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Moral Positions on Publishing Race Differences in Intelligence

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Abstract:

Purpose: Flynn’s argument for academic freedom on the topic of race differences in IQ makes little reference to the real world consequences of publishing race differences in IQ. We provide a brief assessment of these consequences and consider their moral significance.

Methods: Adopting a utilitarian perspective, we summarize positive and negative consequences of publishing data that shows that the races differ in intelligence, assuming this finding is valid.

Results: We should expect both positive and negative consequences, and these consequences can be weighed against one another to determine the path with the greatest utility. In our rough estimation, the foreseeable scientific and social gains of knowing more about variance in intelligence outweighs the social costs of identifying populations with lower average intelligence. Importantly, we admit that different risk estimations will defensibly arrive at the opposite conclusion.

Conclusions: Principled arguments for and against academic censorship oversimplify a complex set of circumstances and provide no grounds for compromise or even hypothesis testing. When the most important and controversial topics provoke partisanship we have failed to temper our outrage and approach a challenge judiciously.

Keywords: academic freedom, intelligence, performance gap, race relations, utilitarianism

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Flynn (this issue) makes an impassioned plea for the freedom to investigate the proposition that differences in allele frequencies between black and white populations (however they are best defined) account for differences in intelligence, as measured by IQ tests. Although we agree that academic freedom is fundamental to scientific progress, we do not agree that the argument for publishing and promoting findings on race differences is best argued on principle. From a utilitarian perspective, the value of any scientific discovery is equal to the net gains that it produces in the well-being of humans (and other sentient animals), accounting for all future outcomes that it begets. For example, it is arguable whether the method for weaponizing atomic energy is a scientific discovery that was better left undiscovered. One can imagine stronger hypothetical cases in which publishing the truth is unambiguously detrimental to human well-being. We respond to Flynn by assessing the argument that publishing data on race differences in intelligence has a net negative impact on human well-being. Although this may not be the argument that Flynn sought to confront, we believe it may be the only serious argument against publishing research on race differences in intelligence.

There are two related features of academic freedom that are worth distinguishing. The first is the freedom to hold certain beliefs regarding the weight of the evidence on a given topic. The second is the freedom to conduct and (more importantly) publish empirical research on a given topic. Flynn defends both from censorship, but we will focus our discussion on the second. Here is why: It is not a matter of moral controversy whether one should be permitted to hold one belief or another. This is not to say that employers, funding agencies, and electorates do not make decisions based on the beliefs of others. Imagine a graduate student and babysitter who believes that parents of multiple children usually develop a preference for one child over the

others, and the father who will permit her that conviction but will not permit her to investigate this belief in his family and share the results with his family. It is not clear whether the father is wrong to censor her in this way, given the potential harm that could be brought upon him and his children. This is a debate worth having. However, it would be unethical for him to fire her or otherwise mistreat her on the basis of her belief alone (although, without being a registered employer, it may be within his rights to do so). That university administrators and funding agencies are prejudiced against individuals who hold certain unpopular opinions is unfortunate, but this is the product of political bias, virtue ethics, and expediency, not a coherent moral argument. Below, we attempt to formulate and scrutinize a coherent moral argument against publishing research on race differences in intelligence, because such an argument is conceivable.

A moral argument against publishing research on race differences in intelligence can be summarized as follows. 1) Published psychological data can have a significant impact on the well-being of humans in the general public via public policy, business practices, and social perceptions. 2) If race differences in intelligence are attributable to genetic differences, widespread knowledge of this fact can produce positive and negative impacts on human well-being. Negative impacts include those that result from miscommunications, misinterpretations, and misapplications of the research findings in the public sphere. Positive impacts include better informed efforts to alleviate disparities in intelligence and opportunity as well as any future benefits of new data on race differences and the genetic contributions of differences in intelligence. 3) A calculation of risk, accounting for the probability and magnitude of negative and positive outcomes, leads to the conclusion that to continue publishing this research has a net negative impact on human well-being in the long term. Each of these assumptions will be assessed.

