

Intelligence and Scientific Racism

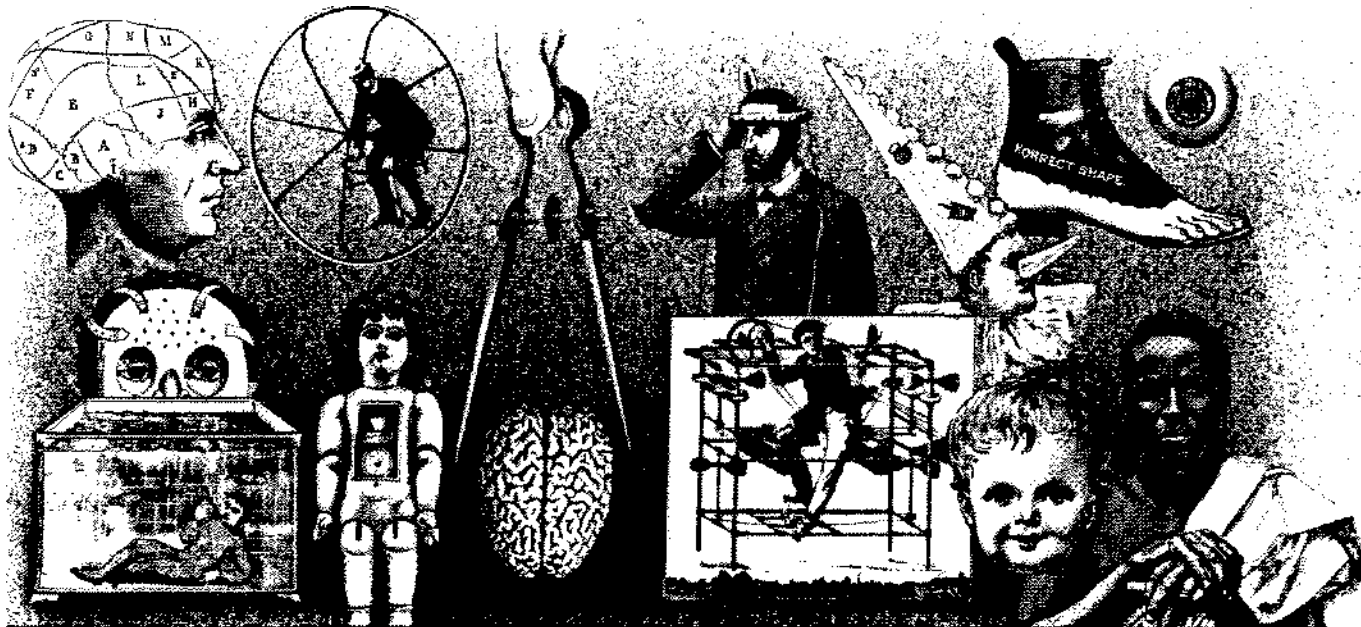
by Veronica Gartner

For years, scientific racists have been trying to justify social, economic, and educational discrimination against minority groups by claiming genetic differences in intelligence exist. Because of genetically determined lower intelligence quotients, scientific racists claim that these groups are destined to remain economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged. Furthermore, the racists see these quotients as universally and irreversibly set; change can only occur through genetic mutation within the group. According to this reasoning, any attempt at changing or improving the circumstances of these minority groups is destined to fail. The people would be incapable of functioning effectively at a higher level, and would eventually regress back to their previous state. One of the most recent scientific racism doctrines is Jensenism, named after its leading proponent, educational psychologist

Arthur Jensen. The Jensenist doctrine claims intelligence is mainly determined by genes, and attempts to offer what it calls "proof to support this claim. Jensenists point out the fact that on the average, a black American will perform less well on an intelligence test than white Americans will. They go on to say blacks are incapable of performing as well because their intellectual capacity is genetically inferior. So programs designed to improve the educational stimulation within a black child's environment would, to this way of thinking, be a waste of time and money. And, yet, these programs have shown positive results. Scientific racists have ignored many factors which can account for differences in intelligence quotients.

Scientific racist doctrines disregard the tremendous flexibility of the human race. The human race has long been adapting and readapting to constantly changing environ-

ments. Through learning, humans are able to change behaviour quicker and more effectively than any other animal species. It has been shown that many differences found between human groups can frequently be attributed to the different environments they are adapting to. Because of these differences, experiences are not the same for all human groups. Humans learn through their experiences; if these differ, then scores on standardized intelligence tests can be expected to differ in direct proportion to the variety and richness of these experiences. For example, numerous studies have proven beyond a reasonable doubt that a direct relationship exists between the amount of educational stimulation a child receives within his environment and his scores on intelligence tests. Positive educational stimulation will have a positive effect on test scores. Anthropologist Conrad Kottak¹



IHuirstkm; Bob Robertson

points out that black Americans, on the average, score fifteen points lower than white Americans on intelligence scores. He also points out, however, that considerable differences exist in the black's and white's environments, with the white Americans receiving the best of the unequal opportunities available,

