Psychology’s Mismeasurement Still Mismeasured

The Mismeasure of Minds: Debating Race and Intelligence between *Brown* and *The Bell Curve*

Michael E. Staub


Review by Richard W. Bloom

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In *The Mismeasure of Mind* Michael E. Staub describes 40 years of discourse (1954-1994) among psychologists, political leaders, and the general public centered on the topic of *intelligence* in the context of politics, power, and social control. Implicitly and explicitly, race and racism form the context. And regardless of one’s position on what intelligence and race are; whether there are racial differences in intelligence; whether intelligence and such differences can be modified; what are the discourse consequences for how educational resources should be employed; and what related social practices should be implemented even with governmental coercion, this has often been a case of psychologists gone wild and behaving badly.

*The Mismeasure of mind* is at least the second outing for Staub, a Professor of English with a doctorate in American civilization, on politics, power, and social control interacting with applied psychology and mental health. It’s a volume within the Studies in Social Medicine series of the University of North Caroline Press “grounded in the convictions that medicine [and many areas of psychology]…should be studied as a social, political, ethical, and economic force” (Studies, 2019). His *Madness is Civilization: When the Diagnosis was Social, 1948-1980* (2011) covers the anti-psychiatry movement including the public discourse around such authors as Ronald D. Laing and Thomas Szasz. There is wild and bad behavior among psychologists and colleagues here as well, or, perhaps citing Lady Caroline Lamb on Lord Byron, they become mad, bad, and dangerous to know (Jenkins, 1974). For example in the 1960s, their labelling the Vietnam War as mad (psychopathological) and bad (immoral) was thrown back at them by authorities of the Nixon Administration which also considered their psychologizing a danger to the Republic.
In reading Staub, one can infer among psychologists and related public discourse needs for power and achievement (Winter, 2005), greed, false consciousness (Engels, 1893), hegemonic and subjugated discourse (Foucault, 1972), righteous indignation, and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) affecting the choice of research design, implementation, and data interpretation. Theses seem to induce an obliviousness to the limitations of applied scientific psychology.

More specifically, Staub focuses on public discourse between 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education) and 1994 (publication of The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life) on intelligence testing, minimal brain dysfunction, cerebral asymmetry, emotional intelligence, and the neuroscience of adaptive psychological skills. He has intentionally gone short on contentious, scientific particulars and gone long on how public discourse on the above psychological topics exemplifies three primary techniques of social control—hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination (Foucault, 1975).

Hierarchical observation entails authorities and institutions collecting information on social members. Hierarchies of social status determine what and how information are collected for and by whom. Normalizing judgment entails how this information is transformed into ipsative and normative ratings based on social desirability and afforded consequent social privileges, as social members become targets for maintenance, modification, and management. Examination refers to how authorities, institutions, social members, collectors of information, raters, and the affordance of privileges are analyzed as to reliability, validity, utility, and suitability. In essence, the scientific fight
for the truth may have always been a post-truth enterprise with truth defined by who has or dies with the most toys, literally or figuratively.

In the Afterword (pp. 169-172), Staub’s brief history of the social use and abuse of intelligence constructs and applications shows us that 1954–1994 public discourse is not an anomaly. He cites Alfred Binet’s diagnostic test of intelligence misused as prognostic; William Stern creating a ratio of mental age to chronological age (intelligence quotient (IQ)) with its potential for stigmatization; Henry Goddard’s ascription of mental deficiency via the IQ to immigrants not fluent in English; Lewis Terman’s popularization of the IQ for mass tracking of students in school and assessing of applicants for employment with noxious consequences for immigrants and their children; Robert Yerkes’s mass screening of U. S. Army draftees supporting the intelligence superiority of men from northern European origins compared to those of African descent; G. Stanley Hall’s and other psychologists’ advocating views of the British eugenicist Francis Galton that intelligence and racial group differences are fixed at birth; and from there a short step to social Darwinist positions that social inequities accurately mirror biologically based psychological differences with noxious consequences that are and should be immutable to social change.

In fact, Staub’s highlighting of politics, power, and social control in the discourse on intelligence and related areas as opposed to psychometrics, methodology, and philosophy of science might well suggest an absurdist commentary on psychology’s contemporary replicability crisis and the need for open data, open materials, and preregistration of design and analysis plans (Smith et al., 2017). The ever more careful parsing within the substructure of psychological research blatantly ignores the sociopolitical superstructure
driving what counts as psychology, gets attended to, is funded, and is applied. (See Herman’s *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts*, 1995).

Although some of Staub’s account has been previously described by the late evolutionary biologist/historian of science/paleoanthropologist Stephen Jay Gould (1980), Staub’s effort is not another pile-on in a contest between the righteousness of politically liberal “We Are the Worlders” and the evil of conservative, racist, hegemons. Instead, in Staub’s telling, we are all born in Original Sin, and we all are guilty. It is as if certain interdependent topics—plasticity of intelligence and the efficacy of educational and social reform; diagnoses of minimal brain dysfunction, attention deficit disorder, and hyperactivity; cerebral asymmetry of psychological capabilities; emotional intelligence and multiple intelligences; and the privileging of the neurosciences in understanding psychological function—foster projection and projective identification (Klein, 1946). The same constructs, theories, methods, and data can be and are construed in multiple ways. Easy pickings for political authorities and their supporters looking to pick the right expert to support the right, preconceived opinions. And even the *American Journal of Psychology* gets into the act. Staub (p. 67) cites a *Journal* book review (Horn, 1974) of Arthur Jensen’s *Educability and Group Differences* wherein the reviewer describes Jensen’s text “akin to screams of ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre.” While Staub adds “it was guaranteed to provoke strong reactions”.

