

EDITORIAL

Should We Do Research on Race Differences in Intelligence?

JOHN C. LOEHLIN
The University of Texas

Research on racial differences in intelligence is desirable *if* the research is appropriately motivated, honestly done, and adequately communicated. All three of these points are discussed, particularly the third.

Is research on racial differences in intelligence desirable? Some 17 years ago Gardner Lindzey, J.N. Spuhler, and I asked ourselves that question (Loehlin, Lindzey, & Spuhler, 1975). Our answer then was, and my answer now is, Yes, or more precisely, Yes, *if*

Yes, *if* the research is appropriately motivated, honestly done, and adequately communicated.

Note that the qualifications do not include: "and deals with racial differences from a purely environmental perspective." I assume that research on racial differences, if it is to be done at all, ought to be done from whatever perspectives might promise to shed any light on the subject matter. And I assume that the stated *ifs* ought to apply to any research done on this topic, whether its independent variables are socioeconomic, psychological-developmental, environmental-biological, or genetic.

I do not assume that the desirability of doing research of any kind on race differences is completely self-evident. Some people seem to feel that racial differences are simply unpleasant matters not to be referred to in polite society—possibly, if ignored, they might go away. Some hold that such differences should more properly be the object of appreciation and enjoyment than of analysis. But others would like to understand the nature and origin of racial differences, sometimes out of scientific curiosity, sometimes with the goal of changing (some of) them. For these persons, research should be an appropriate step. Given the current intellectual climate in the U.S., however, it is prudent to give a little thought to what research one wants to do on racial differences, and why one

I thank J.M. Horn, L. Willerman, and the participants in the Manhattan Conference, for helpful comments.

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to J.C. Loehlin, Department of Psychology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712.

wants to do it, before plunging blindly ahead. If this self-scrutiny leaves us believing that the research we have in mind is sensible and our motives are reasonably pure, we still need to consider how we can communicate both the sensible nature of our research and the goodness of our intentions to an audience that, in today's world, may manifest both a considerable lack of scientific sophistication and more than a little paranoia. Probably no amount of forethought can make research into racial differences totally risk-free, but one ought, at least, to think about damage control before the torpedoes strike.

So, how does one justify research into race differences in intelligence? "Because they are there" has a nice ring to it. Sheer scientific curiosity is a motivation treasured by scientists, but not always equally so by other people, who are apt to want something like a cost-benefit analysis (whether they call it that or not). There are two major alternatives at this juncture. One is to downplay the costs. Here one might, for example, point to the abstract scientific interest of the research and emphasize a total lack of any practical consequences. If you are studying racial differences to give clues to what happened during early human evolutionary history, this might be a reasonable line to take. The other alternative is to emphasize the benefits. Here, for example, one might stress the potential usefulness of such research in improving the status of the disadvantaged. If you are (say) trying to enhance the effectiveness of school instruction for minorities, knowledge about different patterns of intellectual skills in different racial/ethnic groups might be quite important. But regardless of whether the focus is on costs or on benefits, one point should not be compromised. If the question is worth asking at all, the more accurate and unbiased the answer the better. Society can decide to take any course of action on a given issue (including no action). Whatever that decision may be, it ought, in the long run, to have better prospects of success if the facts on which it is based are correct than if they are not.

So, we decide that the study is worth doing, and we persuade people (our colleagues, our subjects, granting agencies) that it is, and we do it. Now we wish to present our interesting discoveries to the world. What principles can be followed in presenting results on race differences to avoid adverse impact? Let me suggest three:

1. Say clearly what your results mean and what they do *not* mean.
2. Put matters in a quantitative perspective.
3. Be tactful.