Research Findings Impact Human Well-Being

History demonstrates that psychology research can have significant impacts on human well-being. Policy decisions often rely on evidence drawn from psychological research. For example, psychologists serving as expert witnesses have informed the United States Supreme Court on the universality of homosexuality, the psychological benefits of marriage, the impacts of social stigma, the normalcy of homosexual relationships, and the normal adjustment of children raised by homosexual parents. These findings have helped to convince the Supreme Court that denying marriage rights to homosexuals is unjustified. Findings in mental health and human behavior shape policy in innumerable, subtle ways; consider the utility of psychological findings in eyewitness testimony, military training, and foreign policy. Businesses often capitalize on psychological findings. Insurance companies attend closely to sex differences and age differences in, for example, risk of automobile accident, injury, and the development of disease. When it is legal, insurance companies explicitly discriminate on the basis of demographically-predicted risk-taking behavior and physical and mental health. Marketing firms exploit a scientific understanding of psychology to influence human decision-making, producing products and advertisements that are carefully designed to appeal to consumer psychology. Psychological science and theory also loom large in public consciousness. Consider, for example, the effects of research on the identification of Attention Deficit Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder, causing many parents and family doctors to, for better or worse, become exquisitely sensitive to symptoms expressed in children. Many argue that the disease model of mental illness produces unnecessary harms in society by stigmatizing differences in mental characteristics. Some argue that reporting the evidence against the existence of free will have disastrous effects on human well-being, while others suggest that an evolutionary understanding

of human consciousness could strip it of its special, personal value. Unfortunately, as in these examples, it likely will not be possible to quantify the impact of research on race differences in intelligence, and a large degree of subjective interpretation will be required.

Outcomes of Publishing Research on Race Differences in Intelligence

Usually, it is those scientific findings that turn out to be false that are destructive to human well-being, and it is because they are false that they produce negative outcomes (e.g., the ongoing vaccine-autism fiasco). But there do not appear to be any clear examples of well-supported psychological truths about which we can state: *if only we did not know this*. For the sake of argument, let us accept that the apparent race differences in IQ as presented by Flynn are valid, that genetic differences account for a large proportion of these differences, and that IQ is a valid measure of a real, unified cognitive factor called intelligence. If true, it is *conceivable* that publishing evidence of this “performance gap,” whenever it is documented, generates a net harm on society and that existing reports of the performance gap have done more harm than good, despite their veracity. If blacks are, on average, less intelligent than whites, and this data continues to emerge into public awareness, we could expect the social, political, and economic standing of blacks to degrade and for negative attitudes towards blacks to become further entrenched. Other traits are known to differ between the races without much controversy, but intelligence is perhaps the most highly valued single human trait in the industrialized world. Intelligence is believed by many to differentiate humans from non-humans and it is a strong predictor of academic achievement, health, and wealth in the West. Intelligence is identified by both sexes as an attractive quality in a prospective romantic partner, and our cultures celebrate intelligence over almost any trait. The unique controversy over intelligence should come as no

surprise, as lives are made significantly more difficult for lack of intelligence and perceived lack of intelligence.

Potential Negative Outcomes

In the free market, differences between populations tend to inform business practices, often despite the illegality of those practices. Investments into the intellectual pursuits of blacks could be expected to have smaller average returns than investments in whites, hiring practices may further favor whites in areas that require intelligence, and insuring black health and life may be less profitable than insuring whites. Government policies aimed at promoting opportunity for underrepresented races in the US would likely be encouraged rather than discouraged by the discovery of genetic differences, but institutional discrimination in local governments, in electoral races, and in less progressive countries could be bolstered. In the public sphere, reports of race differences in intelligence may be widely misinterpreted to describe individual members of populations. Black individuals are likely to suffer a number of negative emotional reactions to these findings. To many aspiring artists and scholars, these findings could be a blow to their confidence, for others these findings could feel like yet another threatening indictment of their value to society, and for others these findings could motivate anger and distrust of science. In their social lives, blacks of any intelligence level could confront a strengthened presumption of low intelligence. We can expect that a large number of lay consumers of science and journalists who report on science would simplify, exaggerate, and sensationalize findings that reach a large audience, despite attempts to preempt misinterpretations. Biases against black students may develop or become strengthened in educators and administrators. The judicial system may become further biased against black suspects and defendants. We can expect the same lack of care regarding the broad moral interpretation of these findings. Many will forget that equality in

treatment is not predicated on equality in phenotype. Some may decide that it is appropriate to expect less of blacks, mistreat blacks, or discount their opinions. In general, it is not unreasonable to predict a measurable decline in perceptions of blacks as members of society.

