ARE CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS FOR RACIAL DISPARITIES RACIST?

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1. Introduction

Negative characteristics are sometimes attributed to racial groups on the basis of culture. Sometimes these cultural characteristics are invoked to explain racial disparities. For instance, an alleged oppositional culture among African American youth is sometimes invoked to explain why African Americans lag behind other racial groups in academic achievement. Many antiracist activists and intellectuals argue that such attributions are racist and, in this respect, are no different than attributions of negative characteristics to racial groups based on biology (Kendi 2019: Ch. 7). But are these activists and intellectuals right? I argue *no*.

In a recent essay, Lawrence Blum (2020) provides a typology of different kinds of views that attribute negative cultural characteristics to racial groups. One of the views that Blum identifies treats the relevant cultural characteristics as malleable but does not attribute those characteristics to existing structural factors (i.e., laws, public policies, and institutions). Blum characterizes this type of thinking as a form of racist thought. It is this characterization which I intend to critique in this essay. I argue that attributions of negative, but malleable, cultural characteristics to racial groups, in particular, ones that are intended to explain disparities, are not racist, or, at the very least, should not be dismissed out of hand as racist.[[1]](#endnote-1) I also argue that if academics are genuinely concerned about combating racist ideas and making life better for racial minorities, then they have good reasons *not* to treat any and all cultural explanations for racial disparities as taboo.

1. Blum on Nonessentialist Culturalism

Blum uses the term *culturalism* to denote any type of thinking that attributes to a racial group some kind of deficiency *and* attributes the alleged deficiency to cultural characteristics of the racial group (2020: 1). He identifies four versions of culturalism: (1) Essentialist Culturalism; (2) Nonessentialist Culturalism; (3) Colonialist Culturalism; and (4) Neo-Racism. I want to focus on what Blum says about nonessentialist culturalism. For this purpose, it won’t be necessary to go into what Blum says about the latter two views.[[2]](#endnote-2) However, since it provides a helpful contrast, it is worth seeing (albeit briefly) how Blum characterizes the first view.

According to Blum, *essentialist culturalism* is the view that cultural characteristics are *inherent* to a traditionally defined racial group’s nature or are so difficult to change that they might as well be treated as inherent (2020: 3-4). An example of this type of thinking is what Blum calls *national racism* (2020: 4). This refers to a way of conceiving of ethno-national groups that became popular in Europe and North America in the 19th century and on into the 20th century. Ethno-national groups (e.g., Anglo-Saxons, the Irish, Southern and Eastern Europeans) were characterized by their different psychological profiles (e.g., hardworking vs. lazy, high intelligence vs. low intelligence). However, “there was no distinct implication that the attributed psychological characteristics were grounded in a biological mechanism; and the scheme did not grow out of an attempt to typologize the human races into biological kinds” (Blum 2020: 5). Rather, these psychological traits were believed to be grounded in each group’s culture, which was seen as something (at least practically) immutable.

Essentialist culturalism is hard to distinguish from the more familiar race essentialism of the biological variety. If a racial group’s culture is inherent to its nature or practically impossible to change, why would that be, except in virtue of the racial group’s biological characteristics? Regardless, this is not a problem for Blum since his aim is not to defend any of the views included in his typology but simply to identify and describe them.

*Nonessentialist culturalism* is the view that racial groups possess cultural characteristics that are malleable - they are neither inherent to a racial group’s nature nor practically impossible to change (Blum 2020: 6-7). Two variants of the view that Blum mentions are the “group responsible for its culture” variant and the “culture rooted in structure” variant (2020: 7-8). The first variant is often invoked to explain disparities in outcomes between different racial groups. On such a view, the disparities are not the result of legal or socioeconomic factors but are the result of a deficient set of values and norms held by the relevant racial group and for which that group bears responsibility. Blum illustrates this view with the example of the hypothesis that there is an oppositional culture among African American youth that leads to high achieving black students being shunned by other black students for “acting white” (2020: 7). According to this hypothesis, call it the *oppositional culture hypothesis*, these anti-intellectual attitudes explain why African Americans lag behind other racial groups (i.e., Asian Americans and white Americans) with respect to educational achievements.[[3]](#endnote-3) The explanation is *not* that African Americans lack the same educational opportunities. Because, on this view, African Americans are themselves responsible for the prevalence of these deficient attitudes, they are also responsible for their relative lack of educational attainment.

