

Anything But Race: The Social Science Retreat From Racism

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Introduction

African American continue to occupy a disadvantaged position in the U. S. While historically, most social scientists emphasize the role that contemporary and historic racism has played in creating and perpetuating the disadvantaged position of African Americans, in recent years, theories that identify other explanations have been growing increasingly popular. They have in common the view that the sources of black disadvantage are characteristics of blacks themselves (e. g. biological, cultural, educational) or some other predominantly non-racial situation or condition. This paper critically examines some prominent theories or perspectives that illustrate the retreat from racism, including: social class, cognitive ability, lack of work ethic or morality, human capital deficits, spatial mismatch, and family structure. While these theories are not exhaustive, they are all “popular” explanations for black disadvantage. Despite their popularity they are all only weakly or incompletely supported by empirical research. The scientific research on racial inequality overwhelmingly supports the idea that racism is the primary cause of black disadvantage. The popularity of these theories can be interpreted as ideological defenses of “white privilege.”

One of the most persistent and salient characteristics of the United States is the disadvantaged position of African Americans. Despite more than 30 years of “racial progress,” recent studies report that irrespective of the measure or standard of socioeconomic well-being, blacks have yet to achieve parity with whites (e. g. Jaynes and Williams, 1989). Racism is the most commonly used explanation for this situation. Following Wellman (1993:55), racism is understood here as . . . a structural relationship based on the subordination of one racial group by another. Given this perspective, the determining feature of race relations is not prejudice toward blacks, but rather the superior position of whites and the institutions—ideological as well as structural - which maintain it. Thus, racism involves the ideas (i. e. legitimations) and practices (i. e. discrimination) that create and maintain a system of white racial privilege which is responsible for both past and present forms of racial inequality.

Historically, most social scientists have emphasized the role that contemporary and historic racism has played in creating and perpetuating the disadvantaged position of African Americans. Since the legislative and judicial gain of the Civil Rights movement, theories identifying other explanations have been growing increasingly popular. They have in common the view that the sources of black disadvantage are characteristics of blacks themselves (e. g. biological, cultural, educational) or some other non-racial situation or condition (e. g. social class, social dislocations). What these new

explanations have in common is that they de-emphasize contemporary racism. These will be collectively referred to as “anything but race” perspectives.

What follows are some examples of prominent theories/perspectives that illustrate this retreat from racism. These include: social class, cognitive ability; lack of work ethic/morality; human capital; spatial mismatch; and family structure. While these theories are not exhaustive, they are all “popular” explanations for black disadvantage which emphasize non-racial sources of inequality

“It’s Not Racism But . . . “Social Class

William Julius Wilson’s book, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978, 1980 2nd. ed.), generated a tremendous amount of controversy and interest both in the media and in the academy. After describing two distinct racist regimes in earlier U. S. history, Wilson (1980) argued that class had more recently superseded race as the most important factor explaining the situation of blacks in America. He contended that in the modern industrial period, economic and political changes—especially civil rights legislation and affirmative action—created a large black middle class which experiences essentially the same labor force processes as whites with little or no residual effect of contemporary racism. This middle class grew primarily through the creation of job opportunities and the removal of racial barriers in education and in government and corporate employment. At the same time, non-racial economic factors including the skill segmentation of labor markets, the movement of industries out of central cities, and the decline in the production of goods relative to the production of services have created a social and economic situation that perpetuates black poverty. These economic factors, according to Wilson (1980), have created a large and growing black underclass that lacks the cultural, social, and economic resources to take advantage of the new opportunities (Wilson, 1987). Although Wilson (1980, 1987) believes that racism is still an important factor in American life, he argues that current discrimination is not the primary cause of the problem of the black underclass. Past discrimination created the black underclass which continues today primarily because of economic and other non-racial factors. Thus, he argues that race is declining in significance relative to class as the most important determinant of well-being for blacks.

Thus, black are over-represented in the lower-class because of past discrimination and kept there because of non-racial economic factors. On the other hand, a growing number of middle-class blacks, who are able to take advantage of the recently developed opportunities, have life chances equivalent or superior to similar whites. White racism has little to do with this current situation. Any remaining racial gap Wilson (1980, 1987) interpreted as part of the “legacy of past discrimination”—the impact of historical discrimination on the socioeconomic status of older African Americans.

