

No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning

Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom

These are reading notes from this 2003 book. The Thernstroms more well known book is America in Black and White. The Thernstroms dismantle excuses for the racial performance gap, leaving nothing standing except the hypothesis of unequal native ability.

1. Measures of performance
 - 1.1. 4 grade difference. 8th grade vs. 12th grade level upon graduation.
 - 1.2. "In math, only 0.2 percent of blacks score at the Advanced level, the very top of the scale. The figure for whites is 11 times higher, and for Asians 37 time higher."
 - 1.2.1. That is to say that the top 2% of whites, roughly, score at the Advanced level. That would be an IQ of about 136 if these numbers were to map directly to the Bell Curve distribution of IQs. If the psychometrics people are right and the median IQ of the black population is around 85 and that of Asian Americans around 105, there would be approximately the given distributions of blacks and Asians at the Advanced level. Aside from the topic being taboo it would seem to be a hypothesis worth investigating. But the Thernstroms are unfortunately not in a position to do so. Abigail is a member of the Massachusetts State Board of Education and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. She obviously cannot be candid. Nor, in fact, can any educator who observes these same phenomena.
2. Thinking the unthinkable, what if the races are differently able? Those are only averages, and we are a society of individuals. "Daniel Patrick Moynihan raised the question of black family culture in a report that causes such a storm that scholars shied away from the topic for decades thereafter." Same thing with The Bell Curve. Thernstroms welcome revival of that investigation.

We are looking at two curves that illustrate different phenomena. One is the distribution of intelligence within a society, and the second is realization of individual potential. We have long known that there are a good many "underachievers" in school. That term was originally taken to mean kids that did not live up to their own potential as measured by intelligence tests or estimated by their parents and teachers. The Thernstroms repeat the common observation that students' time is poorly used, both in school and outside.

- 3.
4. The cure: better schools
 - 4.1. Exceptional teachers make the difference
 - 4.2. Unions, standardized curriculum and bureaucracy hold teachers back
 - 4.3. Local decision making - all excellent schools are charter schools
5. Theories about inequalities

Thernstroms are derisive about theories that don't hold water, such as

Underspending on poor schools. No -- funding is fairly equal.

Racial isolation. No, normed for SES, performance is the same.

Teacher quality. Yes, but it applies to everybody.

persistent racism, etc. etc.

National Task Force on Minority High Achievement "skirted the question" in its report "Reaching the Top." Starts "very early in life" and involves "cultural attributes of home, school and community" Blames "Culturally shaped skills, habits and styles"

Race and class doesn't cut it. Middle class blacks score below poor whites.

Black rate of college attendance @ 76.5% is identical to whites. Only graduation rates differ.

- 5.1. "No Excuses" addresses some of the excuses that are offered. They are consistently "legacy of slavery" "Jim Crow" "bigger classes" "low funding" "unqualified teachers" "low expectations" "low self esteem". The Thernstroms refute some of them. It is interesting to compare them with excuses offered for the consistent lack of performance,

educational and otherwise, in black Africa. "legacy of colonialism" "slave trade" "market dominance" "African culture". Blame it on white exploitation and racism, per Tom Wicker, Hugh Price, many cited by Thernstroms. among them Johnathan Kozol in "Savage Inequalities" .

6. They gloss over intelligence very breezily. Too hot to handle for now, but building towards it. "That fact can't be wished away" (MCAS test score difference)
7. What works
KIPP schools (Knowledge is Power Program). Differences are 1) charter format, 2) selection by kids and parents. Unchanged are neighborhoods, student potential.
8. Culture
 - 8.1. Culture, language, behavior and intelligence evolved together. Quick to point out cultural advantages of Asians and Jews. Quick -- any studies about adoptive Asians and Jews? Yes, Asians especially, thanks, since Vietnam. And gentiles adopted into Jewish families.
 - 8.2. People tend to pursue what they do well. Asians pursue schoolwork because they do well at it. Conversely, they do not pursue sports or vocal music. It is against type and they tend not to shine in those areas. One can think of many other areas in which certain peoples shine. Southerner whites in writing fiction. Jews in finance, law and medicine. Germans in engineering. Russians in chess.
 - 8.3. Asian is a sweeping term. Chinese, Korean and Japanese, then Thai, Filipino, etc. Studies show differences in intelligence, and we observe different levels of economic performance, also that the overseas Chinese dominate in the southern economies.
9. Most of what the Thernstroms report has been known since before Rip Van Winkle's nap. Nothing new.
10. Sweeping in what it covers, but also what it ignores.
 - 10.1. - There are no instances in which minority achievement equals white and Asian. Considering the vastness of America that is quite an indictment.
 - 10.2. - There is no mention of other countries' experience. Public education is a bureaucracy in every country. Many have extensive systems of private education as well (Costa Rica, England). How do they work?
 - 10.3. - There is no account of racial minorities' educational achievements in their native lands. In particular, the educational achievement of African Americans appears to be higher than that of persons of African descent in any other country with the possible exception of Canada. Has this phenomenon been studied?
11. The Thernstroms roll two issues into one. First, the issue of differential achievement by race, and second, general abysmal performance of public schools. Their treatment however makes them easily separable.
12. At the end of the day the Thernstroms offer no good reason for the consistent and substantial differences in performance between the races. The record keeping demanded by the NCLB act will standardize the way in which performance is measured and make the differences in performance among the races more visible than before. Nothing in this book offers much optimism that they will diminish. The question is, what happens them?
13. Thinking the unthinkable, what happens when and if we recognize the consensus of almost all researchers into the field, that race, behavior, culture and intelligence are interwoven and that there are meaningful differences among the races? Does that mean cutting black children adrift, abandoning them as uneducable? No. History does not support that conclusion. Exceptional blacks have been nurtured by society, especially whites, throughout the history of the nation. Benjamin Bannicker, Frederick Douglass, Leontyne Price, Muhammad Ali, Paul Robeson, George

