

Ethics, Racism, and the Genetic Bases of Behavior

Can the Scientific Study of Humans Ever Be Squeaky-Clean in an Open Society?

Something called racism has gotten considerable attention in Ann Arbor during past months. The question: What is racism? has been raised, by Ann Arbor News Editor Don Faber and others. Nastiness toward others, ostensibly because they belong to another group that might be termed a different race, obviously qualifies. Perhaps there are other pernicious behaviors that qualify which are not so obvious.

While events publicized in the News were taking place, others were occurring behind the scenes. For example, consider a speaker whose proposed poster presentation on racial differences at a U-M scientific meeting had been refereed and accepted by those organizing the meeting. Subsequently, his invitation to present the poster was reversed because a group of graduate students associated with the unit that had invited him decided that his presentation would affect their careers negatively by giving adverse publicity to the unit with which they were associated (their spokesperson asserted that if the poster had been of similar *quality* but on another topic no outcry would have been raised). Some of the faculty that invited the speaker resisted the protest by the students, because the individual had already been invited. The students (I understand) also rejected the notion of allowing the poster but placing a countering poster next to it, even though some faculty volunteered to assist with the countering argument. The students prevailed, and the presentation was "disinvited."

More recently, as an associate editor on a journal dealing with the science of human behavior, I received a copy of a letter sent by the chief editor to the same investigator, telling him that his paper on racial differences was being rejected for publication and stating explicitly that the decision was independent of its content but rather because of its possible political effect. The poster and the paper involved in these two cases both dealt with the probability of genetic differences among races: oriental, black, and caucasian; the same Canadian psychologist was involved in both cases. Two of three referees had argued that this author's submitted manuscript was naive biologically, one also argued that the references given to buttress evidence of racial differences were insufficient; the third referee thought the paper superb. Two of the three referees thought the paper should be published (one only if modified to meet objections), and one referee thought it should be rejected and asked for space to reply to it if it were published (evidently with respect to the biological deficiencies, not the possible political effects).

Simultaneously with all of the above, a prominent anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon of the University of California at Santa Barbara, published in *Science Magazine* a paper on revenge killing in the Yanomamo Indians of South America. At the same U-M conference mentioned above he was called out of a session and shown a copy of a letter sent to the president of the American Anthropological Association by the Ethics Committee of the Brazilian Anthropological Association condemning his paper largely because the government of Brazil may use it as an excuse to do terrible things to the Yanomamo. The letter also called strongly into question Chagnon's data and procedures, and his status as a scientist. The president of the AAA wished to publish the Brazilian letter immediately, giving as his reason the fact that the letter had also been sent to *Science Magazine*, and that he did not wish *Science* to "air the dirty linen" of the American Anthropological Association before they could do it themselves. Whether the reference to "dirty linen" involved the attitude of the Brazilian group, Chagnon, or both, Chagnon succeeded in convincing the man that he had a right to the time necessary to prepare a response.

More recently, the Ann Arbor News has published and discussed in some detail the average scores of "blacks" and "whites" on certain tests in the Ann Arbor public schools. The point of these

discussions was evidently to reveal that the average scores of these two groups were different, and to discuss how this difference might be erased. The reported differences were described as a lamentable problem -- an embarrassment -- that society must somehow solve or for which society must take the blame.

I think there are fundamental deficiencies in the understanding of people -- perhaps generally -- with regard to the significance of these kinds of events, resulting, in particular, from misunderstanding of biological issues and from failure to consider the consequences of certain kinds of actions that are apparently intended to be moral and beneficial to society, especially its minority components. I think these misconceptions arise out of ignorance that is perpetuated because the actual issues are suppressed and kept from becoming a part of the open debates of sciences and democracy that virtually alone identify and eliminate errors, whether scientific, political, or ideological. Perhaps all of these issues can be presented by discussing what I see as the most racist among all of these acts, at least in terms of its probable effects: the public discussion of average test scores of students of selected groups by the Ann Arbor News. I recognize that this particular comparison of scores was available because some part of the administrative hierarchy of the public schools chose to make it and publicize it.