Despite the popularity of the “declining significance of race” idea, there are now an enormous number of empirical studies that provide strong contrary evidence. These studies reveal that race remains a significant determinant of the quality of life of African Americans regardless of social class. After statistically controlling for social class, race

has been identified as a significant determinant of numerous factors which impact quality of life including: income (e. g. Thomas 1993), wealth (e. g. Oliver and Shapiro 1995), segregation (e. g. Massey and Denton 1993), promotions (e. g. Johnson and Herring 1989), home ownership (e. g. Jackman and Jackman 1980), housing values (e. g. Horton and Thomas 1998), and even health and mortality (e. g. Davis 1995).

Wilson (1980, 1987) interpreted the current large racial gap in income as a product of the “legacy of past discrimination” and the narrow gap between young workers as evidence of “the declining significance of race.” However, several studies have provided strong evidence that Wilson’s interpretation was wrong (e. g. Willie 1979; Cotton 1990; Thomas 1993; Thomas and Horton 1992; Thomas et al. 1995). They conclude that the large racial gap between older workers and the narrow racial gap between younger workers, rather than indicating declining discrimination, is evidence of the cumulative impact of discrimination. Younger blacks have always looked better off than older blacks when compared with similar whites because the negative impact of discrimination is cumulative over the life course. Most new workers start their career with low wages. Racial discrimination across the career influences access to training and promotions. Thus, the racial gap in earnings always increases with age, regardless of time period and cohort.

The “declining significance of race” idea was and is popular because it de-emphasized white racism and is wanting for that same reason. Wilson (1980: 151) defined racial oppression narrowly and erroneously as “the explicit and overt effort to keep blacks subjugated.” This means that there must be a deliberate and conscious effort to subjugate blacks in order for there to be racism. While there is a growing consensus among scholars concerning the importance of institutionalized racism which not directly linked to bigoted white individuals (see for example Feagin and Feagin 1978; Knowles and Prewitt 1998; Smith 1995), Wilson’s (1980) definition excludes its possibility. But Shulman (1981:23) argues:

Even if white people bear no ill will toward blacks, they are generally unwilling to act against a system which distributes rewards disproportionately to themselves. Whites as a group merely have to acquiesce in a racist system for racism to be perpetuated. The failure to oppose racism is as reasonable a criterion as conscious discrimination in categorizing practices as racist.

Cognitive Ability

One of the oldest explanations of racial inequality is generally referred to as “scientific racism.” This perspective contends that racial inequality is a by-product of inborn genetic differences between the races. Specifically, genetically based racial differences in intelligence or cognitive ability produce racial inequality (e. g. Jensen 1981; Herrnstein and Murray 1994). Since blacks are inferior to whites in terms of intelligence, they are worse off in terms of socioeconomic status. Although largely rejected by the scientific community, such views continue to be promoted by a significant number of social scientists (Hirsch 1981). Recently, a book by Herrnstein and Murray

(1994) entitled “The Bell Curve” received national attention and significant acclaim because it used “scientific data” to “prove” blacks are inferior to whites (and Asians). They used IQ-like test scores as evidence of blacks’ native deficit in cognitive ability, which they then linked to differences in achieved socioeconomic status as well as such things as crime, out of wedlock births, welfare dependency etc.

In sum, scientific racism has a long history both in and out of the academy that continues today. As Smith (1995:26-27) states:

There is thus in respectable intellectual and policy making circles today the view that the terrible conditions of a large segment of the African-American community is a function not of centuries of racial subordination and exploitation but rather of their nature, their very being; doomed to be forever at the bottom of the class structure.

Although these views are refuted, almost as soon as they are presented (e. g. Fishers et al. 1996), their resiliency is a testament to the willingness of a significant number of social scientists and other intellectuals to believe them or, at least, see them as not totally unreasonable.

