

## **The Bell Curve: Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Social Work**

**Kevin M. Gorey and Arthur G. Cryns**

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**T**he ongoing debate on the interrelationship among race, socioeconomic status, and social problems has again been brought to the fore by the recent publication of books by biological determinists, most notably *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) and *Race, Evolution, and Behavior* (Rushton, 1997). These works are based on two central premises of what we consider dubious empirical merit: (1) that one's ultimate social position is, to a large extent, the consequence of the inherited characteristic of intelligence; and (2) that the major "racial" groups differ significantly on this largely predetermined characteristic. It and other inherited differences among racial groups are then put forth as explanations for black-white differences on such disparate personal and social problems as criminality, parental investment, illegitimacy, welfare dependency, and AIDS. Moreover, one of the unstated assumptions of this deterministic paradigm is that race is predominantly a biologic, rather than a social construction; it does not account for life experiences in any compelling way (Muntaner, Nieto, & O'Campo, 1996). Such theorizing has ominous implications for social welfare policy as well as for social work practice. Therefore, we believe that the profession's voice ought to be heard in this debate.

### **Social Worker's Contribution to the Debate**

Recently, critiques of *The Bell Curve* have been presented in four edited books (Devlin, Fienberg, Resnick, & Roeder, 1997; Fraser, 1995; Jacoby & Glauberman, 1995; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1996) and two monographs (Ceci, 1996; Fischer, Hout, Jankowski, Swidler, & Voss, 1996). From among the 154 substantive arguments made, primarily by academics (61 percent) and journalists (37 per-

cent), only one was authored by a social worker (Vidal, 1996). This finding echoes an earlier lament by Gorey (1995) that despite expectations that social workers, committed to a person-in-environment framework, would lead in building knowledge on the interrelationship of socioeconomic factors, race-ethnicity, and personal and social problems, very little of the empirical research has been reported in the profession's peer-reviewed publications.

Being the one exception, Vidal (1996) criticized *The Bell Curve* on two related epistemologic grounds: (1) Its analyses grossly oversimplified very complex issues; and (2) its review of knowledge was highly biased; it ignored the rich social science literature on poverty, AFDC use, and reform evaluations. Specifically, Vidal noted an array of important variables that were ignored in *The Bell Curve's* analysis of intelligence and welfare dependency: gender, the consequences of low pay in low-skilled jobs, relative opportunity for education and more rewarding jobs, and relative availability of affordable child care and health care. Vidal clearly showed that social work's more systemic and structural theorizing provides the basis for more comprehensive and practically valid theoretical models to guide research on social problems.

### **Practical versus Mere Statistical Significance**

The ethical imperative for social work's involvement in this debate is perhaps most cogently underscored when *The Bell Curve's* authors and other similarly oriented analysts report multiple and consistently "significant" relationships among racial group status (most notably black and white) and intelligence, and other clearly social phenomena such as welfare dependency, crime, parental investment, familial abuse, and others, with black people recording significantly more deleterious outcomes in comparison with

whites. Typically, their statistically significant findings are reported without benefit of even the most elementary effect size metrics. Such reports give no clear view of a purported relationship's practical, clinical, or policy significance. Yet, Herrnstein and Murray (1994), as well as Rushton (1997) and others, typically, make rather strong causal claims and then make concomitant sweeping social policy statements, which, not surprisingly, unequivocally support an extremely conservative agenda.

It may be illustrative here to focus on the single largest effect reported in *The Bell Curve*, that is, a one standard deviation difference on mean intelligence between black and white people in the United States. This finding, if accepted, may be interpreted to mean that 20 percent of the nation's variability in intelligence could be accounted for by racial group status ( $d = 1.00$ , converts to  $r^2 = .20$ ; Cohen, 1988). The remaining 80 percent of that variability remains unaccounted for and is probably associated with other variables. Moreover, contrary to determinists' interpretations of such findings, an exclusively genetic explanation is not necessarily warranted; a social explanation is as plausible, indeed, probably more so. We believe that the environmental alternative explanation is far more compelling for the following reasons: Most of Herrnstein and Murray's models of intelligence and social problems account for only 5 percent to 15 percent of the criterion's variability, the majority for less than 10 percent (Gould, 1995); secondary analysis of their data reveals further that the race-intelligence association has diminished by 35 percent to 50 percent over the past two decades; and after any adjustment (matching, sample restriction, mathematical modeling) for any socioeconomic factors, no race-personal or social problem associations are observed. In fact, the socioeconomic-adjusted race-intelligence association indicates that the main effect of race accounts for less than one half of one percent of the explanation ( $r^2 = .004$ ); social-environmental main effects and interaction effects probably account for the remaining more than 99.5 percent (Cryns & Gorey, 1999; Gorey & Cryns, 1995). *The Bell Curve's* extremely simplistic models leave virtually all of social reality unex-