I begin by asserting that with sufficient information I believe that I could locate identifiable groups with considerably greater average test scores than were presented for blacks and whites in the public schools. I also ask the people responsible for collecting the information necessary to present these scores how they happened to choose these two groups to differentiate. Why not compare Christians and Jews? Baptists and Catholics? Whites and orientals? Blacks and Indians? Boys and girls? Poor people and rich people? Children of professors and children of lawyers (doctors, plumbers, millionaires, carpenters, engineers, mechanics, etc.)? Rural and urban children? Blondes and brunettes? Tall and short? Children of college-educated people and non-college-educated people? Children from large families and those from small families? Left-handed and right-handed children? Why not lump orientals and blacks and compare them with caucasians rather than (apparently) lumping orientals and caucasians (or did they? who knows?) and comparing them with blacks? Etc., etc., etc.

I suggest that there are two reasons for the absence of the kinds of comparisons I have suggested above: (1) blacks and whites seem to be a highly distinguishable pair of groups, simply because they happen to have different skin colors (note, curiously, that all hybrids between people of the two different origins are accepted -- or "placed" -- in one of the two categories, unless they are indistinguishable from the other one, whereupon they are considered to belong to it) and (2) the majority (who see themselves as "Caucasians") do not mind identifying a minority that performs less well than a sample from their own part of the population (that is, a *sample* of a minority -- and the majority group probably does not care whether or not the sample is an appropriate one -- unless, I presume, the result of the comparison is not what they would like, whereupon reasons for rejecting the sample would surely be presented). The majority, I suggest, also does not mind including within its own ranks any other minority group that scores high, or failing to publicize that any such group scores higher. Such higher-scoring minority groups, on the other hand, will not mind being ignored or lumped with the majority, since neither of these practices will result in a lowering of their opportunities below those of the majority, and being emphasized as a minority group certainly has that potential. In my experience people do not complain when they feel that they are not being treated as inferiors, discriminated against, or denied opportunities afforded everyone else.

The second aspect of the Ann Arbor News comparison is that it led to the conclusion that society must somehow find a way to erase the reported difference or we all live in shame. This "Isn't it too bad what we have discovered?" aspect reminded me of a report I read some years ago in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* about the children and other descendants of workers invited into Germany from other surrounding countries to do particular kinds of work, and allowed to stay

there generation after generation but not allowed to become citizens. The report noted that children in such groups are jailed much more frequently than "German" youth, and then described the problem as "Germany's shame." There was, incidentally, no suggestion that the solution might be the obvious one of simply granting such people citizenship and all the same rights as other folks living in Germany. Similarly, there is no implication in any of the nonsense detailed in the Ann Arbor News that what we ought to do for blacks in Ann Arbor is that thing we have supposedly done for everyone else -- treat them without discrimination (the single letter I have seen to the editor about this comparison made roughly the same point).

Two aspects of the kind of publicizing done by the Ann Arbor News lead to injustice and are economically and otherwise ridiculous. First, publishing average scores rather than focusing on individual scores, and in the absence of the ranges of test scores or any other data, erroneously labels the individual members of identifiably different groups, such as blacks and whites. That is, it causes an almost inadvertent tendency to believe that any particular individual black probably scored lower and any particular white probably scored higher -- than something. But there is no sense to such impressions. Any particular black individual may actually have scored at or near the very top of all scores for both groups, and vice versa for any particular white individual. The highest and lowest scores could have been received by members of either the group with the higher average or the one with the lower average. Consider an employer who eliminates from consideration or discriminates against a prospective employee because he is black, or favors a prospective employee because he is white. Such a decision would be both ignorant and uneconomical, for any particular individual, black or white, might be either unacceptable or eminently acceptable: average scores of a broad group to which he or she belongs are irrelevant because better information is always available about any particular individual.

