

Abstract for Paper Presentation  
7<sup>th</sup> Norwegian Conference on the History of Science  
Jim W. Porter, PhD

TITLE: A New Hereditarianism: Nature-Nurture Interaction, "Intelligence," and Educational Policy in the post-WWII US (1945-1960)

ABSTRACT: This proposed paper seeks to explore what role discourses of “nature and nurture” played in post-WWII conceptions—and educational policy implementations—of “intelligence” (as a cognitive difference). Nature-nurture interactionism (a concession to interwar challenges to eugenics) became the dominant framing of cognitive development in the post-WWII years. Yet, my initial investigation finds this interactionism could default (particularly in contexts of positive educational selection of supranormal “intelligence”) to a kind of neo-hereditarianism. In other words, what made “academically talented” students talented was an allegedly fixed, inherited (i.e. genetic) nature. Arguments then that began with a seemingly balanced consideration of “nature-and-nurture” often reverted to the discovery of an inherent personal essence dictating development *a priori*, a conceptualization consonant with pre-WWII hereditarianism and eugenical thought. I refer to this rhetorical movement, as “interaction-default.” These ‘defaults’ could take a variety of discursive forms ranging from equivocation and semantic slippage, to substitutions involving spatial and statistical metaphors, to the invocation of mytho-historic exemplars who were used to illustrate "academic talent" as the result of an idealized developmental process. Of course, too, interaction-default could manifest more directly as simple disconnect between rhetoric and practice. I seek to further investigate this line of discourse, and more fully explore the contexts of its usage, and its broader political and educational implications. Using the papers and correspondence of leading educational figures of the day, along with National Defense Education Act congressional records, I hope to begin constructing a discursive taxonomy of the multifarious forms and uses of nature-nurture interaction-default.

KEYWORDS: “Intelligence,” Hereditarianism, Nature-Nurture Interaction  
Cold War/US History, Educational Policy

AV REQUIREMENTS: Standard PC set up for projector/powerpoint presentation.

CONTACT:

Jim W. Porter, PhD  
Postdoctoral Fellow  
Hugo Valentin Centre  
Department of History  
Uppsala University, Sweden  
jim.porter@valentin.uu.se  
+46 (0)18-471 23 67