

Understanding Black-White Differences

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AS PARTICIPANTS in the National Research Council's Committee on the Status of Black Americans, we appreciate the opportunity to respond to Richard Herrnstein's review essay on our report *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* ["Still an American Dilemma," Winter 1990]. Knowing his wide knowledge, scholarly commitment, and expository skill, we are not surprised to find it an interesting exercise; it is not, however, a persuasive one.

Indeed, in one sense Herrnstein says little that requires a response; he himself explicitly acknowledges that even geneticists and sociobiologists do not know the source of black-white differences. But he seems to forget this refreshing admission in the balance of his essay, which presents an artful case for the theory that underlying differences in black and white intellectual endowments are the chief source of black-white differences in socioeconomic attainments.

Professor Herrnstein correctly observes that *A Common Destiny* (hereafter, the report) "suggests that the central determinant of black-white relations in America is discrimination—past or present, deliberate or inadvertent—by whites against blacks." We reviewed a massive accumulation of data that left no doubt that racial discrimination has been and continues to be (though to a much lesser extent) a pervasive fact of American life. Surely there can be no scientific objection to describing the extent and character of racial discrimination, and to analyzing its deep consequences. To

do so is not to advance a "discrimination model" if one means, as Herrnstein appears to, that discrimination is the source of all contemporary black-white differences that we regard as undesirable. Nothing could be further from our intentions.

Instead, the report goes to considerable lengths to emphasize that the current status of black Americans has many causes and is the outcome of complex historical processes. The report points to economic and demographic changes; to shifts in employment opportunities (e.g., the loss of jobs in the "rust belt"); to changes in public policies, especially with regard to political participation, education, and health; and to the behaviors of black Americans. It emphasizes the massive influence of the broader changes in American society since World War II. In short, the report does far more than present a simplistic portrait that attributes the condition of American blacks entirely to "discrimination."

Professor Herrnstein complains that the report ignores relevant science. Of course it does: a great many subjects might have been analyzed in the report, so we had to choose among them, making difficult judgments about the importance of different lines of inquiry. The mandate of our committee instructed us to

...marshall descriptive data on the changing position of blacks in American society since 1940; draw from the wealth of existing research to describe the cultural context, including an increasingly complex framework of laws, policies, and institutions within which the observed changes have occurred; and explore the consequences, anticipated and unanticipated, of public and private initiatives to ameliorate the position of blacks in America.

Given binding constraints of time and resources, this demanding charge required a careful selection among the issues, research topics, and theoretical models that the report might have treated.

We estimate that the editors had to omit close to two-thirds of the original manuscript prepared for the report. Many of the study participants have already fielded criticisms about several topics that were treated briefly or not at all, such as slavery as a source of family instability; contemporary instances of discrimination, violence, and harassment against blacks; gender, regional, and inter-urban differences among blacks; differences between blacks of West Indian heritage and those born in the United States; differences among minority groups; and important aspects of the transition from youth to adulthood.

The important question, then, is not whether the report was selective, but why. Early on, we decided that the theoretical propositions we included should satisfy three criteria. First, they had to cover areas in which there was scientific evidence that could lead

to sound conclusions. Second, they had to be relevant to public policy. Third, they had to help account for the observed changes in the status of blacks, or for the changes in the status differences between blacks and whites, that had occurred during the period that we were investigating. We are willing to defend the report on the basis of these criteria. Theories such as the one that Professor Herrnstein proposes, which attempt to explain black-white differences in socioeconomic attainments on the basis of the measured differences between blacks and whites in "indices of ability" (e.g., IQ tests), failed on all three of our criteria.

THE evidence that Herrnstein offers to explain black-white group differences as a product of ability differences does not lead to clear conclusions. We need not belabor this point. Even Herrnstein acknowledges that "we do not know with any certainty where the [black-white] difference comes from, or what it would take for it to go away."

Thus *Race Differences in Intelligence*, a book that Herrnstein himself cites for its summary and evaluation of the evidence on race differences in intelligence, concludes as follows:

Observed average differences in the scores of members of different U.S. racial-ethnic groups on intellectual-ability tests probably reflect in part inadequacies and biases in the tests themselves, in part differences in environmental conditions among the groups, and in part genetic differences among the groups.... A rather wide range of positions concerning the relative weight to be given these three factors can reasonably be taken on the basis of current evidence, and a sensible person's position might well differ for different abilities, for different groups, and for different tests.... Regardless of the position taken on the relative importance of these three factors, it seems clear that the differences among individuals within racial-ethnic and socioeconomic groups greatly exceed in magnitude the average differences between such groups.