Anyone who thinks that this sort of ridiculous assessment is never made did not read the remark attributed to Peter Steiner, Dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts of The University of Michigan to the effect that it is risky for a university to hire (presumably academic) people from an all-black institution (There may be a question about the precise nature of this statement. A direct quote is not available to me. What I say here came from the Ann Arbor News). This remark, if cited correctly, indicates that Dean Steiner does not believe that the members of academic departments of his college judge prospective employees on their own merits -- that they are forced to rely instead on the credentials of institutions. One may ask if tenure decisions, about seven years later in the case of new graduates, are also made on the basis of institution of origin. If they are, then we may be assured that there are many mediocre departments in the LSA College. If they are not, then the risks to which Dean Steiner alludes have suddenly become trivial -- as I happen to think they were all the time. If academics cannot judge individuals on their own merits then they have no business being in the business. If my inference is correct, then we need to correct the procedure responsible rather than avoid supposed risks by the procedure Dean Steiner seems to be advocating indirectly. Moreover, for the reasons just given, it may be riskier to hire someone from the highest-ranked institutions rather than from those viewed somewhat differently; they are more likely to be hired on their institution's credentials than on their own, and they are more likely to be retained for the same inadequate reason. Finally, it is odd that Dean Steiner referred only to Howard University and Wayne State University in another comment to the effect that he did not want the U-M to become one of those institutions to which minorities flock. It would appear that he cares only about one particular minority; I suspect that the U-M is already an institution to which certain minorities "flock," and I haven't heard anyone complaining about that.

The second question is this: If there are many ways of standing one group against another that will give significantly different average scores, then must we try to erase every single difference of that sort? Does it behoove us to try and erase every variation that exists in every single kind of test score, among individuals as well as among groups? Isn't that the logical conclusion from the lament that any particular difference between some particular groups must

be attacked with the aim of erasing it? Are scores on the tests given in public schools so all-encompassing in their judgments that inferior scores invariably lead to inferior lives -- or call for some other pejorative judgment? I think that everyone who has delved into these subjects knows very well that it is not so. Human abilities and qualities are not adequately measurable along any single axis, no matter how sophisticated. I can point to individuals who came to my university with marvelous records from supposedly top institutions, and with IQ and other test scores extraordinarily high, whose performance never matched those early records, or whose careers aborted too early to say that the investment in them was profitable. I can also point to individuals who never scored high on the brief formal tests of Academia, but whose lifetimes represent the most glorious levels of human achievement, in whatever field or realm. In the final analysis it is only the lifetime test that counts, and I think there are qualities that overshadow any short-term tests in their importance (since one reader of this essay asked me to expand here, I have attached an essay written earlier that is relevant to this question).

When I was a student teacher in 1949 and 1950, we were advised by our education professors to look up the I.Q. scores of all our students before meeting them in class so that we would understand the extent to which the students had different capabilities and have some knowledge of what to expect from them. I did this, partly because I was exhorted to, and partly out of a fascination with the idea of I.Q. tests which had carried over from having found out about them when I was in high school and having discovered what a few of the scores of my fellow students were (of the three scores said to be the highest in the history of my high school, one individual became a lawyer, one an atmospheric chemist, and one an auctioneer). The advanced biology class I taught in a university high school consisted of seven students: five children of professors and two from a local orphanage. The I.Q. scores of the five professors' children averaged about 135, those of the two students from the orphanage were below 100. I pondered this fact for a while, eventually reaching the conclusion that the students from the orphanage probably hadn't given much of a hoot about how their tests came out, while the other five had known very well how important it was to their futures and their status to score high. This realization caused me to design the first assignment in my class deliberately to see if I could motivate at least one of the two orphanage students to outscore the five professors' children. It was easy: All I did was choose a subject that I learned (from careful observation) one of the two orphanage students was enthusiastic about (he liked wolves, and all I did was tell them to choose an animal and write and talk about its way of life): He outscored every other student by a wide margin on both the essay and the oral presentation, and I gave him the only A in the class on that assignment. The point I am making is that any kind of short-term effort to judge quality or long-term achievement is limited, especially when motivation is a principal ingredient; and, even in 1949, many student teachers were immediately aware of the circularity of deciding beforehand about the relative performance capabilities of students from their I.Q. test scores, and the injustice so perpetuated. The student whose I.Q. was in the low nineties (above) not only completed high school (saved from expulsion by my advising teacher and me) but went on through at least two years of college.

