & integrity standards

Dear Dr. Ball:

I think you will find that the standards for scientific integrity/political independence are much higher in the biomedical world than maintained and enforced for social scientists & the oversight review process at the National Academy of Sciences. I think NSF's standards and protections for researchers should be the highest and afford equal protections to those in the biomedical world.

An example which occurs to me is the effects of socio-economic status on health. This has been emerging as a "leading edge" of research in public health, originally from England and now in this country. (I attended a conference at NIH last summer.) As you might expect, lower status means lower health on many indicators, but also controlling for all other obvious variables (e.g., socialized medicine & access to health care). It appears correlated with social stress and lower control and respect in lower status positions; and animal studies seem to suggest that greater rates of self-intoxicating behavior by animals lower in status hierarchies are related to effects of position in status hierarchies on dopamine productions in the brain.

My point is that, under this tawdry "sophistication" of R. Duncan Luce & the National Academy of Sciences standard, this is the kind of "leading edge" research that could be quietly killed because of apprehensions that it would be

politically controversial. An obvious speculation/fear is that the people who started this research are Leftists and/or Radicals who are using scientific research to build the case that only a truly egalitarian society (in England, and elsewhere) is healthy. But it is irrelevant to the science - and the line of research may also open avenues and therapies (e.g., involving dopamine and other stress-related pathways) that help people independent of anybody's ideology.

The key point that I want to draw from this: Social scientists are not being treated fairly. There are higher standards and stronger protections for political independence in the biomedical world - abroad and in other US scientific agencies - than have been maintained under NSF sponsorship in this highly-damaging social science project.

At a minimum, NSF's high standards in this regard do not appear to be communicated with deterrent effect. Luce's letter showed that he and his associates were not deterred by fear of NSF standards & enforcement. Nor did Dr. Alberts and his associates withdraw the Report when the explanation in Luce's letter came to light - as I hope (and think) they would have done, responsibly and quickly, if an NSF-sponsored Report had killed valuable AIDS-related research from political timidity and such contamination made its other recommendations uninterpretable.

Inaction by NSF, in this highly public case, will cause further erosion.

Yours truly,

/s/

(Dr.) Lloyd S. Etheredge, Director  
Government Learning Project

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