NEGRO-WHITE DIFFERENCES IN INTELLIGENCE TEST PERFORMANCE:
A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD PROBLEM

OTTO KLINEBERG

University of Paris

I HAVE written this article at the suggestion of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), Division 9 of the American Psychological Association. It is based in part on some of my own earlier publications and in part on a chapter which I have prepared for a forthcoming book; it represents an attempt to bring up to date a psychological analysis of an old problem. The substantial number of recent publications in this field, some of which have attracted considerable popular attention; the many "letters to the editor"; the unfortunate tendency, all too frequent, to stray from an interpretation of the data to an attack on the ethnic origins or the alleged political positions of the persons involved; the accusation of a "conspiracy"; and finally, the practical implications which have been drawn for public policy—all of these developments have made a factual reappraisal desirable. I had hoped that this might be done by another psychologist, one less closely identified with a definite stand on one side of this issue. As the next best thing, I have tried to look, as honestly as my own biases would permit, at the evidence which has accumulated on both sides. It goes without saying that I am writing as an individual, and that neither the Council nor the membership of SPSSI should be held responsible for what follows.

THE ISSUE

I shall restrict my discussion of Negro-white differences to that aspect of the issue on which we, as psychologists, may claim to speak with professional competence, namely, the interpretation of the results obtained from the application of mental tests. There are other aspects of at least equal importance; whether, for example, there is any acceptable indication of biological superiority or inferiority; whether one can argue from the nature of a culture to the genetic factors responsible, etc. On these and related questions the anthropologists are better qualified than we are to express a judgment. I leave these matters, therefore, with the single reminder that the American Anthropological Association has taken the position that there is no scientifically acceptable basis for a genetic hierarchy among ethnic groups.

As far as mental tests are concerned, the issue is not one of whether on the average Negro children obtain lower test scores than whites. Of that there can be no doubt. My own earlier survey (Klineberg, 1944), in which I was greatly aided by Kenneth B. Clark, was based on 27 studies, and led me to the conclusion that an IQ of 86 represented the approximate Negro median. Shuey (1958), after a much more thorough and complete survey, obtained substantially similar results; on verbal group tests alone, she located no fewer than 72 studies, based upon tests of 36,000 colored children, and her estimate of the average IQ is 85. (I might add parenthetically that in my own earlier survey I found median IQs for children of Italian, Portuguese, and Mexican parentage at or below those of American Negroes, and those of American Indians definitely below.) Shuey's estimate is therefore very close to mine.

The addition of so many further studies has, however, supplied very little new insight. One is reminded of the Literary Digest poll in connection with the Roosevelt-Landon electoral contest in 1936; on the basis of more than 2,000,000 ballots, it was predicted that Landon would win an overwhelming victory. As is well known, there was a systematic bias in the sample. The addition of another 100 studies of Negro children would not strengthen Shuey's (1958) conclusion that there are "some native differences between Negroes and whites as determined by intelligence tests" (p. 318), if some systematic error entered into the test results.

As far back as 1933, Garrett and Shneck in their book on Psychological Tests reminded us that "the
examiner must always remember that comparisons are permissible only when environmental differences are absent, or at least negligible" (p. 24). This appears to be the crucial issue. What comparisons of Negroes and whites have been made under such conditions?

**The Argument for “Some Native Differences”**

There are three major studies cited by Shuey and others as demonstrating that differences persist even when environmental factors have been “equated.” (I have put this word in quotation marks for reasons which will appear later.) One of these is by Myrtle Bruce (1940), who matched Negroes and whites in a rural community in southern Virginia on the Sims Socioeconomic scale, and still found a difference, with a resulting mean IQ on the Binet of 86 for the whites and 77 for the Negroes. Those who have used Bruce’s results have not always gone on to note her careful qualifications.

Although the white and Negro samples equated for social status still show statistical differences in IQ on each of the three intelligence tests, this fact cannot be considered proof of the superiority of the white group, since the equation of the two groups is not entirely valid (p. 20, italics supplied).

Even a quick look at her graph on page 20 shows more whites at the upper levels and more Negroes at the lower. Bruce herself “is inclined to believe that there is an innate difference between the particular white and Negro groups studied” (p. 97). She does not, however, extend this conclusion to the ethnic groups in general; she speaks, for example, of the skewness of the Negro IQ distribution as something which “prevents this study from being used as evidence for the superiority of the white race to the Negro race” (p. 97).