The other variant of nonessentialist culturalism, the “culture rooted in structure” variant, treats a racial group’s culture as a dependent variable, dependent, that is, on structural factors. For instance, although there may be an oppositional culture among African American students, it is a culture rooted in unjust structural factors: factors related to educational opportunities. Given these root causes, it is not fair to hold African Americans solely responsible for their relative lack of educational attainment.

Blum says that the “culture rooted in structure” variant of nonessentialist culturalism is *not* a form of racism, whereas the “group responsible for its culture” variant *is* a form of racism. The reason why Blum considers the former not to be a form of racism is that, in attributing the cause of the cultural characteristics to structural factors, this supplies “the group and the society a diagnosis to remedy the injustices caused by those structures and their cultural effects” (2020: 15). As such, “this form of culturalism is naturally allied with an anti-racist project” (Blum 2020: 15). Blum believes that the latter variant of nonessentialist culturalism is a form of racism because, as he explains:

[I]t aims to provide an ideological justification for the society’s allowing unjust disparities to continue, declaring that they are not unjust but that the cultural forces that (allegedly) produce them are produced solely by and are the sole responsibility of the disadvantaged group itself. As in the case of essentialist culturalism, the historical and structural causes of unjust racial disparity are ignored or explicitly denied, so the two forms share this aspect of racism. (2020: 14)

1. Nonstructural Nonessentialist Culturalism

Now I will explain why I think Blum’s characterization of the “group responsible” view in the passage above is problematic. First, although Blum probably did not mean it this way, the label “group responsible for its culture” conveys the idea that the racial group, collectively, is being *blamed* for the negative cultural characteristics in question. But John McWhorter, who Blum cites as an example of someone who holds the “group responsible” view, rejects the notion that African Americans are to *blame* for the anti-intellectual culture that he says prevails among many African Americans:

I do not want to brand black American culture “guilty” of its own academic failure, but simply as the locus of it, so that we can more effectively solve the problem. It is not the *fault* of black Americans that they have inherited Anti-intellectualism from centuries of disenfranchisement, followed by their abrupt inclusion in American life before they had time to shed the internalization of their oppressor’s debased view of them (McWhorter 2000: 150).

Also, as the quote from McWhorter demonstrates, those who hold the “group responsible” view are not committed to denying that the negative cultural characteristics in question were at *one point* driven by structural factors, only that if they were, that is now no longer the case.

For the reasons just mentioned, I propose using the label *nonstructural nonessentialist culturalism* (NSNC) and defining it as the view that racial groups possess negative cultural characteristics that are changeable and are either (1) not rooted in structural factors, or (2) rooted in structural factors that no longer exist; and that explain differences in outcomes among racial groups. This label and definition more charitably characterize the view of people like John McWhorter and others who invoke culture to explain racial disparities without invoking (current) structural factors.

Is NSNC racist? In his earlier work *“I’m Not a Racist, But…”*, Blum defines a racist proposition as “one whose content is of a racial group characterized as deserving of racial antipathy or inferiorization” (2002: 21). We can see why NSNC-claims do *not* count as racist according to Blum’s definition of a racist proposition. For instance, NSNC-claims do not allege that any racial group deserves antipathy or is inferior. Rather, NSNC-claims are about values and norms that are either (1) prevalent among the members of a racial group in some absolute sense, or (2) more prevalent among the members of one racial group than among the members of others. (I think claims of the second type are more common, although I won’t defend that belief here.) Second, the values and norms are not viewed as inherent to the racial group - they can be eschewed, perhaps quickly. Third, NSNC-claims are not about a racial group’s *entire* culture. Finally, NSNC-claims do *not* entail that there is something wrong *only* with the referred to racial group’s culture. All racial groups may (have) possess(ed) the same cultural characteristics to the same degree at some place or time, and all racial groups may possess a set of negative cultural characteristics.

To illustrate these points, consider again the oppositional culture hypothesis. To allege that negative attitudes toward education among African American youth explain racial disparities in educational attainment does not commit one to the claim that these negative attitudes toward education are inherent to African Americans. Also, the hypothesis is only committed to the claim that these attitudes are prevalent *enough* to explain the relevant racial disparities. No sweeping generalization about all African Americans, or even all African American youth, is being made. Further, the hypothesis is only about attitudes toward education. The hypothesis says nothing about the attitudes of African Americans toward anything else (there is no blanket condemnation of African American culture). Finally, the hypothesis says nothing to the effect that these negative attitudes toward education are only to be found among African Americans (let alone that African Americans are the only racial group for whom there exist negative cultural characteristics). A similar kind of oppositional culture is alleged to exist (or to *have* existed) within the white working class in England, as well as within ethnic groups such as the Burakumin in Japan, the Māori in New Zealand, and Italian immigrants in Boston (Fryer and Torelli 2010: 380, n. 2; Sowell 2019: 167-168).