A major reason for our lack of interest in biological explanations of racial differences in ability or achievement is that changes in the gene pool could have had little, if any, effect on the changes in black-white differences that occurred over the forty-year span covered by the study. One simply cannot explain change by a constant. Thus Herrnstein is wrong to suggest that the major theme of the report is the persistent and intractable difference between black and white life chances. Its major themes instead revolve around the massive and diverse *changes* in the status of black Americans—both favorable and unfavorable—that have occurred since World War II.

Contrary to Herrnstein's assumption, the report does not emphasize only deficiencies in the status of blacks. We found, for instance, that blacks are less likely than whites with similar social characteristics to drop out of high school; that blacks in the mid-1970s were more likely than whites with similar social characteristics to go to college; that black women's earnings are equal to those of white women; and that blacks are more likely to vote than whites with similar social and economic characteristics. The general lesson here is not the intractability of black-white differences, but the volatility of the condition of blacks, which is shaped by general social conditions, by changes in the economy and public policy, and by blacks' individual and collective strivings.

As the U.S. version of apartheid disintegrated—and only seventeen years have passed since the nation had real school desegregation in the South—there have been tremendous changes in the lives of black Americans, affecting their geographic distribution, schooling, health, jobs, incomes, family situations, legal status, criminal involvements, and political power. These changes have had different effects upon different segments of the black population; the beliefs of whites and blacks about one another have held steady in part, but have also changed dramatically in part.

SO LONG as genetic engineering and psychobiology have not advanced far enough to enable policymakers to alter people's genetic makeups, Herrnstein's differential-abilities model will lack clear policy implications. In a society that values the rights of individuals, knowledge about group differences—provided that the groups' distributions overlap—offers nothing useful to policymakers. Sadly, this fact was not so widely appreciated in an earlier period of our history, when a Secretary of Education for the state of Alabama argued that the lesser abilities of black children, combined with considerations of fiscal efficiency, justified lower expenditures for educating black children than for educating white children.

Even if genetically based average-ability differences among U.S. racial and ethnic groups could be shown to exist, they still would yield no clear implications for public policy. As *Race Differences in Intelligence* concludes:

Humane and enlightened public-policy measures need not be, and should not be, bound by either hereditarian or environmentalist dogmas. Improving the educational opportunities of U.S. blacks, for example, seems to us such a good idea that it should not be made to depend on the risky assumption that this will make the distribution of performance of U.S. blacks on IQ tests indistinguishable from that of U.S. whites.

Herrnstein seems to believe that the differential-abilities hypothesis negates various arguments for affirmative action and other remedial social programs. But this claim would be valid only in the extreme case, in which black-white socioeconomic differences were due entirely to black-white ability differences—that is, if 250 years of slavery, followed by segregation and past and present discrimination, had had *no* impact upon black Americans today. Since this is clearly not the case, arguments for affirmative action that would apply in the absence of differences in the average abilities of blacks and whites remain valid. (Implementing affirmative-action programs might, however, be more difficult if black-white ability differences had to be factored in.)

In this regard, it is also relevant to note that Professor Herrnstein seems implicitly to equate affirmative action with quotas for racial groups. Because the report takes as a benchmark for public policy the principle of “equal status of the races,” Herrnstein wrongly implies that we advocate “equal proportionate representation” as the “goal of public policy.” His misunderstanding here clearly shows how much our vision of the goals of social policy differs from Herrnstein’s.

If no one knows the true underlying distribution of abilities, or even understands how they interact with environmental factors, how should public policy be formulated? Professor Herrnstein seems to say that policymakers should assume that current conditions reflect an inalterable underlying reality. We say that policymakers should instead assume that equality would be the norm in the absence of discrimination; they should require society itself to prove that inequality is not the result of bias. Our society has been shaped by a past filled with pervasive oppression of blacks, and it cannot assume a neutral starting point.

HERRNSTEIN says that in treating black-white differences in socioeconomic attainments, the report ignores possible explanations that would be central to any comprehensive scientific analysis. He claims that the report says “almost nothing” about differences between whites and blacks on standardized tests, and that it also ignores relevant differences in academic achievement.

This is not true. One need read only as far as the report’s first chapter, which observes on page 8 that “levels of scholastic achievement [among blacks] are disturbingly low by many measures.” On page 19 it notes that “[b]lacks, on average, enter the schools with substantial disadvantages in socioeconomic backgrounds and tested achievement. American schools do not compensate for these disadvantages in background; on average, stu-

dents leave the schools with black-white gaps not having been appreciably diminished.” We also assert on page 49 that “large numbers of unemployed black youths lacked the ‘basic entry level skills’ required to compete effectively for jobs.”