Why do people make economic and social judgments on the basis of brief, narrow tests or averages that apply to broad groups, usually ill-defined, if it is both economically unsound and socially unjust? I think part of the answer lies in our tendency to favor those closest to us against those who seem to belong to alien or different groups, part involves a very strong tendency to use "quickie" observations to judge people (note how we use a single misspelling, a mispronunciation, or any misuse of a word to judge others), and part lies in long-established tendencies of humans to score any observable human differences on a better versus worse scale. We even compare men and women in the last fashion, and special privileges accrue to the sex that we tend to describe as having "superior" attributes -- historically usually males. Of course we attribute superiority to the particular attributes expressed in the groups that have more power, of whatever kind. That happens because the group with the power makes the decision, and the members of the groups with less power, at least when they have no alternative, even contribute to the situation, in part by favoring the attributes already deemed "superior" and in part by

(sometimes) striving to acquire themselves the attributes deemed "superior." We also tend to draw up social boundaries that exclude those most obviously different from ourselves; test scores that give average differences between groups are convenient accessories to such tendencies. But we are not living today as we did when any such tendencies might have been formed by natural selection. Because we are now mixed in large groups that are socially, politically, economically, and geographically unified, such snap decisions and such discrimination can be extremely inappropriate in virtually any respect that makes sense -- and still be perpetuated if we do not sit back and consider what we are doing and what its consequences will be. It does not serve our personal interests to make mistakes of the sorts I have described above, and, therefore, some kind of unexpected altruism is not required to erase such behaviors. Only knowledge and common sense are required.

I think there are two main groups of people who err in this arena. First is a group who apparently believe that differences between identifiable groups of humans, in respects such as I have been discussing, are owing to genetic differences, and that we need to ferret out, emphasize, and publicize such differences because variations in social practices should be instituted to take them into account. Some of these people seem to believe that the differences that can be measured are really important because once knowing about them we will be able to engage in some useful eugenic practices not previously available to us. Less extreme views imply that at least we can use such information to make reasonable social and business decisions about people's behavior. These people are usually wrong, for the reasons I have given.

The second group of people may or may not believe that genetic differences in behavior accompany genetic differences in morphological features, but they definitely believe that *if* there are such genetic correlates, then we should not dwell on them, and perhaps we should even suppress them. These people are like the wife of the Bishop Wilberforce, who prayed that Darwin would be wrong and prayed that, if he was right, it not become generally known. These people are pessimistic about getting other people to act justly when genetic differences among people become known, meaning that they believe that everyone except themselves is incapable of acting justly and rationally in the face of any such differences. They are probably revealing as well an inclination to believe that there really are significant genetic differences underlying behavioral differences among humans, and that some variants really are less desirable than others. This is so because if such differences actually do not exist, then when those who think they do present their information, we should be able easily to show that their results are faulty. Such people may also believe that if anyone says there are differences of the sort described above, everyone but themselves will believe it even if it is not true. In other words, they not only seem to believe that everyone but themselves is incapable of dealing with the truth in a just way, but also that anyone who investigates such differences virtually has to be suspected of having ulterior motives, probably in the direction of derogating the group(s) to which he or she does not belong. Part of my reason for saying this is that such people surely believe that the differences between themselves and others who, they seem to think, cannot handle information about themselves without misusing it, are not ephemeral or easily removed. If they believed otherwise, they would surely change their approach.