Suppose, however, that the two groups had really been “equated” for their scores on a satisfactory socioeconomic scale. Can this possibly be regarded as taking care of all the relevant environmental variables? This appears to be the assumption underlying the study by McGurk (1951) in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Negro and white high school seniors were matched for socioeconomic level, and still there was a difference, the Negroes overlapping the white means by 29%. This would be an important finding (as would also the demonstration that there was about as much difference between the two groups on test items identified as “cultural” and “noncultural,” respectively) if socioeconomic level were all that mattered. Can anyone really believe that? Do motivation, self-confidence, opportunity for wider experience, and other related factors count for nothing?

In a recent critical review, Dreger and Miller (1960) insist that it is not enough to equate ethnic groups in terms of social class and economic variables; that there is a caste as well as a class difference; that even those Negroes whose economic status is higher than that of most white persons will still in most cases be prevented from living the same kind of life in all respects; these writers insist that many other factors may also be important. Incidentally, they emphasize that they “are not taking sides at this point in the hereditary-environment controversy . . .” (p. 367). They show their impartiality in a striking and (to me) slightly painful manner by stating that “Shuey does the same rationalizing from an hereditarian standpoint that Klineberg did in his earlier ‘review’ from an environmental standpoint” (p. 364). To return to McGurk, it is impossible to accept the contention that all relevant environmental factors have been considered, just because socioeconomic status has been controlled.

The third study which has figured prominently on this side of the argument is by Tanser (1939). This was conducted in Kent County, Ontario, Canada, where the Negroes have lived since before the Civil War; Tanser writes that they are on a level with the whites in regard to “every political and social advantage.” On the Pintner-Paterson tests, the mean white IQ was 109.6, the Negro, 91; on the Pintner nonlanguage test, the means were 111 and 95; on the National Intelligence Test the respective figures were 104 and 89. On this last test, 20% of the Negroes reached or exceeded the white median; 29% of the Negroes and 56% of the whites reached or surpassed the National test norms. (Tanser’s study is unfortunately not available to me in Paris; I have quoted these figures from Shuey.)

If Tanser is right with regard to “every political and social advantage,” these results must be taken seriously. A comment by Anastasi (1958) is, however, pertinent. Nevertheless significant differences were found in the socioeconomic level of the two groups. Moreover, it is reported that the white children attended school more regularly than the Negro, a difference often associated with social class
differences. Thus within the entire sample of white children tested, school attendance averaged 93.38%; within the Negro sample, it averaged 84.77% (pp. 556–557).

I have only one comment to add. I was born in Canada, and lived there the first 25 years of my life. I would have said that Negroes were reasonably well off there, but emphatically not that they lived under conditions of complete equality, or that the social environment was free of prejudice. I would have thought that Canada was in this respect similar to the northeastern United States, with Negroes occupying about the same relative position. As a matter of fact Chant and Freedman (1934) report a correlation of .98 between scale values assigned to the same list of ethnic groups, including Negroes, by Canadian as by American students. I do not know Kent County, Ontario, and I cannot take it for granted that the same attitudes would be found there. I cannot help wondering, however, whether this particular Canadian community can be so exceptional. I would like to see a replication of this study, with full attention to social and sociological variables, and to patterns of personal development and interpersonal relations. In the meantime, Tanser's results cannot be dismissed, but they appear to me to be outweighed by the evidence on the other side.

The Argument Against Native Differences

The evidence against the assumption of native differences in intelligence test performance between Negroes and whites still seems to me to be very convincing. The relevant studies, most of which are already well known and will therefore be presented in brief outline, include the following.

Among infants during the first year of life the earlier finding by McGraw (1931) was that southern Negro babies showed inferiority on the Hetzer-Wolf tests. McGraw concludes:

It is significant that with even the very young subjects, when environmental factors are minimized [italics supplied], the same type and approximately the same degree of superiority is evidenced on the part of the white subjects as that found among older groups.

In New Haven, however, where Negro mothers obtained more adequate nourishment and where the general economic level of the families had improved, Pasamanick (1946) found no Negro inferiority or retardation. A follow-up of 40 cases at a mean age of about two years still showed no retardation (Knobloch & Pasamanick, 1953; Pasamanick & Knobloch, 1955). Using different tests, Gilliland (1951) also reports no significant differences between Negro and white infants in Chicago.

