

## Review and Criticism

# Reading Racism: A Reflection on the Politics of the Production of Knowledge

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Reading racism in American culture presents significant challenges for rhetorical critics. Ever since Kenneth Burke observed that communities constitute themselves using vocabularies of difference, exclusion, and hierarchy, the interactions between symbolic enactments (texts) and the motives that shape identity have evolved into focal points for critical investigation. Given these insights, the construction of racial categories demands special attention. The study of ethnic identity is particularly complicated because it demands continual self-reflection—a process involving the careful interrogation of the methods or perspectives used to read race in contemporary scholarship.

In a recent article (Grey, 1999) examining the role that certain statistical methodologies play in the representation of modern ethnicity, I examine this issue using the highly charged debate sparked by the publication of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*. This article was written to heighten awareness of the manner in which certain statistical methods

designed to objectify human populations serve political as well as epistemic goals.

A response surfaced earlier this year in an essay by E. Michele Ramsey, Paul J. Achter, and Celeste M. Condit (2001) that reexamined *The Bell Curve* and its attendant controversy. In this essay, my work is portrayed as vague, contradictory, and embracing a form of inquiry that seeks "dispersion rather than engagement on the classical enlightenment pattern of scholarship" (Ramsey, et al., 19). This strident mischaracterization of my work necessitates substantial correction. More importantly, examining key tensions between these conflicting gestalts provides an opportunity to reflect further on the way that certain methods of inquiry participate in the formation of identity and shape perceptions of the polity.

Texts that promote essentialist views of race, particularly those that posit African-American inferiority, are like recurrent nightmares. Despite the best efforts of opponents who present well reasoned attacks against these works, controversies continue to erupt. Recently I suggested that even though "critics condemn the bad science, overt racism, and partisan politics generated by Herrnstein and Murray, the underlying methodology that consolidates

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their agenda still remains in place, implicating a much broader, more deeply imbedded discourse." Perhaps "certain [emphasis added] assumptions which underlie statistical practice may promote moral imperatives that fuel these controversies" (Grey 305). Statistical methods that involve calculations of normalcy and standard deviation, when applied to human populations, evoke historically imbedded modes for reading race that reinforce social hierarchy (Grey 1999). This essay does not argue that social science is inherently racist or that it created racism, as my detractors suggest (Ramsey et al. 3). For example, the now famous studies conducted by Kenneth Clark using brown and white dolls to measure African-American children's negative self-identification were used in *Brown vs. The Board of Education* (Kluger 1975). Rather than employ simple cause-and-effect reasoning, more nuanced understandings of the relationship between academic methodologies and their role in creating political consensus should be sought (Rorty 1989). My goal was to illustrate the preservation of certain ethical imperatives within specific social scientific practices, contextualized in an identifiable historical milieu.

The purpose of Ramsey et al.'s work is to use an audience response paradigm to correct the misconceptions of "progressive" critics (5). To accomplish this they blend quantitative and qualitative techniques to determine whether *The Bell Curve* and reviews critical of the book "circulate and hence support racist beliefs" (4). The researchers arrive at their findings by asking undergraduate students to take a racist attitude test, to read a single page that contains short passages from *The Bell Curve* and reviews critical of the book, to identify which were more persuasive, and finally to respond to open-ended questions about the relationship between race and crime (5-7). After categorizing student responses to the passages, the authors conclude that the traditional arguments between genetics (Herrnstein and Murray) and environment (critical reviewers) represent a "failed stasis" (16). Racist respon-

dents are able to appropriate environmental accounts by holding African-Americans responsible for their degraded neighborhoods and economic circumstances, and non-racists reject the link between genetic arguments and those of racial inferiority (9). Instead, the authors use the written responses to argue that most individuals who link African-Americans with crime use the language of poor individual choice to justify this connection rather than genetics or environment (15). Their essay provides another case study of the social scientific investigation of race that reveals the way that political agendas often go undetected when the components of a discursive enactment such as text and audience are operationalized for empirical investigation.