1. Say Clearly What Your Results Mean and What They Do Not Mean. The first part of this principle seems natural to scientific writers. The second part does not. Let us suppose, for example, that you are interested in the relationship of race, head size, and intelligence. Let us further suppose that you find that head size has a correlation of about .20 with intelligence, and that head sizes of blacks are on the average around 6% smaller than those of whites. Finally, let us

suppose that these results are based on large, random samples of both races (you see by this that my example is a fictitious one, although the numbers are taken, roughly, from Rushton, 1990). This obtained result means, as you surely would not fail to point out in your article, that there are some systematic—possibly causal—relationships here that may be of scientific interest. It does not mean that you should hire your next faculty colleague by measuring his (or her) head size. It *surely* does not mean that you should hire your next faculty colleague by looking at the color of his (or her) skin. With race a weak predictor of head size and head size a weak predictor of intelligence, this behavior would be ludicrous in the extreme, if what you want to select for is intelligence. Yet this conclusion—that race will predict intelligence with reasonable effectiveness based on its association with head size—is exactly the sort of conclusion that unsophisticated people will draw from this result if you do not explicitly tell them not to. Psychologists who are used to working on typical topics that psychologists work on aren't particularly attuned to this point, because few but their fellow specialists much care what their results *do* mean, and such experts are well aware of the limitations in the conclusions that can properly be drawn from them. With race differences, it's different. Lots of people care passionately, and most of them are not experts in interpreting research, even though many may, in a general sense, pride themselves on being informed and literate.

2. Put Matters in a Quantitative Perspective. For a long time psychologists and social scientists in general have been telling each other that they should stop placing so much emphasis on statistical significance, and put more stress on effect sizes, variance accounted for, and the like. If you are told that 2% of the variance of some behavior is accounted for by race, you are less likely to go out and do something silly than if you are told that the racial difference is significant at well beyond the .0001 level. The latter fact about the difference is important to a scientist, because it assures him or her that there is something there to be followed up and understood. The former fact provides a much more relevant perspective for the general public.

3. Be Tactful. This may be the least important of the three principles, and it is not without hazard, for to be too tactful is to be condescending, which is, morally speaking, at least as bad as being rude. And sometimes clarity or emphasis must override tact. Nevertheless, other things equal, there is often a choice between saying something in a way that will increase or that will decrease the probability of the reader feeling aggrieved, and—other things equal—one might as well opt for the decrease.

It is often just a matter of thinking a little about one's choice of metaphors. The late William Shockley once spoke of Nature as having "color-coded groups of individuals so that statistically reliable predictions of their adaptability to intellectually rewarding and effective lives can easily be made and profitably be

used by the pragmatic man in the street” (Shockley, 1972, p. 307). This was an unfortunate choice of metaphor, from at least two standpoints. First, it is misleading in a very fundamental way. The point of color coding electrical or electronic components is to let the user know what the internal characteristics of the device are from the external color code. The scheme works because the user can trust manufacturers to supply components bearing a given color code that are uniform in the coded-for property, and distinct from components of other colors. If electrical and electronics manufacturers did as badly as Nature apparently has—so that components bearing any color code varied widely among themselves, and overlapped extensively with components of other color codes—users would abandon the color coding as worthless, and resort to direct tests on the components themselves to find one that in fact possesses the properties desired.

A second objection to the metaphor is that it is value-laden, and the values are not very sympathetic ones. Why should ordinary people, of any color, be equated to simple electrical or electronic components whose only role is as interchangeable parts in more complex systems, and why should Nature be arranging things for the benefit of personnel managers anyway? I venture to say that if Professor Shockley—or you or I—had written down the quoted sentence and then stopped to think whether it might give a misleading impression or unintended offense, you or I—and perhaps even Professor Shockley—would have wound up saying it differently.

Well, there you have at least a minimum explication of the Yes and the *if* of my answer to the question with which these comments began. I could—though I won’t—go into detail about various possible avenues of approach to the study of racial differences in intelligence. Much more was said on this topic in Loehlin et al. (1975), and many of the avenues discussed there are still pretty much unexplored. The study of race differences in intelligence, especially if done from a biological perspective, requires some courage today, maybe even more than it would have 17 years ago. But the issues—many of them—remain important. And the questions, at least some of them, should be answerable. So they ought to be asked.

REFERENCES

- Loehlin, J.C., Lindzey, G., & Spuhler, J.N. (1975). *Race differences in intelligence*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Rushton, J.P. (1990). Race, brain size, and intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 11, 785–794.
- Shockley, W. (1972). Dysgenics, geneticity, raceology. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 53, 297–307.