Blum’s definition of a racist proposition notwithstanding, NSNC-claims might still count as racist. Two possible reasons come to mind. One possibility is that NSNC-claims, although not racist in virtue of their content, are racist in an indirect way having to do with the type of person who would believe them. Another possibility is that NSNC-claims are racist, not in virtue of their content or the type of person who would believe them, but in virtue of the social function belief in them plays. I will address each possibility in turn.

The first possibility might derive support from J. L. A. Garcia’s account of racism. Garcia (1996; 1997; 1999; 2018) is well-known for arguing that racism is fundamentally a moral failing that concerns a person’s will: their motives, intentions, desires, etc. Because propositions are abstract entities, they are not the kind of thing that can be moral or immoral, so they cannot be racist (Garcia 2018: 64). However, Garcia says that it can be racist *of* someone to believe a proposition if their belief in it is psychologically grounded in racist motives, intentions, desires, etc. (2018: 64). For example, we can say that it is racist of someone to believe that Asians are sneaky if that person has simply arrived at that belief as a way to rationalize their antipathy toward Asians. Garcia also allows that we can *say* certain propositions are racist if what is actually meant is “that it is *characteristic of them* that they are believed by racists, and (differently) that it is also *characteristic of racists* that they believe such propositions” (2018: 64).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Of course, it is *possible* for someone to believe an NSNC-claim simply as a rationalization for racial animosity. But I think it would be nothing but a nasty *ad hominem* to suggest this is what is going on with any social scientist who endorses such a claim. Also, the same reasons for why NSNC-claims do not count as racist on Blum’s definition of a racist proposition are reasons to doubt the idea that it is characteristic of such claims that they are believed by racists or that it is characteristic of racists to believe them. If there are any culturalist propositions that are characteristically believed by racists or that racists characteristically believe, they are almost certainly *essentialist* propositions.

But NSNC-claims are not off the hook yet. They might, or, rather, *belief in them* might, count as *ideologically* racist. According to Alberto Urquidez, “A belief is ideologically racist in virtue of its social function…ideological racism cannot be determined a priori or solely in virtue of the content of the belief…we need experience to inform us of the *social role* of the belief” (2017: 235). The notion of ideology at work here is defined by Tommie Shelby: “An ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations” (2014: 66).[[5]](#endnote-5) Shelby, like many others, believes that racism is an ideology: “Racism is a set of misleading beliefs and implicit attitudes about ‘races’ or race relations whose wide currency serves a hegemonic function” (2014: 66).[[6]](#endnote-6)

So, are NSNC-claims racist in this ideological sense? NSNC-claims that are not widely entertained, or have never even been entertained, cannot be ideologically racist. And even if an NSNC-claim is widely entertained, it can only be ideologically racist if it is causally efficacious in perpetuating racial injustice. All this goes to show what Urquidez points out: “we need experience to inform us.”

It is worth noting that ideologically racist beliefs do not fulfill their (racist) social function in isolation. “[A]n ideology is never an isolated belief, even if widely held, but always a network of beliefs. This is not to say that a single belief cannot be ideological but that an ideological belief will be a part of a wider view of things, a component of a larger systematic outlook” (Shelby 2003: 159). Urquidez offers a helpful illustration:

Take, for instance, the belief that blacks are naturally powerful and strong. Like racial stereotypes generally, this belief is false; nevertheless, its propositional content is arguably morally benign…However, imagine a society in which most people believe…that blacks are naturally predisposed to violence and criminality, prone to harm whites, easily aroused, impulsive, and lacking in self-control. In a society such as this, the belief that blacks are naturally powerful and strong may be racially harmful if it is commonly used to rationalize sentiments, judgments, policies, and practices that are harmful toward blacks (2017:236)

In this example, the belief in the innate power and strength of blacks is not racist on its own. It is only racist in tandem with a host of other beliefs. The same goes for any NSNC-claim *if*, as a matter of contingency, it serves a racist social function.

