

## No Brain Is Racial

Mica Pollock

Look inside yourself and ask: have you ever thought that different racial groups have different intellectual abilities? You might immediately say "no." But the assumption is more ingrained than most Americans would like to admit. Indeed, after almost 600 years of programming, it would be surprising if you did not have this scientifically false notion somewhere in your head. (You can take a test online to examine your unconscious bias; see Resources.)<sup>1</sup>

Over several centuries, social and natural scientists constructed the myth that "white" people were smarter than non-"white" people. They did so to justify Europeans' enslavement of Africans, and worldwide European colonial conquest begun in the 1400s. In a cruel cycle, the notion that intellectual ability was distributed differently among so-called races was developed by white scientists through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries to explain and justify a system of economic, social, and political inequality organized along racial lines.

For example, to rationalize slavery and its treatment of Africans as inherently less worthy than Europeans, natural scientists classified people descended from northern Europeans as the "race" with superior reason and the people descended from Africans as an inferior "race" fit only for labor and subordination.<sup>2</sup> Even after the abolition of slavery, scientists tried to justify the racial hierarchy that was reconstructed as Jim Crow segregation by arguing that "the races" differed in intellect. Indeed, that effort was inextricably intertwined with the development of intelligence tests and the very idea of the "intelligence quotient," or IQ.<sup>3</sup> People classified as "black" or "Negro" bore the brunt of these ascriptions of inferior ability, but they affected other "nonwhite" groups as well. Mexican Americans working as low-paid field laborers for white landowners after the U.S. conquest of the Southwest were deemed mentally inferior and shunted by whites into classes and schools for the "retarded."<sup>4</sup> Italians, at the bottom of the labor pool at the turn of the twentieth century and widely regarded by U.S.-born "whites" at the time as not quite white, were pronounced disproportionately "retarded" on the new intelligence tests. So were Jews, who, as Eastern European immigrants and

non-Christians to boot, ranked low in the national status hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Repeatedly, experts designing “intelligence” tests tweaked these instruments until they showed what they were meant to show: that lower-status populations were less intelligent than higher-status ones. These notions persist today. In *The Bell Curve*, published in 1994, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray suggested that people of color were less successful educationally and economically because they were less intelligent.

The active effort to prove a lie—that the “races” differ in intellectual ability—has taken its toll on every one of us, regardless of the racial category through which we live our lives. In contemporary America, it is difficult to think about racial groups without thinking about them as unequally intelligent. Being brought up white typically involves learning to believe that we are smarter than those who are not white; being brought up nonwhite often means battling the fear that perhaps we will be judged less intelligent than those who are white.<sup>6</sup> In a more recent variation on this pattern, being brought up Asian American entails contending with racialized presumptions of our superior ability in math and science, which can sometimes prompt achievement and sometimes stunt it.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, after six centuries of programming, “races” can seem to be easily identifiable and fundamentally different types of humans. Some of us are lighter skinned, some darker; some of us have straight hair, some curly; our bone structures vary. Yet we have fallen for the misconception that internal differences, including intellectual ones, accompany these visible differences.<sup>8</sup> American educators reactivate this cruel programming every time we imagine, even for a fleeting second, that students’ physical appearance signals anything at all about their brain power. Since assumptions of racially distributed intelligence are in the air we breathe, antiracist practice requires actively resisting this notion. When we say that we have “high expectations for all students,” we should think more specifically about what it is we are saying. What we really mean is that we are struggling against the expectations we have been programmed to have, that some “race groups” are smarter than others.

## RESOURCES

- American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Race and Intelligence: <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/race.htm>.  
 Stephen Jay Gould. 1996. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton.  
 Harvard Implicit Project: To take a test of your unconscious or “implicit” racial bias, see <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** How common is the view that “the races” are unequally intelligent?

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2. **Strategy:** How, if at all, might it make a difference for your students if you reminded yourself routinely that the notion of racially based intelligence was a lie?
3. **Try tomorrow:** In your own classroom, how can you imagine conveying the truth that one's skin color, nose shape, hair type, or language has nothing to do with one's intelligence?

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