

ipants at a local mall—one-third were black, one-third white and one-third Asian—to answer such questions as: “How far can you ejaculate?” and “How large is your penis?” Interviewed in the most recent issue of *Rolling Stone*, Rushton summarizes his research agenda: “Even if you take things like athletic ability or sexuality—not to reinforce stereotypes—but it’s a trade-off: more brain or more penis. You can’t have everything.” And in a 1986 article in *Politics and Life Sciences*, Rushton suggested that Nazi Germany’s military prowess was connected to the purity of its gene pool, and warned that egalitarian ideas endangered “North European civilization.”

Anticipating Murray’s celebration of “clannish self-esteem,” Rushton devotes an entire chapter of his book to a genetic explanation for ethnocentrism: “According to genetic similarity theory, people can be expected to favor their own group over others.” And Rushton speculates that “favoritism for one’s own ethnic group may have arisen as an extension of enhancing family and social cohesiveness.” *The Bell Curve*, too, flirts with the notion that ethnocentrism is hereditary.

Murray’s racist notion of American blacks and whites as culturally and genetically distinct “clans” seems especially implausible in an era when the healthy growth of ethnic intermarriage promises to undermine the concept of coherent racial classification entirely. It’s not surprising to discover, after scratching the surface of Murray’s footnotes, the shabbiness of the tradition on which he has staked his reputation.

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## Blue Genes

Murray and Herrnstein have written a book that deals with extraordinarily important issues, many of which have been considered too explosive to discuss in the public arena yet need to be aired. There are, however, three assertions made about race and I.Q. that do not reflect the consensus of scholars.

First, although Murray and Herrnstein do not deny that racism and structural factors play a role in producing some of the I.Q. differences between blacks and whites, they also claim that racial differences in intelligence may be genetically influenced as well. This argument is based in large part on the fact that the races produce different “profiles” of ability patterns, with blacks performing relatively better, for example, on arithmetic and immediate memory and whites scoring higher on spatial and perceptual abil-

ities. The authors note that socioeconomic status could not plausibly account for such profile differences, and imply that this leaves genetics as the most likely explanation.

This is a breathtaking leap. It presumes that the only relevant way groups might differ is in socioeconomic status. But groups differ in all sorts of other ways that might produce ability profile differences. For example, Stanford anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath compared the way working-class whites and blacks in a North Carolina town socialized their children for literacy. White parents regarded it as their job to teach literacy skills in preparation for school, reading to their children from an early age and showing them how to extract information from the printed page. Black parents assumed the school would handle the literacy issues and focused on social matters. They did not read to their children, indeed did not even “teach” them language. (Black babies were, however, bathed in words and verbal play, perhaps explaining in part the new prominence of black novelists, playwrights and poets.) To invoke different patterns of abilities as evidence of a genetic basis for group differences is utterly unfounded.

The claims that cognitive abilities are little modifiable and that the differences between blacks and whites are not likely to be significantly reducible are different. Here Murray and Herrnstein interpret masses of evidence in ways that are eccentric to say the least.

Head Start and similar programs often produce large I.Q. or achievement gains in preschool children, but Murray and Herrnstein call these programs failures, since once children return to their relatively impoverished environments, the gains fade. But if social scientists know anything, it is that the immediate situation is of utmost importance. People are capable of a wide range of behavior depending on their peers, their role models and the reward structure of the world they confront. Malcolm X was the top-ranking child in his Midwestern elementary school (and the only black). He then spent several years in bad company in Boston, and estimates that by the end of this period his effective vocabulary was less than 1,000 words. “Use it or lose it” is the relevant adage for cognitive abilities.

And some preschool programs do produce dramatic and enduring change in I.Q. or other achievement-related attributes, even well after termination of the program, as Murray and Herrnstein admit. They explain away these results on dubious technical grounds that do not accord with the consensus of

experts. Intervention has been shown to work at every age level. James Comer of the Yale psychiatry department and others have shown that the academic performance of inner-city elementary school children can be made to exceed national averages. A week’s worth of studying will raise scores of high school students on the math portion of the SAT by one-third of a standard deviation (thirty-three points); the renowned teacher Jaime Escalante can do far better with East Los Angeles barrio youths. Experiments at my university and others show that relatively small, inexpensive interventions can improve grades of blacks in particular subjects and can even produce significant improvements in grade point averages.

What has happened to the black-white gap after decades of concerted effort to improve black ability and achievement test scores? Murray and Herrnstein review the evidence and correctly note that the studies range from showing a slight convergence of black and white scores in the past twenty to twenty-five years to indicating that as much as one-half of the difference has been eliminated. The median change reported is somewhere between one-quarter and one-third. Yet they summarily dismiss this extraordinarily hopeful evidence: “too soon to pass judgment.”

Such coolness about evidence that contradicts their position together with uncritical warmth shown toward supporting evidence is found throughout the painful sections of the book dealing with race and the modifiability of I.Q. This is not dispassionate scholarship. It is advocacy of views that are not well supported by the evidence, that do not represent the consensus of scholars and that are likely to do substantial harm to individuals and to the social fabric.

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## The Lying Game

Five years ago Richard J. Herrnstein reviewed a National Academy of Sciences report on the condition of American blacks in *The Public Interest*. He objected to the report for using a “discrimination” model to explain differences between blacks and whites in income, earnings, schooling, health and a host of other factors. He proposed what he called a “distributional” model, which, he made clear, refers to differences in the distribution of one key trait, intelligence.