plained, and so, we believe strongly, that policymakers ought to reject them as the basis for making any social welfare or other policy decisions.

### The Need For More Complex Models

Transcendence of the simplistic and very typically atheoretical (Muntaner et al., 1996) black-white dichotomization of "race" is a needed first step toward making the research in this field practically useful. A search of research literature indexes between 1975 and 1998 provides evidence suggestive of social work's lead on this score. We compared *Social Work Abstracts* with *Psychological Abstracts*, *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Medline* on their use of more diverse ethnic or culturally sensitive key word terms (for example, ethnicity; Afro, African, Asian or Native American; aboriginal; Hispanic; Latino) versus the mere use of race or a simplistic black-white dichotomy. Twice as many social work citations (51 percent) used more ethnically-culturally specific language compared with psychology, sociology, and medicine (26 percent,  $p < .001$ ). It would seem that social work is more aware that theories that enable understanding about the interrelationship of race-ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and social problems will need to account for the multitude of life experiences of diverse people of color.

Social work researchers, although we traditionally have called for systemic assessment of the transaction of people and environments, acknowledging, at least in theory, the importance of multiple factors in the development of both personal and social problems, also have tended to analyze race or ethnicity simplistically in a vacuum of sorts, as if it did not indeed interact with many other personal and social factors. For example, a search of *Social Work Abstracts* on CD-ROM retrieved 8,923 citations on the key words intelligence or personal or social problems representative of *The Bell Curve's* analyses, and nearly three times as many were indexed under the race-ethnicity key words listed above (678) as were indexed under socioeconomic-relevant key words (250) (for example, poverty, income, education, social class, socioeconomic status). None included both

race and socioeconomic parameters, and so, none could have observed any of their possible interactions. Such simplistic analyses may unwittingly lend support to biological determinism, as the interpretations of atheoretical racial group comparisons are left to readers' implicit theory of causality (Muntaner et al., 1996; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Biological determinists play this analytic game well. For example, of *The Bell Curve's* numerous analyses of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data, its central analytic plan, none presented both racial and socioeconomic factors so that the practical strength of their main effects and their interactions could be understood. This makes it much easier for readers to infer that the reported racial group differences on crime, illegitimacy, and welfare dependency must result largely, if not completely, from some innate personal, genetic factor.

## Conclusion

The research and practice experience of ourselves and others convinces us of the following: That race is primarily a social-cultural construct; that socioeconomic factors are much better predictors of various social and health statuses than is race; many diverse problems are more prevalent among poor people, who are disproportionately represented by children, women, and people of color (Wilson, 1987); and that interaction effects of these and other diverse factors are nearly always more important than simple main effects are (Armour, Anttinen, May, & Paabo, 1996; Devlin, Daniels, & Roeder, 1997; Diamond, 1997; Gorey et al., 1997; Gould, 1981; Muntaner et al., 1996; Stringer & McKie, 1997; von Haeseler, Sajantila, & Paabo, 1996). To make the research in this field more useful to the practitioner and policymaker, the simplistic and scientifically unsupported differentiation of "race" into "black," "white," and "others" groups needs to be abandoned in favor of a more diverse conceptualization that endeavors to understand people and communities in systemic transactional terms. We believe that the practice wisdom and knowledge of our social work colleagues will confirm these notions and so implore them to bring their voices to the im-

portant ongoing debate on race-ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and social inequalities. ■

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**Kevin M. Gorey, MSW, PhD**, is associate professor, Social Work Program, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4, Canada; e-mail: [gorey@server.uwindsor.ca](mailto:gorey@server.uwindsor.ca).

**Arthur G. Cryns, PhD**, is professor emeritus, School of Social Work, and adjunct professor, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, State University of New York at Buffalo.

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