Each of the two groups I have just described believes that the other group is the problem. The first thinks the second is trying to conceal facts, and the second thinks the first is advocating discrimination. I would rather argue that both represent the problem. I want instead to belong to a third group whose position is that any reasonably high quality study on any topic ought to be published, and that when there is doubt it is always better to err by publishing mediocre or poor quality research and relying upon the competitiveness of scientists and the procedures of science -- mainly its requirement of repeatability -- to demonstrate the inadequacy of the results, rather than to engage in censorship on grounds of supposed morality and try to keep our science squeaky clean by applying supposedly ethical considerations. One reason for my position is that scientists are so competitive that they not only will inevitably ferret out inferior research if

left free to do it, but they will also unethically use supposedly ethical considerations to censor competitors if that is possible. Another reason is that different people legitimately see ethical considerations differently, and such disagreements will not lead to the most rapid advances of knowledge, and justice from knowledge. I think that there are many ethical failures in the examples I set out at the beginning of this essay, and they are certainly not all on the side of those wishing to allow presentation of results that others believed to be pernicious.

If there are differences in behavior that correlate with genetic differences, let's find out about them and decide what to do about it afterward. Let's proceed from knowledge rather than from ignorance. Let's get this kind of information out to the public in such profusion, and in such high quality publications, that we can all absorb it and go on. Let's find out about our differences so that we can begin to understand just how diverse is the human species, just how many different axes of variation there are, and what each one might mean. Let us begin to realize that the multifarious ways in which different individuals excel at different enterprises very well may involve underlying genetic variations, and that every genetic variation is not a better versus worse measurement. Let's prevent people from snobbishly using the particular narrow measure that benefits them to bolster artificially their own status and downgrade that of someone else, whether those snobs proceed by the Bishop Wilberforce's Wife Technique of perpetuating ignorance or by the equally pernicious technique of parading differences revealed by one or another narrow or inappropriate test or conclusion. My view is that injustice and error come primarily from ignorance not from knowledge. To those who may argue that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, I counter that a little knowledge is also a necessary step on the way to a lot of knowledge. As I see it, those who perpetuate ignorance by excluding investigators and investigations rather than allowing and criticizing them are neither ethical nor altruistic.

Some Practical Considerations

I am fairly certain that my views of things, as given above, will not resolve the questions in everyone's mind about all these issues. Some may think I have been inconsistent by indicting simultaneously the Ann Arbor News for publishing what it did and the U-M graduate students for suppressing publication of other information or arguments that may have been equally inadequate. I am indicting both, but I do not think I am being inconsistent. The reason is important. There is a difference between indicting someone for being incompetent or inaccurate and indicting someone for being unethical (even this distinction, however, can become terribly difficult). I blame the Ann Arbor News not for being unethical but for being incompetent, and perhaps unprofessional, because they did not seek arguments and discussion from appropriate people to accompany their publication of average test scores. I also blame the readership of the Ann Arbor News (including myself) for not writing in to point out how ridiculously inadequate and useless was the nature of the information they published: criticism and pursuit of the truth breaks down when people remain outside the controversies. The gravity of this sin of avoidance of published innuendoes is emphasized when it is realized that the supposedly ethical tactic employed in another circumstance by the same people who failed to write to the News was to deny publication.

I don't really know if the News was being unethical or not, partly because I don't know what their intent was, or how they interpreted the information they published. On the other hand I am sure that there are those who would regard as unethical behavior that was merely careless with respect to whether or not some piece of supposed information was made public, at least when peoples' lives and opportunities are involved. I don't think the Canadian psychologist mentioned above was being unethical because I believe that his intent was simply to advance his career by making public some information that he thought was important -- the same intent that all academicians must lay claim to now and then. It might be argued that the students described above were not being unethical by working to get his presentation rejected because their intent was to prevent pernicious racism -- that they didn't really think about crimping the psychologist's career in order to advance their own careers, even if that was the most important effect and

somehow the driving force behind their action. They might, on the other hand, argue that the psychologist is probably a racist, deep down in his soul, and that's why he undertook this work in the first place, even if he doesn't know it.