Washington Carver. They will continue to be. Teachers are generally idealists, at least before they become numbed by the system. They want their students to succeed whatever their color.

14. Society needs people at all levels of skill. We are not imperfect as a nation because so many of our doctors and lawyers are Jewish. Though it is incidental among his many atrocities, Hitler decimated the German medical and educational communities. The best and brightest fled to America and many of those who were merely competent died in concentration camps. It is not a sin that so many of our biochemists are Chinese and our software engineers are Indian. They get the job done. It is not a sign of failure that all peoples do not rise to uniform levels of performance. It would be a historical first were that to happen. The important thing is for all people to have an equal opportunity to realize their potential. More than that, they should have a high opportunity to realize their potential. That is what is missing.
15. Suspect the Thernstroms are constrained by the need to be published. They strongly attack the weaker propositions but barely take a swing at IQ. They are positioned to express shock and dismay when someone again makes the argument that it is really IQ.
16. Massive and expensive failures with strong political constituencies. Flawed because of a fundamental misconception about human nature or the laws of nature.
 - 16.1. Total shams
 - 16.1.1. - Synfuels (shale oil)
 - 16.1.2. - The War on Drugs
 - 16.1.3. - Prohibition
 - 16.2. Dubious propositions
 - 16.2.1. - SDI (the bluff that worked)
 - 16.2.2. - The War on Poverty
 - 16.2.3. - Ethanol programs (7 for 6)
 - 16.3. Truths that took a long time to come out
 - 16.3.1. Homosexuality is inborn
 - 16.3.2. Drug addiction is more than a matter of will
 - 16.3.3. Tobacco is bad for you
17. What's missing: Staples of psychometric studies.
 - 17.1. Twin studies
 - 17.2. Adoption studies
 - 17.3. Controls
 - 17.4. IQ testing vs. performance testing.
 - 17.5. "Culturally shaped skills, habits and styles"

Thernstroms do not blame white racism. That is an improvement. Also don't acknowledge white help. All the idealists over the years.

Ralph Ellison. Help from local library. "Industry" that "can be counted on to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity."

18. "Raw intelligence, we will argue, is not the story." They don't argue it.
 - 18.1. They cite SAT tests, but do not mention that the key word is "aptitude" and that SATs correlate highly with IQ. They give a lot of ink to Head Start, and how the measured benefits disappear after a short time. This is of course what the psychometrics folks find. Unless it is terrible, environment has almost nothing to do with adult IQ. The argument now being made by Turkheimer et al is that IQ is predictive of performance except in the worst of circumstances. "Genes' sway over IQ may vary with class." is Washington Post's headline.

- 18.2. "Education writer Gerald Bracey tells of a principal from Brooklyn who 'once joked that when he was a kid, all of the students knew that Jewish kids had a 'smart gene.' Now, he said, the students in this same Brooklyn neighborhood know with equal certainty that the smart gene resides in Asian brains.'" No follow up to this observation. Suppose it is true?
- 18.3. The authors say "The assumption that differences in IQ are primarily genetic rather than environmental is one we reject, and the scanty evidence available does not sustain the argument that Asian students are born with a "smart gene." The footnote, interestingly, is to Murray and Herrnstein's "Bell Curve" which argues precisely the opposite. "unconvincingly to us" say the authors.
- 18.4. Asians "do not think in terms of innate ability" or luck or teacher biases, but in terms of hard work. So what? This is a no-brainer. The Thernstroms cite evidence elsewhere that black students are more likely than white to believe that teachers treat them fairly, that is, that their grades reflect their effort.