To drive home the point further, imagine a scenario where the oppositional culture hypothesis is widely believed but *false* – what explains lower levels of academic achievement among African Americans is their disproportionate lack of access to a good education. Suppose, further, that the same people who believe in the oppositional culture hypothesis also believe that (1) every individual deserves access to a good education, and (2) a disproportionate number of African Americans lack access to a good education. For these two reasons, these people support efforts to improve educational opportunities for African Americans. True, given their acceptance of the oppositional culture hypothesis, they do not believe that such efforts will close any racial gaps in educational achievement. But they do not believe that closing such gaps is the only reason to care about the lack of access to good educational opportunities among a disproportionate number of African Americans. Now, suppose that efforts to improve educational opportunities for African Americans are successful and, as a result, racial gaps in educational achievement disappear. In this scenario, the widespread, yet false, belief in the oppositional culture hypothesis does not help perpetuate any unjust educational advantages whites have over blacks because of the presence (and absence) of *other* widely held beliefs. What this shows is that if the oppositional culture hypothesis *does* in fact serve the function of rationalizing and perpetuating unjust educational advantages whites have over blacks, it is only able to do so because of other beliefs people hold.

The most important thing to highlight, however, is that regardless of any social function a belief fulfills, it is not ideological if it is *true*. Recall from Shelby’s definition of an ideology that the beliefs which form it must “misrepresent significant social realities.” As he puts it, “Racist beliefs and assumptions fall into the category of *false* and dangerous” (Shelby 2014: 70; emphasis added). There is no *a priori* reason, or reason rooted in easily made observations, for dismissing all NSNC-claims as false. What this means is that if there is enough evidence to take an NSNC-claim seriously, we won’t be in a position to say whether or not it is racist unless social scientists rule it out using the standard methods at their disposal. If we insist that social scientists not take NSNC-claims seriously because we think they are racist, then we are getting ahead of ourselves.

I hope what I have said in this section convinces the reader that Blum is mistaken to characterize, as racist, what I call nonstructural nonessentialist culturalist claims (NSNC-claims): explanations for racial disparities that cite as their cause negative cultural characteristics of racial groups that are not dependent on (current) structural factors, but that are nonetheless changeable. Such explanations neither claim nor imply that any racial group is deserving of “antipathy or inferiorization,” and so do not count as racist on Blum’s own definition of a racist proposition. Further, they do not count as racist in virtue of the type of person who would believe them. Finally, there is no reason to dismiss out of hand all such explanations as ideologically racist since whether or not a claim is ideologically racist is contingent on a host of factors, in particular, on whether the claim is false. Therefore, we are not in a position to determine whether an NSNC-claim is ideologically racist unless it has been ruled out by our best science.

1. Lingering Worries

Despite all I have said, there are sure to be lingering worries about NSNC-claims. The number one worry that I suspect is on the reader’s mind is the potential that NSNC-claims have to perpetuate negative stereotypes. For example, consider a hypothesis that has not been mentioned so far, namely, that the higher rate of violent criminal offense among African Americans is attributable to a culture of honor that is historically traceable to a culture of honor that prevailed, and, to some extent, still prevails, in the American South.[[7]](#endnote-7) To my knowledge, no scholar who has defended this claim argues that this culture of honor prevails among most African Americans, let alone that most African Americans are prone to violence.[[8]](#endnote-8) Rather, the claim is that a larger proportion of the African American population, relative to the proportions seen in other American racial groups, takes part in a culture of honor, and this explains a higher rate of violence. Nevertheless, to many people, this hypothesis might seem to lend credence to the negative stereotype of African Americans, particularly men, being prone to violence.

Second, NSNC-claims about a racial group can gather all the attention while evidence for similar claims about other groups (racial, ethnic, or class) is ignored. This can easily lead to the attitude that there is something inferior about the racial group in question. For instance, while the oppositional culture hypothesis has garnered a lot of attention, very few Americans are likely to know that similar hypotheses have been put forth to explain educational outcomes among other racial/ethnic groups, both within the United States and elsewhere. The perception that there is a unique problem with African American students could be seen by some to support the racist belief that blacks are lazy and stupid.

It is because of these kinds of concerns that NSNC-claims about racial minorities are often treated as taboo, especially in academia. I think this is a grave mistake. First, just because a claim is taboo does not make it false. *If* there is any truth to a set of NSNC-claims, well-trained social scientists are best equipped to understand them, investigate them, and communicate them to the wider public. Treating NSNC-claims as too taboo for academics to entertain is likely to backfire. Such claims are likely to gain the mystique of “forbidden knowledge” among some outside of academia (“This is what the liberal elite in the Ivory Tower don’t want you to know.”).[[9]](#endnote-9) And then, instead of being discussed by well-trained social scientists, these claims will end up only being discussed by pundits on cable news and trolls on social media, where they will inevitably be distorted and are *more* likely to be treated as rationalizations for ignoring racial injustice.

