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The Genetic Myth

The IQ Dilemma

By Aaron B. Stills

In 1969, Arthur R. Jensen, a social psychologist at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, published a lengthy but controversial article entitled, "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" The implication was that the IQ gap between Blacks and whites is determined, primarily, by genetic factors.

Jensen's theory created a "fury that was unequalled in the recent history of the behavioral sciences," wrote psychologist E. Earl Baughman in his book *Black Americans*. From the beginning, Blacks across the country were suspicious of Jensen's conclusions and have voiced their rejection of his findings in strong terms.

The claim by Jensen—and by a few others, Hans Eysenck, Richard Herrnstein and William Shockley—that Blacks are inferior to whites because of their hereditary endowment continues to be challenged. Last year, it was revealed that Jensen and Eysenck were inspired by the work of Sir Cyril Burt, who, before his death in 1971, was a leading British educational psychologist.

Burt, who was a major proponent of the genetic superiority myth, was said to have based his conclusions on statistical correlations that were contrary to the accepted laws of mathematics. The revelation was made public through articles in mass circulation newspapers, particularly the London *Sunday Times*, and in scholarly journals.

The *Monitor*, journal of the American Psychological Association, carried an article in its December 1976 edition that revealed Burt's falsification of data. The article by Peter Evans under the title, "The Burt Affair . . . Sleuthing in Science," said of Burt:

"For 20 years, the most influential man of his era in the sphere of mental measurement deliberately, it now seems, faked the data in support of his theory about the relative importance of genetic as

opposed to environmental factors in determining intelligence. He may even have invented fictitious collaborators to support his contention that 85 percent of an individual's performance in IQ tests was attributable to inherited characteristics. So Burt's alleged misdemeanors as a scientist clearly were serious and their effects far-reaching."

The Burt affair was first brought to light in an October 1976 article in the *Sunday Times*, written by its medical correspondent Oliver Gillie, who holds a doctorate in genetics. In the course of Gillie's research in the area of heritability, reported the *Monitor*, he uncovered evidence of Burt's manipulations in a book by Princeton University psychologist, Leon Kamin, *The Science and Politics of IQ*. Kamin's findings disputed Burt's studies on twins, reared together and separately. He noted: "These twin studies, the mainstay of Burt's hereditarian platform, also showed evidence of Sir Cyril having taken data from one piece of work to slot into another because they would conveniently fit with his preferred genetic theories."

Two other British husband and wife researchers also drew similar conclusions about Burt's data, as a result of their investigation. They are, Ann Clarke, a psychologist at Hull University, and Alan Clarke, a professor at the same institution, who felt "Burt's figures were too often a perfect fit for the theories." Their simple conclusion was that Burt "cheated." Again, it must be made clear that Jensen, Eysenck, and Herrnstein were inspired by Burt's studies on intelligence and used Burt's data to draw similar conclusions about Black IQ in the United States.

Damage Has Been Done

The hereditarian theory of intelligence has caused irreparable damage to many Black youth. Blacks' inability to score high on standardized intelligence tests that are based largely on white middle class norms have been attributed by many white psychologists to their genetic endowment.

Robert L. Williams, in an article titled,

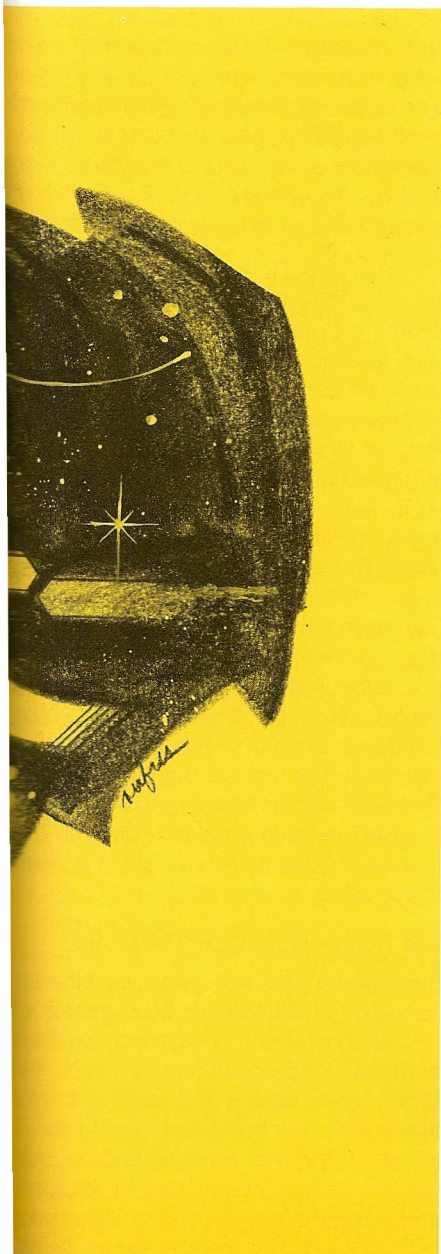


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"Abuses and Misuses in Testing Black Children," stated that "the single, most salient conclusion is that traditional ability tests do systematically and consistently lead to assigning of improper and false labels on Black children, and consequently to dehumanization and Black intellectual genocide." The Association of Black Psychologists has in the past repeatedly called for a moratorium on the administration of ability tests to Blacks. It charged that these tests, among other things, label Black children as uneducable, place them in special classes, potentiate inferior education, assign them to lower education tracks than whites, deny them higher educational opportunities, and destroy positive intellectual growth and development of the Black child.

Several Black educators, among them, William Grier and Price Cobb (1968), Thomas Gunnings (1970), and Robert L. Williams (1970) have refuted the hereditarian theory of intelligence. It is possible that the differences in IQ and academic achievement by Blacks are a direct result of the limited amount of time in which Blacks have been exposed to the educational process.