Pages 346-354 of the report provide an extended discussion of black-white differences and trends in performance on tests, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests of nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen-year-olds; the NAEP literacy test; a census literacy test; the SAT; and mental tests used in the Coleman-Campbell report of 1966. The report refers to the last of these tests to document black-white difference in ability: “The [Coleman-Campbell] report also found large black-white differences in achievement test performance at the time of school entry, and these differences were substantially maintained throughout the years of schooling.” In addition, the report provides a skeptical, although not an entirely pessimistic, review of various efforts to raise black achievement levels in the schools. At the end of a discussion of black-white differences in scholastic achievement, the report explicitly sets out the criterion used to select among possible explanations of the differences for further discussion:

Among the possible causes of these patterns and group differences are family background, differences in ability, test bias, differences in motivation, and differences in the educational resources and climates of schools and communities. In the next section, we focus on those institutional practices and policies and individual behaviors that can be manipulated through social policy.

In short, we did not ignore ability or achievement differences between blacks and whites.

LET us say a bit more about why we decided to include and emphasize certain materials, especially the NAEP tests—which have recently become the centerpiece of federal efforts to monitor progress toward national educational goals. Our objective was to find measurements of the levels and trends of black and white intellectual performance that would parallel the measures of educational enrollment and attainment that were obtained from census data. In our judgment, there are no such measurements of IQ; that is, none of the measurements have sufficient scientific quality to justify their inclusion in the report.

To be sure, it is possible to measure the difference between mean-performance levels of blacks and whites, in one sample or another and for various years. But even under the best of circumstances, these data show virtually nothing about overall trends in

mental ability—we do not know the trend of IQ in the U.S. population—and the various samples (and nonsamples) are so diverse and often so selective that they provide no evidence of trends in black-white differences.¹

A report that Herrnstein specifically commends—*Ability Testing: Uses, Consequences, and Controversies*—argues:

There is understandable concern ... that a person's [IQ] ranking will be considered fixed, and possibly genetic, despite the fact that professional opinion emphasizes that abilities are affected by experience. This concern becomes distress when the misconception about ability is carried over to a belief that group differences in test performance reflect hereditary differences in ability.

Herrnstein, however, emphasizes test scores to claim that the measured differences “lend support to the impression that there are intractable race differences in the performance of cognitively demanding tasks.” This statement asks readers to accept both an “impression” and the enormous assumption that the differences are racial and “intractable.” In a matter of such grave importance, Herrnstein’s argument requires more substantial support than impressions and assumptions can provide.

As an expert in the field, Herrnstein surely knows that research and experience over the years have gradually tempered the early enthusiasm for so-called IQ tests as measures of intelligence. Such tests have now come to be seen for what they are: indicators of a set of skills, including acquired language skills, selected as components of academic aptitudes.² Thus those who thought that intractable differences between blacks and whites were revealed by the Army Alpha testing in World War I had to confront the fact that many southern whites scored below northern blacks. The apparent racial inferiority of those southern whites, of course, reflected their lack of educational opportunities. Similarly, the “evidence” in the 1920s from tests at Ellis Island showing the inferior performance of European immigrants proved transitory.

One of us (Hauser) has devoted much of his scientific career to gauging the influence of measured ability on educational attainment, occupational careers, and economic success. The conclusions yielded by this line of research do not validate Herrnstein’s faith in the importance of IQ for life chances within either the

¹See, for example, *Race Differences in Intelligence*, chapter 6; and Lloyd G. Humphries, “Trends in Levels of Academic Achievement of Blacks and Other Minorities,” *Intelligence*, vol. 12 (1988), pp. 231-260.

²On this point, see Thomas Sowell, “New Light on the Black IQ Controversy,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 27, 1977, pp. 56-65.

black or white population. What is more, measured ability affects life chances primarily through the completion of schooling, so there is little need to consider IQ's effects on adult life chances once one has taken schooling into account—as the report did throughout.

The importance of schooling is what led us to emphasize the NAEP tests. Although these tests do not go back very far in time, they do provide absolute measures of performance for well-defined samples of age groups that can be compared across time and racial lines. Among the report's relevant findings is that blacks aged nine to seventeen improved between 1969 and 1984 in reading, mathematics, and science. Similarly, intercohort changes in literacy differences between blacks and whites, as measured in a census survey, point to decreasing differences in cognitive performance between blacks and whites.