Potential Positive Outcomes

The long-term value of any scientific discovery is difficult to predict. New knowledge can facilitate and inspire further discoveries, even in distant fields. A more detailed understanding of race differences in intelligence could produce several research descendants. In the field of intelligence testing, critiques of Rushton's and Jensen's work have motivated an explosion in cross-cultural testing, validity testing, and the development of "culture-fair" tests of intelligence. At the biological level, our understanding of intelligence heritability and the potential genetic and cultural contributions to differences in intelligence have begun to be clarified by twin, adoption, and family studies. In the long term, this and related work may lead to identifying the specific genes that produce differences in intelligence between *and within* races. Uncovering the sources of race differences in intelligence could be a necessary step towards uncovering the sources of individual differences in intelligence. This refined, individual level understanding of genetic factors of intelligence would render the study of race differences obsolete. At the theoretical level, our understanding of human evolution can be improved by tracking the selection pressures on intelligence along the geographic and sociological paths of human history. The long-term benefits of this research, in terms of human well-being, is impossible to know. In education and academia, for any real intelligence differences to be alleviated, a thorough understanding of the nature of black disadvantage would be necessary. Obviously, a thoughtful approach will distinguish between black student populations and individual black students, who may or may not benefit from new educational initiatives. Genetic

predispositions can often be diminished in the right environments and any worthwhile applications of this research would have the betterment of black lives as their only goal. Assuming that race differences in intelligence are valid, withholding this fact from broad public consumption could help foster the insular, racist interpretation that many individuals will seize upon. In other words, sharing this research with a wide audience could defuse some of its potency because it will be publically scrutinized and discussed, rather than remaining a “dirty secret” primarily circulated by those laypeople who wish to degrade the status of blacks. Without this larger discussion, there is no opportunity to debunk the racist dialog that follows from these findings. Further, without a deeper scientific understanding of the factors that contribute to intelligence, an essentialist, unscientific, racist rationale can more easily survive, unexamined.

A Qualitative Risk Assessment

On the one hand, there do appear to be real negative consequences to human lives that could follow from continued dissemination of research on the performance gap. These consequences include reinforcement of racist business practices, educational expectancies, and broad social attitudes. On the face of it, it is understandable that many find this research tasteless and detrimental to society. On the other hand, this research is a likely precursor to several promising avenues of research, it can aid efforts to alleviate racial disparities in opportunity, and a larger, scientifically informed discussion of race and individual differences (well delivered) may be helpful in combating racist sentiments. It is our primary intention to illustrate a basic rationale for both sides of this contentious argument, and to argue that to feel certain of one position or another is to be overconfident, but we will offer our own tentative position. We are optimistic that the broad reception of evidence for race differences in intelligence will not slow

public efforts to achieve and maintain social equality, nor will it immediately damage human lives above and beyond those long-term gains in human well-being that it is likely to produce.

Most regrettably, blacks themselves may suffer undue discomfort and changes to self-perception upon learning that black populations have lower IQs than white populations. But how does the reaction to this news compare to receiving a disappointing, individual score on an IQ test? An individual IQ test score may be a good description of an individual's intelligence and future prospects, but it does not describe their family, their friends, and the cultural entities with which they may identify. "Race differences in IQ" primes group identities and rivalry, which may promote stronger emotional reactions than personal IQ scores. Because of this, it is only responsible to frame such findings in a way that, although accurate, downplays salient social identities and emphasizes the distinction between variance *between* populations and variance *within* populations (this is already common practice when the topic is discussed academically). The impact of "stereotype threat" on black test scores could be exacerbated by a more widespread (and scientifically confirmed) knowledge of black disadvantage. Although we are optimistic that the development of measures to reduce stereotype threat will continue, we do not claim to know how detrimental it could be to report race differences in intelligence to black students. The stereotype threat effect is a feature of this risk calculation that may be harmless or enormously destructive, depending on how convinced one is by stereotype threat research, and whether the perceived threat of this particular stereotype would be enhanced by empirical support. We are not convinced that an empirical understanding of race differences in IQ would greatly enhance the impact of an existing stereotype threat. We feel that with the right delivery, these findings could be less distressing than receipt of a disappointing personal IQ test score, while not necessarily disrupting self-perceptions. However, we could be convinced otherwise.