For preschool children, Anastasi and d'Angelo (1952), found no significant differences on Goodenough Draw-a-Man IQ between samples of Negroes and whites attending Day Care Centers in New York City. Dreger and Miller (1960) comment:

With due recognition of the limitations of the Goodenough as a test of intelligence, we may yet regard Anastasi and d'Angelo's results as a challenge to nativist theories of intellectual differences between the races (p. 366).

It is as the children get older that differences in test performance appear. Surely this is to be expected on the basis of the cumulative effect of an inferior environment. Such an effect has been demonstrated in the case of white children as well. To mention only one example out of many, Sherman and Key (1932) found a striking decrement with age among white children living in the "hollows" of the Blue Ridge Mountains; there was a Pintner-Cunningham IQ of 84 at ages 6–8; 70 at 8–10; and 53 at 10–12. This is a much more dramatic drop than any with which I am familiar in the case of Negro children; it shows what can happen when a poor environment persists over a long period.

Conversely, when the environment improves, test scores go up. In the case of Negro children they do not usually go up all the way to meet the white norms, but this is to be expected if the discriminatory treatment persists, and even for a time if discrimination were to be completely eliminated. The atmosphere in the home, the conversation around the dinner table, the use of leisure time, the books read and discussed—these and other factors contributing to “intelligence” cannot be expected to change over night or even possibly in one generation. With this in mind, the changes that have been reported in Negro IQs become all the more impressive.

When my students and I indicated (Klineberg, 1935) that test scores of southern Negro children improved in proportion to their length of residence in New York City, we were perfectly aware that they still did not reach the white norms, and we pointed that out. Could anyone have expected them to do so under Harlem living conditions, and
in the Harlem schools as they were at that time? Could anyone possibly suggest that in New York or in Philadelphia, where Lee (1951) obtained similar results, there is no discrimination against Negroes? There was improvement, however, because there was less discrimination than where they came from.

In some cases, the improvement has even been dramatic. Shuey (1958, p. 87) points out that in my review of Negro intelligence testing (Klineberg, 1944) I gave special prominence to a study by W. W. Clark in Los Angeles (1923). This I did because of the striking finding that the Negro children attending 5 elementary schools obtained an average National Intelligence Test IQ of 104.7 as compared with an IQ of 106 for all the children in 15 schools. Shuey indicates that she wrote to Clark asking for further details, and was informed by him that “the National norms available in 1922 were probably about 5 per cent too high” (p. 87, italics supplied). Surely 5% does not change the results greatly. Besides, in that case the results for the comparison group of 15 schools would also have to be reduced by a similar proportion.

I also wrote to Clark for further information, and he indicated that the obtained IQs were too high, but that he could not determine by how much. The fact remains that if they were too high for the Negroes, they were also too high for the rest of the Los Angeles school population. Clark’s original article indicates that there was no significant difference shown in the intelligence level of the Negro children and the 15 schools in general, nor were there significant differences in reading comprehension, arithmetic ability, spelling, as well as educational accomplishment in general. He writes: “The average accomplishment and range of accomplishment for Negro children is practically the same as for the total population of the fifteen schools.”

Shuey reports further that research conducted in Los Angeles Public Schools in 1928 (unpublished) revealed a median IQ for Negro children of 95. If that is the case, it is difficult to understand Clark’s finding of “no significant difference.” Even if we accept this estimate, however, the fact remains that in the relatively friendly climate of Los Angeles, Negro IQs have shown a tremendous leap upwards. Compare even this lower estimate of 95 with the 76 reported by Bruce for rural Virginia. Could “selective migration” account for this large difference? Shuey writes:

If we were correct in assuming an IQ difference of about 9 points between northern and southern Negro children, then about half to two-thirds of this difference may reasonably be attributed to environmental factors and the remainder to selective migration (p. 314).

Here the difference is 19 points, and “half to two-thirds” would suggest that Shuey would accept an improvement of 10 to 12 points in IQ as attributable to the superior environment. I am putting this figure at its most conservative, since I have found no acceptable evidence for this kind of selective migration, but even then the environmental rise is clear, and it is considerable.

The desegregation of elementary schools, particularly in the border states and cities where the process has more than a “token” character, gives us another opportunity to see what an improved educational environment may accomplish. This situation has been studied in Washington, D. C., although the measures used were tests of achievement rather than of intelligence. Stallings (1960) writes:

The Washington study showed that during the five years following integration, marked progress has been made in academic achievement . . . a gain was made in the median score for every [school] subject tested at every grade level where the tests were given.