So intent and consequences can both be involved in the ethical nature of any act. What if I am correct, and the best way to eliminate racism is to get the arguments -- good and bad, sublime and ridiculous -- out in the open and debate them. Then, unless I stay with intent as crucial, I have to call the students' action perniciously racist. Of course that conclusion calls for a good deal of optimism with respect to how science and open society work in ferreting out the truth. I have that optimism. Or, perhaps more accurately, I have a deep and abiding respect for the effectiveness of censorship in concealing the truth and promoting the interests of particular groups against those of others. That's why I regard myself as defending the most basic freedom in our kind of society when I argue against suppression of results or supposed "information" on political, ideological, or other similar grounds. That's why I do not mind the Ann Arbor News publishing what I see as the most racist thing in the above narrative nearly as much as I mind the act of the graduate students or that of the editor or that of the president of the American Anthropological Association (initially) or that attributed to the Dean of the LSA College. Because the editor rejected the psychologist's manuscript on political grounds -- he obviously believed it would cause repercussions that would reduce the status of the journal he had founded and was editing -- I am now placed in a position of having to argue for publication of a paper that I found wanting when I refereed it. In a precise parallel I found myself having to argue for allowing an author to present a poster that I thought inferior and probably would have rejected if I had participated in the refereeing procedure. I am not nearly so upset at the idea of such things being published as I am about their being suppressed because of someone's feeling about possible political repercussions. The reason is that a larger issue is involved. Much larger. Anyone who accepts censorship can use it to suppress any view or information or individual that he or she simply does not like, or who appears to be acting against the suppressor's interests.

This is why an enormous sadness (yes, that is precisely the emotion) actually swept over me last spring when I believed that I had perceived among the graduate students of EHB primarily an attitude of self-satisfaction over having "won" something, and having demonstrated power, and an almost complete lack of concern or willingness to debate the issue of censorship. These students, I believe, should have been the last to accept censorship, for their group exists only because some of their mentors had found ways to withstand and bypass censorship only a few years before. They either forgot or never understood that indignation over quality or topic is never a sufficient reason for suppression of a work. An argument for such suppression cannot be made ethical by the claim -- no matter how righteous -- that one is protecting someone else by his effort to suppress. Although I was out of the country when the actual argument about the psychologist's poster took place, I expressed my opinion at the open meeting held later. Not a single student from the group who argued for what I am here calling censorship thought it worthwhile either then or later to explain or justify his or her stand to me (or at that meeting), although several students who did not participate in the students' action later undertook what I regarded as profound and worthwhile discussions of the issues, either with me or in my presence.

This issue will not go away. It will inevitably come up again and again with respect to investigations of human behavior. It is always and inevitably an issue in the social sciences. It cannot be resolved easily. It deserves additional -- perhaps even continual -- attention.

I conclude, then, that the scientific study of human behavior cannot be "squeaky clean" in an open society, and this means that it cannot be squeaky clean in any society anywhere any time. More important, I must also conclude that efforts to make it so will always run the risk of creating favorable conditions for the flourishing of effects precisely opposite to those sought by the individuals motivated to do the cleansing.

What I have said here is probably not "ready" for dissemination. Maybe essays on this topic can never be ready, in the sense of being complete, consistent, and decisive (squeaky clean?). But I am going to pass out these comments in their present state anyway and take my chances. I will be happy to have errors, inconsistencies, or other problems pointed out to me. Hell, I will be happy just to know that someone cares enough⁵ about this issue to continue the discussion.