A recent variant of this argument, although not as insidious as scientific racism, also contends racial earnings inequality is reflective of differences in cognitive ability but sees the difference in cognitive ability as a product of differences in the quality of schools blacks and whites attend. Farkas (1994), for example, points toward the failure of schools to educate poor children, especially racial and ethnic minorities. This failure reflects the cultural capital assumptions of schools which does not match the familial resources poor African American and Hispanic children bring with them to schools. The result is that minority children develop lower levels of cognitive skill and educational attainment than white children at precisely the same historical moment when the labor market increasingly values these skills (Farkas 1996; Neal and Johnson 1996). It is the schools that are producing race and ethnic inequality as a consequence of how they teach and the cultural capital they reward.

To its credit, this perspective acknowledges the impact that racism has on the quality of education that black and white children receive. It acknowledged the largely non-conscious institutional racism in the schools. However, it concludes that the labor market functions in a race neutral way—rewarding blacks and whites equally according to their cognitive abilities or “cultural capital”. This view ignores the large body of empirical research that demonstrates that this is not true. These studies demonstrate that because of racism in the labor market, African Americans do not receive financial reward commensurate with their academic and professional skills. Indeed, there is evidence that the more educational and professional skills African Americans receive, the further they fall behind similar whites (e. g. Cotton 1990; Thomas 1992; Thomas and Horton 1992; Thomas, Herring and Horton 1995).

Lack of Work Ethic/Morality

According to this view, government policies such as welfare and affirmative action have created disincentives for work, marriage, and morality (especially sexual). The result is that many of the poor-particularly African Americans would rather receive welfare than work and young women would rather have babies before they get married. Charles Murray's 1984 book, *Losing Ground*, is a good example of this view. According to Murray, government anti-poverty programs-especially Aid to Families with Dependent Children-reduced the desirability of marriage, increase the attractiveness of unwed childbearing, and reduced the attractiveness of low paying jobs for the poor. The result was high male joblessness, female-headed households, and out of wedlock births-particularly for African Americans. The disadvantaged position of African Americans is, therefore, a result of misguided liberal government the create lazy black folk, rather than a result of discrimination.

The popularity of this view is, in part, due to its affinity to the "lazy black" stereotype. Although in this story the laziness is not inborn, it is the result of government induced disincentives to stable work and family formation among the poor. Nevertheless, this view, like the others, has little empirical support. For example, Sanders (1988:151) concludes:

. . . we do find statistically significant effects consistent with the thesis that, over the long run, comparatively generous AFDC transfers encourage acquiescence to a lifestyle of welfare-dependency and poverty. But these relationships are substantively weak and it is widely acknowledged that public transfers reduce poverty over the immediate short run. Thus the critical issue is the tradeoff between the short run diminution and long run incremental tendencies AFDC transfers exert on poverty.

Sanders (1988) argues against any reduction in AFDC payments because the weak tendency toward welfare dependency is more than offset by the reduction in poverty these transfers provide. Moreover, economic growth, not welfare dependency, was found to be the strongest predictor of poverty rates.

Cororan and Adams (1997: 506) found that "Living in a state with high welfare benefits was associated with greater income sufficiency and was significantly associated with less poverty for both black and white women, and state welfare benefits were always insignificant for white and black men." Economic resources, not welfare reciprocity were the most important factors affecting the chances of being poor (see also Sanders 1988). Whatever the impact welfare has on the black community, it is shaped by racism, specifically in the form of segregation. Massey and Denton (1993) convincingly argue that welfare payments were only harmful to the socioeconomic well-being of segregated groups. They (1993: 9) state:

Because of segregation . . . the higher levels of welfare receipt were confined to a small number of isolated, all-black neighborhoods. By promoting the spatial concentration of welfare use, therefore, segregation created a residential environment within which welfare dependency was the norm, leading to the intergenerational transmission and

broader perpetuation of urban poverty. Massey and Denton (1993) document how this segregation is a direct product of past and present racist practices and social policies.