Even if there is *not* any truth to a set of NSNC-claims, treating them as taboo has the potential to backfire. Suppose, for instance, that social scientists have identified structural factors as the correct explanation for a host of racial disparities. The wider public would be rational in lending less credence to this explanation if they were aware that alternative (i.e., cultural) explanations were never entertained (as opposed to entertained, and then ruled out based on the evidence).[[10]](#endnote-10) Ironically, perhaps, any social scientist who wants to convince the public that structural racism exists has a good reason to reject treating NSNC-claims as taboo.

It is important to keep in mind that, although we may risk perpetuating negative stereotypes about racial minorities by seriously considering NSNC-claims, we may risk perpetuating *other* harms against racial minorities by *not* seriously considering them. Consider, again, the culture of honor hypothesis. By treating this hypothesis as taboo, we might succeed in not lending credence to racist stereotypes about black men being inherently violent. On the other hand, we risk not correctly identifying the cause of the relatively high rate of violent criminal offense among African Americans, the burden of which is mostly borne by African Americans themselves. No doubt, black people have an interest in not being unfairly stereotyped. But they also have an interest in not being murdered, robbed, assaulted, etc. Surely this supports considering all causal hypotheses relevant to this phenomenon and judging them on the evidence, and *only* the evidence. A benefit, therefore, of not treating NSNC-claims as taboo is that social scientists can be more confident that they have correctly identified the causes of problems that disproportionately impact racial minorities. As Blum would phrase it, they can be more confident of providing “a diagnosis to remedy” these problems. This should be welcomed by anyone who cares about truth *and* socialjustice.

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1. Endnotes

   I will not be arguing that any such attributions are true, however. To do so would be above my paygrade (to say the least). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Colonialist culturalism* is the view that certain racial groups are justified in dominating other racial groups for the purposes of *civilizing* them (Blum 2020: 8). This form of culturalism is historically situated within the context of Western imperialism in the late 19th century and early 20th century. According to Blum, colonialist culturalism is a distinct type of culturalism. However, given Blum’s characterization of it, it is not clear that the view isn’t just a version of nonessentialist culturalism in the form of a specific normative political theory.

   *Neo-racism* is the view that racial groups have distinct inherent cultures that are incompatible (Blum 2020: 10-11). This view is used as a rationale for excluding certain racial groups from certain countries. The thought is that, by excluding these groups, a potentially destructive clash of cultures can be avoided (or so it is said). Like colonialist culturalism, neo-racism is also a historically situated view. It is historically situated within the context of present-day Europe and is reflected in the anxiety some white citizens of former European colonial powers have over the influx of immigrants coming to their countries from formerly colonized nations in Africa and Asia. Like colonialist culturalism, it is not clear from Blum’s discussion, despite what he says, that neo-racism is a distinct type of culturalism and not just a version of one of the first two, in this case, essentialist culturalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Much has been written on the oppositional culture hypothesis. For support of the hypothesis, see McWhorter 2000: Ch’s 3-4, and Ogbu 2003. For criticisms of the hypothesis, see Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998, and Harris 2011. Fryer and Torelli (2010) find evidence that there is a trade-off between academic success and social status (among same-race peers) for black students with GPA’s of around 3.5 or higher, whereas there is no such trade-off for white students with similar GPA’s. However, Fryer and Torelli are cautious about the conclusions they draw. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Also see Garcia 1996: 13; 1997: 16. It is worth noting that, on Garcia’s view, “A person may hold prejudices about people assigned to a race without herself being racist and without it being racist of her to hold those prejudices” (1996: 13). For instance, imagine a child who harbors no animosity toward Asians but who nonetheless believes Asians are sneaky because her father told her so. Because the child’s belief is not grounded in racial animus or disregard (she’s just trusting her father), the child’s belief that Asians are sneaky is not held for racist reasons, and, according to Garcia, the child is not racist in virtue of holding the belief. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The original quotation appears in italics. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The original quotation appears in italics. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a defense of this hypothesis, see Latzer 2016 and 2018, and Sowell 2005. For a discussion of honor culture in the American South, see Nisbett and Cohen 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Latzer’s crude estimate is that between 1-3.2% of African Americans share in a culture of violence (2018: 47). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Steven Pinker argues that by treating certain facts as too taboo to discuss, academics have inadvertently created converts to the Alt-Right (Spiked 2017). I should reiterate that I am not assuming that any NSNC-claim states a fact. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For more on why this would be the rational response on the part of the wider public in a case like this, see Joshi 2021: 20-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)