Given the references to the Human Genome Project in Ramsey et al.'s first paragraph, this essay appears to be an extension of Condit's recent exploration of the genetics debate in contemporary culture (Condit 1999). In this work the notion of the genetic "blueprint" metaphor is posited as a vocabulary that might reduce public concerns about genetic engineering because it appeals to ideologies of individualism (217). Ramsey et al. use their hypothesis that both *The Bell Curve* and reviews attacking this text would be expected to promote racism given their "circulation" hypothesis (4) to conclude that the current environment/genetics discussions within the academy are irrelevant. While Herrnstein and Murray's book seems like a logical choice, the idea that reviews critical of their work circulate racist beliefs under the cover of disapproval is a curious one. This seems analogous to arguing that the Shoah project, a series of films documenting the Holocaust using survivor interviews, propagates Nazi ideas by continuing their circulation within the cultural economy. The authors' inevitable "surprise" that anti-racist book reviews do not promote racism seems oddly naive (17). These findings are subsequently used to suggest that arguments supporting the genetic inferiority of African-Americans do not substantially impact racist attitudes (9-14). Thus the piece

seems to create a straw hypothesis that is easy to disprove. Much like the scientific impulse to remove methodology from its cultural and historical context, the authors seek to disentangle the discourse of modern genetics research from the taint of eugenics.

Reducing discursive enactments to research variables always runs the risk of oversimplifying communicative practice (Phillips 1981). This problem seems to be particularly acute in Ramsey et al.'s audience survey. While the authors acknowledge in passing the complexity of arguments about race found in *The Bell Curve* (2), the social function of the text is misrepresented in their study when the authors characterize the Herrnstein and Murray quotes as dealing exclusively with genetics and the reviewer quotes as dealing exclusively with environment (the specific excerpts used in the study are omitted) (7). Herrnstein and Murray explicitly note that cognitive differences cannot be definitively linked to genetic heredity (315). The genetic argument in *The Bell Curve* is presented as a tease, with the authors using the majority of their vast page space to explicate the intellectual, environmental, economic, and moral differences that divide certain groups. Characterizing the critical reviews as exclusively environmental in their scope is also misleading. Along with the eugenics critique, the bell curve debate has revolved around the use of controversial arguments to gain publicity, incorrect methodology, using data from prejudiced sources, biased interpretation of data, and blending politics with science (Grey 305). In the Ramsey et al. study these texts have been recast in a manner that fits the political goals of the researchers rather than reflecting the production and reception of the public debate.

Often audience response studies are wrongly viewed as a corrective to cultural criticism (Kellner 1995), privileging the manageable nature of controllable, instrumental frameworks over fluid historical and aesthetic approaches. In this case, the authors' inaccurate portrayal of the bell curve debate calls into question their quali-

tative data where respondents noted that crime is a result of individual choice rather than genetics or environment. Herrnstein and Murray clearly use an extensive vocabulary of individual choice in their discussions of civility (527–52). They argue that those with high cognitive capacity naturally “rise to the top” in a pure meritocratic system unfettered by liberal social engineering (513). The vocabulary of individualism, that African-Americans tend to make poor moral choices as compared to whites, is difficult to critique because it seamlessly integrates with the American belief in just social reward—thus allowing respondents to represent themselves as non-racist while embracing beliefs that preserve ethnic hierarchy. Using the language of social physics, Herrnstein and Murray are able to blend biology, culture and individual ethics to create a deterministic epistemology (Grey 315). Ramsey et al. are not illustrating a “failed stasis,” but rather have found further evidence for a deeply interpenetrated vocabulary of science, politics and ethics that textual readings have already identified (Grey 1999). By claiming that the coders of these responses achieved “intersubjective agreement” while categorizing them, the authors attempt to dehistoricize these texts (8). They have not discovered a new pattern of audience response ignored by progressive academics, but instead have confirmed the ideological use of individual merit to justify racial division.