Human Capital

Similar to the cognitive ability explanation of racial (and gender) differences in earnings is the human capital perspective. It is one of the most widely utilized explanations of racial inequality-particularly by economists. According to this view, labor market earnings reflect levels of productivity for individuals at different stages of their lives. Differences in productivity in turn result from deliberate self-investments in human capital such as education and on-the-job training (Becker 1964). Welch (1973), suggested that differences in the quality of education have played a major role in the observed gap between blacks and whites. Thus, because blacks have historically attended lower quality schools, income returns to schooling for blacks have been less than for whites. Recently, however, the black-white earnings gap has begun to close because the returns to education have risen faster for blacks than for whites in recent years as the quality of education for blacks has improved for more recent cohorts. Among those with at least some college, for example, returns to schooling

have begun to be as high for blacks as they are for whites (Welch, 1973; Smith and Welch, 1977). Thus, according to this view, older blacks who received poorer educations received lower returns to their educational investments than their white counterparts while more equally educated young blacks experience similar earnings profiles to their white counterparts (Freeman 1976).

Although the human capital perspective continues to be popular among social scientists, when applied to racial inequality, it has only limited empirical support. There have been several empirical studies which seriously question the idea that education and other forms of human capital acquisition explain racial differences in earnings (e. g. Landry 1987; Work 1984; Cotton 1989; Cotton 1990; Thomas 1992; Thomas and Horton 1992). This body of research focuses on how well middle class blacks are doing when compared to similar whites. These empirical studies generally conclude that race plays a significant and negative role in the labor force experiences of even middle class blacks. Some (e. g. Cotton 1990; Thomas 1992; and Thomas and Horton 1992) have even claimed racial discrimination negatively impacts higher status blacks more than it does lower status blacks. In regard to racial differences in personal income, Thomas (1992:23) concludes: Blacks who were more educated and had attained higher occupational status were worse off than less educated, lower status blacks when compared to similar whites. Therefore, middle-class blacks, in terms of personal income, represent a “truly disadvantaged” group when compared to middle-class whites.

Thus, racism is involved in both the attaining of human capital (Farkas 1996) and how human capital characteristics are rewarded in the labor market. Moreover, racism manifests itself in the career processes and access to training (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). Thus, racial differences in human capital acquisition are, to a significant degree, produced in the labor market through blocked opportunities for promotion, good job

employment and on-the-job skill training across the career. Tomaskovic-Devey (1993b) has shown that it is the access to good jobs that explain most racial wage inequality with human capital differences explaining only 30% of the wage gap between blacks and whites. Tienda and Stier (1996) demonstrate that a key part of the early career process is racial disparities in access to entry level jobs and longer periods of unemployment and job search for young African Americans. This may help explain why the racial disparity in earnings increases over the life course (Thomas et al. 1994).

Spatial Mis-Match

The spatial mismatch hypothesis recognizes that African American, Hispanic Americans, and whites live in different places. Much of the social disorganization and increasing significance of race we have seen in this country over the last forty years reflects the increased American apartheid that has come about because of the concentration of African Americans, and Hispanics to some extent, in declining central cities as whites (and some more prosperous African Americans) left the cities for suburbs and exurbs. In addition, there have been declines in the overall opportunity structure of some older central cities as a reflection of deindustrialization processes (Wilson 1987). This deindustrialization process has led to high levels of unemployment and low wages among those remaining in the central cities. The relative deterioration of black male earnings reflects a decline in manufacturing jobs in the central cities in which African Americans are trapped by residential segregation (Kain 1992, Kasarda 1989).

Certainly the spatial separation of African Americans hurts their life chances. However, as stated above, this separation itself is a result of racist practices (Massey and Denton 1993). Additionally, this separation is not absolute. Most African Americans have access to automobiles and, therefore, could reasonably commute to the suburbs (as many whites commute to the city) and beyond. The problem is access to jobs in the suburbs. Holzer (1996) concludes that both employer location and discriminatory attitudes limit the job prospects of African Americans. He (1996:128) states: "Blacks are roughly twice as likely to apply for jobs on the primary central city as in the suburbs, and black applicants are somewhat less likely to be hired in the suburbs as well, especially in smaller firms and where contact with white customers is involved." Holzer (1996) provides evidence that racial discrimination might be stronger in the suburbs than in the central city.

Cohn and Fossett (1996) provide research that calls into question the basic premise of the spatial mismatch perspective. They found that in both Boston and Houston blacks actually lived closer to jobs than whites. Cohn and Fossett (1996:571) conclude:

In short, our analyses failed to support mismatch theory with any credible evidence that spatial patterning of jobs and population creates an important black disadvantage in access to sites of employment. . . . Contrary to the impression created by the mismatch literature, blacks in both cities had superior rather than inferior spatial access to jobs even when the analysis was restricted to entry-level jobs. Allowing for race differences in access to transport diminished but did not reverse this advantage.