In Staub’s account of discourse on the plasticity of intelligence and the efficacy of social and pedagogical intervention to minimize intelligence differences among groups (pp. 17-48), the more intractable intelligence seems, the more it must be pre-determined.
Or perhaps not. Seeming intractability may indicate poorly resourced educational interventions, educational interventions of the wrong kind or duration. Or intractability indicates macro-systemic inequities that cannot be modified without political and social revolution. Most psychologists have gone far beyond nature versus nurture in explicating human phenomena. They include continuously interactive biopsychosocial phenomena, distal socio-cultural and historical events, as well as the epigenetics of gene expression. With so much to choose from, conceptual sophistication also can breed the improbability of applied research to falsify any hypothesis seems improbable. And the discourse of politics, power, and social control feeds on this to service a position on group differences in intelligence and intractability (Arribas-Aguila et al., 2019).

In Staub’s account of discourse on minimal brain dysfunction, attention deficit disorder with and without hyperactivity, and the therapeutic efficacy of stimulant medications (pp. 49-78), diagnoses are based on social not biological interpretations. These interpretations are of external behavior and of descriptions of these behaviors and other interpretations by authority figures like teachers, parents, and psychologists. Some sort of brain-related foundation for diagnosis is presumed, but is not specifically identified. A result—with interpretive heterogeneity of social behavior and absence of a biological foundation—is that analyses of attributing attention deficit disorder suggest how fraught diagnosis becomes with differing socio-cultural contexts as it facilitates finding what one is hoping/looking for (Bergey et al., 2018). The same applies to inferring drug-related efficacy, as well as claiming racial and other group differences. (Here Staub correctly points out that minimal brain dysfunction initially was racially posited more as a white than black problem, while retardation was more heavily
attributed to blacks, perhaps to ‘explain’ or ‘protect’ mythologies or narratives about racial differences and their valuation).

In Staub’s account of discourse on cerebral asymmetry of psychological functions (pp. 79-108), specific cognitive capabilities—asserted to be primarily localized within the left or right cerebral hemisphere—have been be used to support the hypothesis of IQ test bias. That bias would be that IQ tests are left-hemisphere oriented not measuring intelligence from the right hemisphere. Or intelligence is localized only in the left hemisphere, there’s nothing from the right hemisphere to measure that is intelligence-related. Or lower IQ scores for some racial minorities—African-American but not Asian-American—may be due to an unmeasured superiority of right-hemisphere intelligence which, once measured, would yield African-American scores surpassing majority race scores. On the other hand, left- hemisphere and right-hemisphere people may each be superior in their own special way—close enough so that all people are above average in some important way, and all should have prizes. Better yet, superior people regardless of being from the “right” gender or race may be the ones displaying less lateralization of psychological function. Or people might or might not vary from left-hemisphere to right-hemisphere to non-lateralized depending on the adaptive situation. This last part of the discourse has tailed off, and much of it has been directly related to language processing and reading skills (cf. DeLisi et al., 1997).

In Staub’s account of discourse on emotional intelligence and multiple intelligences—both at least partially popularized through the discourses on cerebral asymmetry of psychological function—(pp.109-137) the construct of intelligence can be more and more related to self-awareness, motivation, intuition, self-control, and empathy on the road to
life success. For some of these capabilities, racial minorities might prove superior to majority groups and would be judged as inferior only if these capabilities are not being measured. Experts and their political enablers pontificate on the plasticity of these capabilities—with “pontificate” chosen to suggest faith-based epistemology.

Sociopolitical questions and answers emerge which mirror discourse from the 20th century anti-psychiatry movement (cf. Cooper, 1967). For example, are high scores on self-control and other intelligences adaptive or not when a society is or isn’t sane? Are ratings on the various intelligences largely a method of social control? Do such ratings dehumanize and construct people as things based on labor value and commodity price? But, meanwhile, emotional intelligence continues to be a frequently researched construct (cf. Hall et al., 2018).

In 1931, after being threatened by a Kentucky sheriff and his posse illegally hired by a mining company, Florence Reece, the wife of a mining union leader, wrote the song “Which Side Are You On”. Staub reminds us that psychology, even as a science, is significantly about sides with political, power, and social control consequences. In an even more recent reminder, The New York Times editorialized on how the same data was used for and against the construct of a mentally impaired “crack baby” with the against side winning so that there were draconian penal sentences for crack possessors who were overwhelmingly black. (Slandering the unborn, 2019). Whites with different illicit drug preferences were treated differently and more benignly, much like white possessors of attention deficit diagnoses have been treated compared to blacks with low IQ scores. And this resonates with iconic works such as “Blackness and madness: Images of evil and tactics of exclusion” (Szasz, 1970) in explicating psychological categories linkages to
politics, power, and social control. Or citing Staub citing the jazz vocalist Annie Ross (Gray & Ross, 1957) in his preamble to *Madness is Civilization*, is the whole matter just “Twisted”? 
References


Gray, W., & Ross, A. (1957). Song: *Twisted*. [Recorded by King Pleasure and Annie]


Post, Ed.). *The psychological assessment of political leaders.* (pp. 153-177).

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