

Biology Makes Little Distinction Between Black and White

By Mark G. Birchette
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As a student at an integrated high school in the late 1960s, I recall watching with mild fascination the contortions of some of my white classmates as they danced to a series of Motown hits. I guess it really is true, I thought, that white people don't have any rhythm. I was disappointed because I had hoped to prove my more cynical friends incorrect. The conclusion underscored in a trivial but apparently undeniable way the deep-rooted differences between us and them. But the most disturbing aspect of this experience was that I was absolutely wrong and didn't realize it.

I had subscribed to the stereotypes about a segment of the American population in a manner not entirely unlike that of Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder, who was recently shoved under the spotlight for saying blacks were "bred" to be better athletes than whites. Those remarks were at best ill-considered and certainly foolish.

Ironically, disagreements arose within the black community. Some black leaders thought Snyder's comments were blatantly racist; others said he was simply reiterating historical fact: in the antebellum South blacks were viewed as chattel, as animals to be bred for specific physical traits at the master's whim.

As a biological anthropologist, I can ask if some of the most significant issues aren't being overlooked: Do common assumptions about so-called racial characteristics have any basis in fact? Do they derive from biological considerations or is the biology obscured by social context?

The statement "blacks are better athletes than whites" or "whites are intellectually superior to blacks" presumes that the racial categories "white" and "black" are clearly delineated. While few people would have difficulty categorizing most in-

dividuals as blacks, white or neither, the categories would conform to social concepts of race and would for the most part ignore the salient biological aspects.

Race Socially Determined

How is race defined? How many races are there? The experts are unable to reach a consensus. Authorities have proposed as many as 63 and as few as two races. Yet the average American never even pauses to ask the question because the socio-cultural constructs of race are, for most people, exceedingly clear cut.

A person can be socially defined as black, regardless of outward appearance or degree of genetic similarity to other people in the same category. These socially determined racial roles can sometimes fly in the face of the most compelling outward appearances.

A friend who was captain of the swim team at a predominantly black college tells a story about a white team member (a quintessentially Aryan type, with blond hair and blue eyes) who routinely got quizzical looks from competitors from other predominantly black schools. Finally, a swimmer from another school asked point blank, "Hey, is that guy white?" My friend responded, "Him? No, man, he's not white; he's just got blond hair and blue eyes."

Amusing, perhaps, but even more remarkable because the questioner accepted this explanation and conveyed it to his teammates, all of whom subsequently stopped staring and incorporated Young Blue Eyes into the post-meet carousing. Similarly, the tales of people "passing" for white in the segregationist South and their fears of being discovered stemmed from the notion that once they were declared black in a social context, they were discriminated against and ill-treated no matter how translucent their skin or straight their hair.

Social determinants of racial classification are powerful, and yet as a rule do not adhere to hard and fast biological boundaries. The old "scientific" classifications mistakenly assumed that pure racial types occurred in nature. They ignored or denied the dynamic, evolving aspects of populations. There are, of course, certain physical characteristics such as hair form, skin color, eye and nose shape, lip thickness and overall body configuration that correlate with geographic origin and environmental conditions.

Distinctions Blurring

This conforms to the notion of geographical race — a collection of populations that share recognizable traits, produced by natural selection acting over a geographical area. But geographical races have always been extremely variable. Especially during the past few centuries, they have begun to merge. Humans are capable of mating across so-called ethnic or racial boundaries and have done so regularly.

Racial distinctions literally are becoming less obvious as improved modes of transportation and communication have increased mobility. It is also true that people may resemble each other superficially (as in degree of skin pigmentation) and yet genetically may be more distantly related than they are to people who at first glance look quite different.

"Black" Americans, in many instances, share a significantly greater proportion of their genetic constitution with "white" Americans than they do with darkly pigmented peoples from, say, Subsaharan Africa, Australia or Melanesia. It's unfortunate that few people understand how much various "racial" groups have in common biologically and how pointless it is to underscore the differences when the similarities are so much more compelling.

The Keys To Achievement

If there are proportionately more blacks than whites in professional football, could it have less to do with inbred ability and more to do with the arenas where blacks are permitted access? What proportion of black high school and college students look to professional sports as one of the few careers where, rightly or wrongly, they perceive the possibility of exercising real control over decisions about their livelihood?

Exposure, equal opportunity, fair treatment and skill are the keys to achievement in most endeavors. Show a child what possibilities exist, give him or her a chance to learn in a reasonable atmosphere with encouragement, be fair, and if the child has talent, ambition and maybe that little extra who-knows-what, success will follow. The successes will not be restricted to particular racial categories. It's that simple.

As for white people and dancing, I discovered the error of my assumptions when I went to an Afro-Caribbean music concert in Seattle, Wash., about five years after my high school graduation. There I witnessed your basic Scandinavian suburban preppies doing some serious steppin' very much in time to the music.

If people have an opportunity to experience different and delightful things, they can and do learn to repeat — and often enhance — the experience. Humans are more alike than different.

So-called racial differences may provide the basis for stereotypes of particular groups, but stereotyping misses the point: The biological traits that human populations have in common are, or should be, infinitely more significant than the relatively few traits that differ.

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Audrey Johnson (Cont'd. from Page 6)

Johnson jokingly suggests that her mottoes might be "Have suitcase, will travel" and "It's hard to hit a moving target." Her activities over the past few years prove both to be true.

"It's important for me to make a contribution within the black community," she says. "What happens to black people affects me."

Johnson, a UNC faculty member since 1975, says she hopes her work will influence attitudes about the black community.

"I believe that black people deserve quality and excellent service," she says. "I want others to believe that too, and for them to respect black people. I serve the African-American community in

the best ways I can, whether that be through teaching or service.

"So many people can't speak for themselves, so I try to use my education as a tool for the black community."

Teaching graduate courses about African women's health issues and how racism affects the quality of human services is one way Johnson sends her message. She says the greatest reward of teaching comes from students who are interested in learning and who are open to different ideas.

"Teaching is in itself a learning experience, not just a giving experience," she says. "When I instruct students who are motivated, I learn from them as well."

One of the blacks Johnson describes in her writing is William Still, whom she calls the first black social worker. He worked to improve the lives of blacks in the 19th century by supporting the underground railroad and by fighting to pass Pennsylvania's first public accommodations law after the Civil War.

People like Still, Johnson says, point to the tradition of blacks helping blacks that she would like to continue.

Johnson's professional affiliations show her desire to affect the black community. She chairs the student essay contest committee for the National Association of Social Workers, and is immediate past chairperson of the Social Work Section of the American

Public Health Association. She is active in the Association of Black Women Historians and serves on the board of the Council of Social Education.

Her work has not been without thanks. She has received numerous awards and citations, several of which she displays in her office. One is from N.C. Agriculture and Technical State University, and two others she received recently at the conference marking the 20th anniversary of the national association she helped found.

"The awards help me to reaffirm my faith in the things that I'm doing," Johnson says. "This validation reminds me that it's okay to be black and it's okay to succeed."