Family Structure

The family structure explanation of black disadvantage was first proposed in the work of Frazier (1939) and gained national attention through Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan's book *Beyond the Melting Pot* in 1963 and the Moynihan Report in 1965. The work of these scholars claimed that slavery had so weakened the structure of the black family that it could not provide the basis for the uplifting of blacks out of the economic hardships they face in racist society. They contend that the deterioration of the black family structure is responsible to a large extent for black economic disadvantage. This deterioration and disorganization are reflected in the prevalence of female-headed households in the black community.

One of the most striking demographic trends in the black community is the increasing number of female headed households with no male present. In 1987, 55.3% of all black families are maintained by the mother compared to 18.4% of white families (U. S. Bureau of the Census 1989:50). The two-parent family is now a minority family structure in the black community.

Contemporary researchers link the changes in the black family structure with the continuing racial disparities in family income. For example, Farley (1984) links the lack of improvement in family income for blacks compared to whites to an increase in the number of black families headed by single females. As he (1984:199) states: "The deterioration in the average economic status of all black families in the 1970's came about mostly because of changes in living arrangements." Similarly, O'Neill (1987:175) states ". . . black family income is lower than white income in part because of differences in family structure . . . Differences in family income between blacks and whites are significantly reduced when families of the same type are compared." Smith and Welch (1986: xxv) take this argument further and state:

Because of the rapidly changing composition of black families, family income has become a very poor indicator of changes in black labor market opportunities. The lack of recent improvement in black family income is a reflection of a growing problem in the black family, not of a decline in black labor market prospects.

Smith and Welch (1986) and Glick (1988) also note that racial progress was most rapid for families with both husbands and wives present. However, Glick (1988:128) observes that the income level of black families remains comparatively low for each family type. Kilson (1981) takes the family structure argument to the extreme, arguing that the black family structure is the basis of class stratification in the black community and is responsible for intergenerational poverty, violent behavior and the lack of achievement of black children. He states (1981:62):

Thus, on the one level class stratification among Afro-Americans is due to the income and employment deficiencies that seem endemic to female-headed black families. These deficiencies, in turn, translate into cross-generational disadvantages for the

disproportionately larger number of children found among black female-headed families. In addition, these families pass on interpersonal pathologies, like hypertensive and violent behavior, which result in low proclivity for coping and achievement.

The family structure explanation, as the previously “it’s not racism but . . .” perspectives, fails because it does not identify the role racism plays in both the creation and the perpetuating of black female-headed households. As Darity, Cotton, and Hill (1993:57) state : “The prevalence of black female-headed families is merely an indicator of an entire constellation of forces that negatively affect black Americans.” The prevalence of black female-headed families is a consequence-not a cause- of black disadvantage. It reflects the labor market disadvantage of blacks-particularly of black males. Hill (1997) links the growth of female-headed households in the 1970’s and 1980’s to the impact of economic recessions and high unemployment. Between 1969 and 1983 black unemployment rose from 6 to 20 percent. Hill (1997:19) states:

The sharp increase in economic instability led directly to family instability. Over that 14-year period, the proportion of black families headed by women increased from 28 to 42 percent. During the years 1970-83, every one percent increase in black unemployment was correlated with a one percent rise in single-parent families.

Similarly, Healey (1997:132) argues that the so-call matriarchal structure of the black family as result not a cause of black poverty and as “a reflection of racial discrimination and the scarcity of jobs for urban black males.”

Thomas and Horton (1992) found that in both 1968 and 1988 a racial gap in family remained even after controls for family structure as well as social class and other demographic variables. They (1992:466) also found that after controls “. . . not only do differences in family structure fail to account for the differences in family income for blacks and whites, but, taken together, the race effect was actually stronger for married couple families than for female headed families.”