With regard to Louisville, Kentucky, Omer Carmichael, Superintendent of Public Schools, reported (1959) as follows:

When we tested, we looked at the results the year before desegregation and then looked at them after the second year of desegregation and found that the Negro in all grades had improved—and by an amount that was statistically significant.

This does not mean that average differences between Negroes and whites have disappeared; it does mean that they have been reduced. Nor has this occurred as the result of “pulling down” the white level. Carmichael reports that there “was a slight improvement for the whites; a substantial improvement for the Negroes.” For the difference to disappear completely, much more has to happen. (Even among whites, the difference in the IQ of occupational classes is substantial.) Until that “more” has happened, we have no right to assume that Negroes are, on the average, innately inferior.

AVERAGES AND INDIVIDUALS

In many of the recent analyses of ethnic differences, including the extensive one by Shuey, a great
deal of emphasis has been placed on the extent of overlapping. Her own estimate is that the median overlap among school children was between 10 and 20%. (In McGurk’s study it was 29%, and presumably in Clark’s it was close to 50%.) As every psychology student (but unfortunately not every layman) knows, this refers to the percentage of the “inferior” group who reach or exceed the mean of the “superior.” As Anastasi (1958) points out:

If 30 per cent of the Negroes reach or exceed the white median, the percentage who reach or exceed the lowest score of the white group will be approximately 99. Under these conditions, therefore, the ranges will overlap almost completely (p. 549).

Clearly, then, statements to the effect that there was “only 20% overlap” obscure the degree of similarity in the total distributions.

This fact comes out strikingly when one looks more closely at Bruce’s findings on the Kuhlmann-Anderson scale. For the total population examined (521 whites and 432 Negroes), the range in IQ was 52 to 129 for the former and 39 to 130 for the latter. When equated on the Sims scale, the range was 51 to 115 for the whites, and 41 to 130 for the Negroes. On the Binet, the two ranges were 51 to 125, and 51 to 130; on the Grace Arthur scale, 46 to 140, and 51 to 120, respectively. On three out of these four comparisons, one or more Negroes obtained higher scores than any of the whites; on two out of the four, one or more whites obtained scores as low as, or lower than, those of any Negro.

Let us suppose for the purpose of this argument (a supposition for which I perceive no acceptable evidence) that there is a difference in averages due to genetic factors. What about the individuals who “overlap”? I learned my statistics from a good teacher, a former psychologist at Columbia University, who kept reminding us not to forget the range when we compared two distributions. We were both students of that wise man, R. S. Woodworth, for whom the essence of psychology, as I understood him, was the behavior and characteristics of the individual. In one of his texts (1929) he defined psychology as the scientific study of the activities of the individual.

It is perhaps beyond the scope of this paper to consider the practical implications of psychological research on Negro-white differences and similarities, but I hope I may be permitted one observation. Lines of demarcation between groups of people, in employment, in education, in opportunities for development, based on alleged differences in averages which are essentially abstractions, do violence to the facts of individual capacities and potentialities. At the most, group differences are obscure and uncertain; we are faced with the living reality of individual human beings who have a right to the opportunity to show what they can do when they are given an equal chance. Perhaps I am allowing my own value system to influence me to look at the whole range of individual variations and not just at averages. I should have thought, however, that concern with the individual represented one value on which all psychologists might find themselves in agreement.

**Conclusion**

I can only conclude that there is no scientifically acceptable evidence for the view that ethnic groups differ in innate abilities. *This is not the same as saying that there are no ethnic differences in such abilities.* In the first place, I do not feel that mental tests can by themselves alone be used to prove this negative proposition. Perhaps in the future new techniques will be developed, better than our present tests, less subject to possible variations in interpretation, more conclusive in their results. I doubt that this would really change the picture, but the possibility must be kept open. Secondly, it is exceedingly difficult ever to prove the absence of something, because one can never be certain that all the relevant factors have been taken into account. We can, however, say to those who have claimed to find evidence for ethnic differences in innate mentality: You have not proved your case. You have not been able to demonstrate that such differences exist.

We can go a little farther than that. We can point to the improvement in achievement when conditions of life improve. We can emphasize the tremendous variations within each ethnic group, much greater than the differences between groups even under discrepant environmental stimulation. We can insist that since innate psychological differences between ethnic groups have never been satisfactorily demonstrated, we have no right to act as if they had been. The science of psychology can offer no support to those who see in the accident of inherited skin color or other physical characteristics any excuse for denying to individuals the right to full participation in American democracy.
REFERENCES


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