In the last 50 years in the US, attitudes towards blacks have improved substantially, and although Americans may perceive certain race differences, a majority of them do not consider them grounds for unfair treatment. When whites receive the finding that blacks tend to score below whites on IQ tests, there are a number of possible outcomes. The outcomes that produce negative effects on human lives include explicit and implicit biases against blacks. Explicit biases against blacks are expected to be produced primarily in those who already harbor negative perceptions of blacks, generating marginal increases in discrimination. Implicit biases, however, may develop across a wide range of people, even despite their interest in social equality. Again, we are struck by the difficulty of predicting the response of laypeople with lay theories of race and equality to empirical findings. We are tempted to assume that whites who are committed to social equality (presumably the majority of whites in America) will be motivated to combat the formation or expression of negative biases, perhaps compensating for them. However, this is another estimation that is open to argument and empirical investigation.

Unless the nature of scientific progress unexpectedly changes, research on race differences in IQ will almost certainly contribute to identifying important details about the biological and environmental development of intelligence, human genetics, and human evolution, while inspiring necessary conversations in public policy, business ethics, and bioethics. In other words, an emerging discovery of race differences in IQ would not be a tragic conclusion to the story of equality. It would be another collision with the truth that genetic inequality does not discredit the pursuit of social equality. The sooner this lesson can be fully exposed in civil, public discourse, the better. Moreover, few societal ills can be defeated without an understanding of their causes. If race differences in IQ are due to environmental differences, researchers and educators will be better equipped to address those differences. If race differences

in IQ are due to genetic differences, we hope those same researchers and educators will nonetheless endeavor to find ways to equalize the academic status of blacks around the world. If no such solutions are forthcoming, it will not be because we know too much about the topic, it will be because we know too little.

It is important that all research be subjected to scrutiny in the public eye, and all rational attempts to dispute the validity of any findings should be encouraged. Many will take the position that genetically-informed race differences in intelligence do not or cannot exist, and they will (and do) often make valuable contributions to this field. We feel that, even if genetic differences do account for race differences in intelligence, these critics are instrumental in buffering the negative effect that any such veridical difference could have on human well-being by offering a defensible counter-narrative which can be endorsed by anyone who is made uncomfortable by race differences. This kind of theoretical and methodological criticism is welcome, as long as it is divorced from the claim that is often leveled at researchers that study race differences: that they are racist and wish to harm race relations. Science can be insensitive, but as Flynn put it, “the truth can never be racist.”

Conclusion

Whether we allow ourselves to discover uncomfortable truths, they will exist, and any real disparities between populations will continue to exist for at least as long as they remain censored or deemed incredible. The argument against publishing research on race differences must make the case that the costs of publication outweigh the benefits, in the currency of human well-being. Depending on one’s assessment of the magnitudes of the costs and benefits and their attendant probabilities, we believe that both positions are defensible. However, we have made the tentative case that the benefits outweigh the costs. Although the fulcrum of this debate should

center on our responsibility to the well-being of humans, the reality of the debate appears to hinge on two principled commitments. The first is the liberal commitment that at a genetic level, the races (however they are best defined) *cannot* differ on variables like intelligence, leading to the presumption that any such reports must be confounded by other factors. The second is the libertarian commitment to academic freedom, no matter the cost to human lives. It is our contention that a utilitarian perspective will illuminate the best course of action, an uncomfortable but morally defensible middle path. This course of action will include the understanding that the researchers and publishers of any work are ultimately responsible for the positive and negative outcomes of that publication on human well-being. The decision to publish or censor should be made by these entities only after they have considered this responsibility, not after checking their political commitments.