Historically, the American system of education has systematically and legally denied Black people the opportunity to develop to their maximum intellectual capacity. And that the Black American has been treated as an inferior needs no documentation here. Indeed, the question of the treatment of Blacks has been a sore spot in the United States since the introduction of slavery into the Jamestown Colony.

During slavery, 1619-1863, there was little effort made to educate Blacks in the South. Prior to 1863 (Emancipation Proclamation) formal education for Southern Blacks was at a minimum. Black slaves were not allowed access to schools because of the stringency of the laws against the instruction of Blacks. However, free Blacks in Northern urban areas were receiving some formal education. E. Frank-

1949 book, *The Negro in the United States*, that in 1850 there were large numbers of Blacks attending schools in Northern cities. Boston was one city in which free Blacks sometimes attended schools.

In the South, after the Civil War, Blacks were excluded from acquiring formal education by written and unwritten laws. As Blacks migrated to Northern cities, de facto segregation was used as one method of keeping them in separate schools.

The 1896 Case

In 1896, the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, otherwise known as the separate but equal doctrine, dimmed the bright promise of the Emancipation Proclamation. By this decision, white America gained constitutional support in denying Black Americans the right to a quality education. Black schools at the time did not have qualified teachers, facilities, and sufficient funds to thoroughly prepare Blacks with the necessary intellectual skills for pursuing high level academic work. Blacks were denied the chance to attain knowledge of the necessary social, political, and economic truths which would have made freedom a reality. Black schools became a symbol of racism. They became testaments to the society's commitment to excluding Blacks from playing any meaningful role in the society as a whole. W. E. B. Du Bois (1895), was among the first few to demand total equality in education for Black children. Later, he related in a 1935 article titled, "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools," that:

"Theoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education. What he must remember is that there is no magic, either in mixed schools or in segregated schools. A mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile public opinion, and no teaching of truth concerning Black folk is bad. A segregated school with ignorant placeholders, inadequate equipment, poor salaries, and wretched housing, is equally bad. Other things being equal, the

mixed school is the broader, more natural basis for the education of all youth. It gives wider contacts; it inspires greater self-confidence; and suppresses the inferiority complex. But other things being equal, and in that case, Sympathy, Knowledge, and the Truth, outweigh all that the school can offer."

It is very hard for one to understand how the people of the United States and the Supreme Court justices allowed a ruling such as "the separate but equal" doctrine to remain as a part of the nation's laws for 58 years and make it legal for local authorities to ignore the need for integrated public schools.

On May 17, 1954, the "separate but equal doctrine" was ruled unconstitutional. The decision by the Supreme Court in the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* struck down the 1896 ruling. Henry J. Perkinson, *The Imperfect Parable: American Faith in Education, 1865-1965*, wrote that white Southerners greeted the decision with shock, some with fury. May 17th, the day the Supreme Court ordered the racial desegregation of all public schools "with deliberate speed," was labeled a "Black Monday" by the *Washington Post*.

Are Blacks Genetically Inferior?

Some social psychologists reach the conclusion that Blacks are born genetically inferior to whites. It is reported that the IQ of Blacks is 15 points (one standard deviation) below whites. But most of the theories of the psychologists constitute a justification for the existing social order. Blacks have not been part of the formal educational process for most of the history of this nation. Therefore, today as the first, second, and some lucky third generation Black students attempt to assimilate into white middle class schools, they are characterized as being "culturally deprived," "high risk" and "disadvantaged." The labels are in effect a character assessment and serve as a deterrent in the attempt to improve the self-image of Black students.

These new labels have the effect of putting a "freeze" on Black intellectual potential. The psychological effect is to further diminish the self-concept of Blacks. Ideally, Black graduate students should be able to compete with other students at all levels, but because of a combination of poor undergraduate education and institutional racism, they are not equipped to meet the academic demands. The fact is, academic deprivation is not a reflection on blackness, but a reflection on society.

Consequences

In 1973, more than 200 Black freshman students entered Vincennes Junior College in Indiana. In 1975, two years later, a total of 28 received associate degrees, with nearly half of them specializing in general studies—as opposed to math and science. Probably the biggest difficulty Black students face is passing courses in mathematics and science. This difficulty stems from poor preparation in earlier schooling. Although many white students experience similar problems, it seems to be a universal difficulty for Black students.

Black students can learn at the same rate as whites, even a good deal better. If this assumption is valid, Blacks can learn to do a "chi square" just as white students. It is not a matter of genetic endowment but a matter of "time" given to solve the problem.

In 1969 Williams noted that probably more than 50 percent of the institutions of higher learning in this country now have special programs for students who are frequently described as disadvantaged or high risk. Most of these programs, however, are little more than token efforts.

Most compensatory educational programs have failed to make a noticeable difference for the Black student. These programs, for the most part, have been either insufficient or irrelevant to the needs of disadvantaged youth. Thomas Sowell in an article (*New York Times*, Nov. 17, 1976) titled, "Compensatory Education:

education is not really compensatory education. Humanitarian reasons are given for admitting minority students who do not meet the standards of a school. But the results are seldom humanitarian for the overmatched students." High attrition rates are merely part of the problem. Even when academic pressures are eased by double standards, the stigma of such standards is felt by all minority students, including those who made it on merit, both are concerned about acceptance by society.

James Turner, *Black Studies: Challenge to Higher Education*, wrote in 1970: "There has been a general failure to do research on the culture and conditions of Black people which would allow for significantly validated generalizations. Research is needed to identify useful correlates of academic achievement for minority students."

As Blacks "pay their dues" in the educational process, they will develop a Black identity, independence, pride, and viable education. Once this process has taken place, Blacks will enter into the mainstream of American academic life on an equal "genetic" basis. □

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