Ramsey et al. argue that they employ a “post-positivist” paradigm that blends the precision of scientific analysis with the sensitivity of interpretation (6). They make this claim despite the fact that the essay follows the methodological style of triangulation studies, augmented with traditional demographic information, popular in fields such as sociology and psychology for decades. The absence of detailed statistical explanation makes evaluating certain aspects of their method difficult, but clearly the lack of experimental control would draw criticism from readers trained in media effects research. Indeed, the mere presence of qualitative data, while enhancing

the study's interpretive dimension, does not make it inherently critical in nature. The authors do note that the statistical analysis of their data is designed to "make comparisons in a non-normative fashion, in an attempt to break up the normalizing assumptions of some standard statistical methods" (7). This affirms a key argument from my original essay although it is not cited in this context (Grey 307–12). While the desire for the freedom of interpretation is legitimate, the fact that the majority of the methodological components of the Ramsey et al. remain committed to a fully scientific style militates against this goal.

Their eschewal of particular academic communities is instructive. The reduction of rhetoric to audience effect studies and the portrayal of humanistic research as merely "ideological" reveals the authors' epistemology (18). While critiquing my work for violating the principles of enlightenment scholarship, they accuse other academic critics of being too rational (18). This inconsistency illustrates that the authors are willing to acknowledge the linguistic turn only insofar as it serves their own agenda. Rather than quantifying audience effect, rhetorical critics can provide insight by examining texts as symptoms or condensations of existing ideological impulses that drive a culture at a particular time. These observations are not intended to bolster the humanistic "hegemony" that the authors perceive to be repressing their quantitative perspective (Ramsey et al. 6). Yet, their frequent references to "elite" or "progressive" academics more concerned with their own agendas than empirical truth creates an intellectually depleted climate. Media effect studies are often informative, but excluding critical perspectives from the domain of rhetoric by labeling them ideological and suggesting that these scholars misinterpret real audiences is both incorrect and clichéd.

Toward the end of their essay, the authors argue that the critics of racism must recognize the "potential appropriations of the progressive view that are unwanted by the writer" (19). This is a point well taken. A stunning example of this is the recent

anthropological controversy where evidence has emerged that certain researchers studying South American Indians produced data that was not only biased, but was also appropriated by government and industry groups to justify actions that led to the extermination of thousands of indigenous peoples (Tierney 2000). Here the authors might heed their own warning. Rather than recognizing the interpenetration of academic vocabularies and ideologies of merit, this study could be perceived as one engineered to illustrate the insignificance of the environment/genetic debate. Would the authors intend for their work to be used by racist advocates to demonstrate how disengaged "elite" scholars are from the discourse of ethnicity, hence rendering their critical insight meaningless? Would they intend for this study to fuel genetic determinism by adorning it in a more palatable or appealing vocabulary? Probably not, yet one of the reasons that social science can be so attractive to policy makers is that it presents arguments as facts.

Perhaps the authors' most intriguing criticism of my work is its "pointillist" nature. Pioneered by Post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat, this artistic technique employed small, discrete points of pure color to create vibrant scenery. His goal was twofold—to release color from the tyranny of line and subject and to develop a more scientific method for artistic creation (Shlain 1991). While it is unclear to me precisely what meaning my critics intend by the use of this term, the idea can be appropriated as a strikingly apt metaphor for our field. If one thinks about the individual points of color as discursive enactments, the investigator attempts to craft meaning by imbedding these practices in various contexts using an epistemic process. These portraits of symbolic interaction have a basis in knowledge production, even if that basis is inherently flawed or itself subject to reinterpretation. Clearly the tension between rhetoric and social science has long been a subject of discussion, with various scholars arguing for mutual coexistence (Miller 1975; Cushman 1990), pointing to the ubiquity of rhetoric (Prelli 1990), suggesting

mutual correction (Condit 1990), suggesting greater reflexivity (Daniels and Frandsen 1981), and demarcating the humanistic domain (Darsey 1994). I suggest that the artistic and critical nature of rhetoric need not be placed in opposition to scientific objectivity, but can provide a lens through which to understand the political and social consequences that epistemic assumptions sometimes provoke. Those who investigate discursive activity are in a special

position not only to study the social tapestry, but to foreground its creation. Methodological diversity broadens our understanding as long as we remain aware that these modes of inquiry are grounded in symbolic practices. Much as Seurat hoped to provide a more luminescent rendering of a day in the park, communication scholars can enhance our understanding of the manner in which individual expressions shape human consciousness—including their own.

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