Environmental conditions, such as social, economic, educational, and even nutritional factors, differ between human groups. And in the stratified societies of America, one group occupies the superordinate position, while another group occupies the subordinate position. Environmental limitations are forced on the subordinate group to keep them in their subordinate positions. Scientific racist doctrines are used to justify these class differences. Subordinate groups are said to occupy their positions because of their genetic inability to function at a higher level. This justification is rationalization on the part of people who profess it. For one thing, because of their environmental limitations, subordinate groups do not have the same opportunities for educational stimulation that the superordinate group has. They are not able to attend schools designed to meet their specific needs; stimulating and informative outings are often a luxury they cannot afford. Their nutrition, both pre and post-natally, if inadequate, can adversely affect intelligence levels by slowing development. Lack of contact with educated adults can negatively affect intellectual development. Adults who have been denied the opportunity to learn do not have their own education to pass on to their young. So, scientific racist doctrines claiming class differences are genetically caused through differences in intellectual ability *are* inaccurate. Instead, it is more accurate to say these differences show a serious and unjust deficiency in the environ-

ments of subordinate groups.

As well as these environmental disadvantages, many ethnic groups face another major disadvantage when they sit down to write an intelligence test. Most standard intelligence tests have been developed by highly educated European or American individuals from middle or upper class environments. The tests naturally reflect their own experiences. To date, no intelligence test can justly claim to be free of class, ethnic, or cultural biases. For example, one test may require familiarity with specific phraseology or grammar. Instead of measuring intelligence, these tests are measuring how a person measures up to the achievement norms and experiences, of a specific ethnic group. This bias in intelligence testing will put many subcultures at a definite disadvantage. It is not surprising to learn that upper and middle class Americans and Europeans score better on these tests than lower class ethnic groups in the same society. They score better because their opportunities and experiences are compatible with those of the people who developed the tests.

Because the above factors vary from class to class, intelligence tests can only measure what has been learned, not potential for learning. Consequently, even when a standard intelligence test is translated into an ethnic group's language, that group still does not score as well. This factor occurs because even though the language has been translated, the concepts remain the same. As well as speaking a different language, the ethnic group has also had different experiences and opportunities. It is difficult to understand how scientific racists can believe that people living in such a different environment are being tested fairly by a test based on completely different traditions, experiences and socialization processes. Even the grammatical and phraseological structure of the

test would still be detrimental to their scores. These same scientific racists would find their own intellectual capacities questioned if the tests were designed by an ethnic group other than their own. The situation would then be reversed.

As well as being devised by upper and middle class Europeans and Americans, intelligence tests are usually administered by this ethnic class. Thus the test instructions will be given in their dialect and their test taking methods will be followed. A person from a different ethnic group may be disadvantaged *if* he cannot clearly understand these instructions or methods. Also, different cultures stress different characteristics as important to learn. The Canadian culture, for example, stresses speed and competitiveness in test taking, as many industrial societies do. Other ethnic groups stress co-operation. So, if a score on a test is based on speed of completion, then the person whose culture does not put such an emphasis on speed is disadvantaged. If competition is a central factor in the structuring of the *test*, then people whose culture stresses co-operation are going to score lower. Intelligence tests which emphasize verbal skills as a positive asset are not an accurate measure of learning ability or innate intelligence, but are measures of what a person has learned of a specific culture's verbal apparatus. All of these class and cultural biases can affect a person's performance. Consequently, the inability of intelligence tests to be unbiased will place some groups at a disadvantage, as even the smallest bias will cause inaccuracies in intelligence assessment.

Finally, the subject of intelligence and scientific racism must be taken seriously. The measuring of intelligence has had a widespread impact in society today. Originally the intelligence test was designed to enable educators to style a particular

child's educational experience according to his own unique problems, needs, and abilities. Today they have a much wider use.

Decisions to give or withhold opportunities are made every day on the basis of a person's intelligence quotient, which is determined by his score on previous intelligence testing. This is why cultural bias in intelligence tests is a major problem. In the past, people have been subjected to degradation because of their supposed genetic inferiority. Negroes in the United States were forced into slavery; native people in

Canada were treated like children and encouraged to adopt the "superior white ways". In Germany, the greatest crime of all time was committed against the Jewish people, because certain powerful people believed them to be genetically inferior. Scientific racism doctrines can be extremely dangerous, especially if they gain even the smallest following. Although the great majority of social scientists today accept an environmental explanation for intelligence test score differences, the few who subscribe to scientific racism doctrines pose a very real threat to

minority groups. Because of their high educational levels, they are held in high esteem by the average person. Their diagnosis of genetically determined intellectual inferiority for minority groups must be refuted at every opportunity. *

For further reading see:
Kottack, Conrad. *Anthropology - An Exploration of Human Diversity*; Chapter 17, Biology, Society and Culture, Random House Inc., 1978.