Bringing Racism Back

While few of the “anything but race” perspectives have been supported by sustained empirical research, the amount of research that has demonstrated the critical importance of race has been enormous. For example, Massey and Denton (1993) show how racism has created and sustained the “ghetto underclass,” while Oliver and Shapiro (1995) demonstrate how it has produced the tremendous difference in wealth accumulation between blacks and whites. These two factors-residential segregation and differences in available wealth-are crucial to many of the dynamics identified in the anything but race theories, including neighborhood and family disorganization, the availability and quality of jobs, educational achievement, and even discrimination by employers. They are perversely ignored by the anything but race theorists.

There are many other studies that treat the process and consequences of racism much more seriously. Feagin’s (1991) study revealed that even middle class African

Americans cannot escape the impact of racism in their everyday lives. Thomas et al. (1994:625) state: "Labor market dynamics are not guided by pure rationality and perfect competition; rather, a number of concrete processes operate systematically to generate differential remuneration for blacks and whites." Some of these processes include normative beliefs about "black jobs" and "white jobs" (Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1991), employer reliance on "soft skills" rather than tangible ones (Kirschenman, 1992), informal recruitment networks (Braddock and McPartland, 1987), employers' "tastes for discrimination," (Portes and Sassen-Koob, 1987; and Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1991) and exclusionary practices by labor unions and professional associations (Johnson and Oliver, 1992). All of these act to push blacks into lower paying, "racially typed" jobs with fewer benefits, opportunities for upward mobility and access to power even if they have the same credentials as their white counterparts (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993; Shelton, 1985; and Landry, 1987). Thus, smaller proportions of college-educated blacks occupy positions of authority. As Collins (1989) points out, blacks in managerial positions are given fewer opportunities to accrue additional skills and responsibilities to enhance their professional credentials for future rounds of competition. Also, as Johnson and Herring (1989:22) state: "Blacks are significantly less likely ever to be promoted. This [tendency] continues to be exacerbated over time" and over the life cycle.

Racist Social Science?

According to Wellman (1993), racism refers to culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages based on race. "Regardless of its historically specific manifestations, racism today remains essentially what it has always been: a defense of racial privilege" (Wellman 1993:4). If racism is defined in this way rather than the traditional idea which identifies it as based on beliefs about the inherent inferiority or superiority of racial groups, then we are left with a disturbing conclusion. We must conclude that the "anything but race" social science perspectives are plausibly racist because in one way or another they defend or at least ignore, social advantages based on race. They defend the advantaged position of whites by claiming they have "superior" characteristics such as: higher cognitive ability, stronger work ethic, better morals, stronger families, more human capital or skills, etc. Because they see whites as somehow "better" than blacks in some important way, their superordinate position in society is deserved. They ignore race when key racist practices such as segregated neighborhoods, culturally destructive educational practices or employer discrimination are forgotten in the rush to focus on something-anything other than race. If discrimination—the inequitable allocation of resources based on race—is left out of the analysis, there could be no other conclusion: black disadvantage is a result of deficiencies within blacks themselves.

The popularity of the "anything but race" perspectives should not be surprising. Most social scientists are white as are most social commentators and public policy makers. It is easy to see how any theory or concept that removes responsibility for racial inequality from whites and rationalizes their privileged position would become "popular." Social scientists are human and are not immune from the impact of living in a racially stratified society. Nevertheless, social scientists are responsible for seeing beyond their own racial self-interests and lining up their theories with empirical reality: racism exists and is

responsible for our current system of racial inequality. This does not mean that non-racial factors do not play a role. They certainly do. But, as Wellman (1993:11) states:

To say that race matters . . . does not mean that social class is irrelevant, that economic dislocation is unimportant, that culture is an epiphenomenon, or that African Americans have historically and miraculously survived some 400 years of racial oppression without any emotional or psychic scars. Quite obviously class, culture, and economics are important lenses into the black American experience. The point is that race still counts in very important ways for how one is treated in America. And it matters in at least two crucial respects: One, certain features of the African American situation are not attributable to class position or moral character. They are unexplainable without a conception of racism. And two, European Americans benefit from this social arrangement.

The challenge for social scientists is to abandon the search for alternative explanations and involve themselves in the study of how racism is created, sustained and the mechanisms through which it impacts all of our lives. Only then can social scientists hope to be able to provide solutions to one of the most troubling aspects of our society.

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