HERRNSTEIN, however, is too preoccupied with unobservable racial differences to be attentive to such positive developments. His preoccupation harms his analysis at all points. Thus he notes that surveys of black and white preferences for racial housing patterns reveal that blacks and whites typically claim to prefer some level of racial mixing—although blacks usually prefer much higher percentages of blacks than do whites. Herrnstein then criticizes the report for failing to “infer ... that at some point blacks as well as whites would prefer to prevent additional blacks from moving into their neighborhoods. The dislike of predominantly black neighborhoods—common to whites *and* blacks—frustrates blacks' quest for equal access to housing [Herrnstein's italics].” Should we also conclude that whites who say that they prefer integrated neighborhoods seek to prevent additional whites from moving in? Of course not. Such whites instead express egalitarian and pluralistic values that are characteristically American. Unlike Herrnstein, who is preoccupied with black-white differences, we attribute similar values to the typical black.

We would be remiss not to note another of Herrnstein's specific misreadings of the report. Consider his claim that “[t]he homicide rates among blacks doubtless reflect black criminals' disproportionate victimization of other blacks—a connection that the book does not make explicit.” Perhaps Herrnstein simply failed to read a passage that appears on page 464: “Deaths due to homicide among blacks have ranged between 6 and 7 times those for whites during the past 50 years.” Similarly, page 419 of the report observes that “[h]omicide is the leading cause of death for black males ages 15-34.... Most homicides are intraracial and inflicted by young male

acquaintances and relatives as a result of a quarrel....” Contrary to Herrnstein’s allegation, the report does not say that differing averages are *prima facie* evidence of discrimination. On the contrary, it is careful to point to the great scientific difficulties of identifying the factors at work (see, e.g., pages 139-148) and of critically assessing specific evidence.

HERRNSTEIN’S position, however, is more generally flawed than these specific criticisms suggest. Its crucial weakness is revealed in his contention that the report “wrongly ignores the evidence at the individual level that I discuss here.” Here Herrnstein makes unexamined assumptions concerning the meaning of “individual level”—assumptions that are built into subsequent statements, such as his assertion that the report ignores a model that refers to “characteristics of the populations themselves.” But Herrnstein fails to define “characteristics ... themselves.” Similarly, he does not tell us what he means by “individual.” Are Herrnstein’s “individual traits,” which “may be distributed differently among blacks and whites,” to be understood as genetically determined, socially determined, or outcomes of complex life-course interactions? We are not told. Soon afterwards, however, Herrnstein informs us that “[a]ny average level of attainments could indicate a nondiscriminatory society, provided that it correlated with the underlying distributions of traits [Herrnstein’s italics].”

Thus Herrnstein seems to assume that individuals’ characteristics are somehow intrinsic, innate, and unaffected by the individuals’ lives. But the conditions affecting many blacks, we know from undisputed evidence, range from lead poisoning and malnutrition to the hopelessness induced by extreme poverty and lack of access to opportunities. Surely we also know that people are what they are in substantial measure because of the beliefs and values that they acquire in the course of their lives. We ignore this fundamental truth if we assume that “individuals” are monads, constituted by “characteristics” unrelated to the cultural environment that shapes them.

Perhaps the most astonishing passage in Herrnstein’s essay occurs under the heading “the dangers of dogma.” Here he claims that the report shows “unwavering adherence to the discrimination model as the sole explanation of race differences”; he goes on to refer to our “[d]ogmatic adherence to the discrimination model.” These are strong words to appear in scholarly discourse, and we submit that a close reading of the report shows them to be insupportable.

We have already noted that the report gives critical attention to a truly enormous body of research. Readers will disagree as to emphases on various topics, and not everything could be treated in equal detail. Nevertheless, the committee was indeed “unwavering”—unwavering, that is, in its scrupulous attention to factors other than discrimination. Thus we considered macroeconomic, international, regional, organizational, and behavioral evidence. Our basic approach was so undogmatic that the report has been criticized for being unduly eclectic.

To the extent that the report has a “model,” it is a complex and dynamic social-system model in which a number of major variables continually interact over time, with many feedback loops and indirect effects. The system has evolved historically; it has changed drastically over time, and the significance of particular factors has shifted accordingly. From 1619 to 1865, slavery was a dominant institutional fact. After Reconstruction, from 1876 to the years immediately following World War II, legally mandated segregation and discrimination subordinated blacks and restricted their opportunities. The much more complex situation in the past few decades occupied the primary attention of our committee, but the report would be grossly irresponsible did it not also emphasize the crucial historical legacy that Herrnstein ignores.

The natural sciences, to which Herrnstein’s hypotheses would direct our attention, cannot as yet tell us what portion of the difference between black and white scores on IQ tests—which are, after all, social constructs—is explicable only by genetic factors. The social sciences can tell us, however, that black Americans have been undernourished, physically and psychologically terrorized, and grossly undereducated for three centuries—and that this has begun to change only during the last two decades. For these reasons, it would be absurd to believe that Herrnstein’s alternative explanations are sufficiently well-grounded to have required anything like equal treatment in *A Common Destiny*.

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