

Equality of Opportunity and Productive People

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Productive people will be successful regardless of the political environment but imagine how many more would be successful if we actually attacked the obstacles that are holding them back. The best way to attack this problem is to ensure equal opportunity. Equality of opportunity allows inherit human diversity to flourish. Seventy years ago equality of opportunity was not available for all Americans. Today, however, opportunities abound and the fruits of Americans' taking advantage of them are easily seen. The landscape of corporate executives, medical trailblazers, political leaders, entrepreneurs and owners of powerful media organizations consists of virtually every race and background on the planet. The contrast between today with 1950 is breathtaking and remarkable.

Some would argue this achievement is not enough and invoke the criterion of equity of outcome as opposed to equality of opportunity. There are a number of arguments against this notion. First, it confuses process and outcome. Equality of opportunity makes sure the process is fair, workable and will lead to success for anyone willing to expend the effort and apply their inherit talents. Outcome is the result of this process. To short circuit the process and demand the same outcome (equity) regardless of the process not only denies the very human diversity that has led to so much progress it also destroys the motivation that drives this progress.

Second and perhaps more devastating, the equity position denies an aspect of diversity. Regardless of the opportunities that are available, some individuals will not take advantage of them. Instead of ignoring this fact and launching headlong into an equity of outcome program, would it not be more productive to ferret out the variables associated with individuals rejecting the available opportunities? With these data in hand, perhaps programs could be devised such that some of these individuals would take advantage of the opportunities as well.

Third, on purely empirical grounds, study after study has shown what our grandparents knew all along. Success is associated with, correlated with if you will, situations in which positive outcomes are contingent upon required behavior.

There is much history to support these ideas. Perhaps the most telling is the history of attempts to solve the racial differences in achievement in our country. Specifically, what have the data shown and what has been our response?

Following the Civil Rights Legislation of 1964 and 1965 the Coleman Report was produced. This report was the result of a large study comparing the academic and cognitive skills of black and white students. This study used multivariate analysis which was a comparatively novel statistical technique at the time and the idea was to use this technique to tease out the variables accounting for the widely observed differences in cognitive test scores between blacks and whites. The results were not those that were expected. Instead of educational facilities and opportunities accounting for the differences, these variables accounted for little of the variance. Instead, social variables such as family makeup, socioeconomic situation, etc accounted for the lion's share of the variance (see Charles Murray, "Facing Reality", 2021, for a discussion of the Coleman Report and detailed analysis of some of the other issues raised here).

A reasonable response to these results would have been to attack the variables accounting for the difference. Instead, we attacked the variable we believed should have accounted for the difference and began throwing money at improving minority education facilities and ensuring that minorities were admitted to colleges for which they were unprepared.

And what was the effect of this approach? By 1990 the difference was still there if not worse (there was progress in the 70s and that may be the subject of a later article). A reasonable response to this result would, again, be to attack the variables accounting for the difference. We did not do that.

Instead, the argument the tests of cognitive ability were biased was raised. That is, the tests were designed by white people using white standards; so, they are biased in favor of whites. Study after study has shown no support for this argument. In particular, the tests predict equally well for black and white as well as other races. So, did we finally focus on the variables accounting for the difference?

No. Instead, we came up with yet another way to explain away the difference and ignore the cause. Since the tests are not biased and they predict both academic and job performance equally well for black and white, the argument today seems to be this prediction is a result of systemic racism. In other words, the lower cognitive test score is due to racism and the lower performance is due to racially biased academic or job evaluations. So, lower performance is prime facie evidence of racism because we know even though all people are not equal in cognitive ability, we also know that all races ARE equal in cognitive ability.

As before we ignore the data and approach the situation as if the data were what we wanted. Since the races are equal but the pesky data refuse to show it, we ignore the data and force all test scores to be the same. We claim the behaviors that result in high test scores and hence later success are themselves racist and set about to impugn those behaviors and those that exhibit them with the goal of lowering the cognitive scores for all.

Who does this approach help? No one. But, it is devastating to the very group we should be helping. The people with the low scores will have their behavior that leads to those low scores applauded and reinforced. So, once again we will perpetuate the cycle of low achievement when if we attacked the process instead of attacking the outcome we might actually do some good.

And what of the high achievers? As pointed out in the beginning, they will ignore this charade and continue to exhibit high achievement and pursue a successful and rewarding life. A few may of course take the easy road and lapse into underachievement and be casualties of our poor use of the data. So, we will have missed an opportunity to lift our fellow citizens out of poverty and even shepherded a few to that end who would have done fine without our help.

Surely, with sixty years of failure staring us in the face we are ready to face the data. And, how should we go about this? First, we must understand that cognitive ability is important, can be measured, and most importantly correlates with virtually every measure of success in occupations and education. And, this correlation increases with the complexity of the work. Second, we must realize that cognitive ability has some inherent limitations but within those constraints it can be molded such that at some point between adolescence and adulthood an individual will have achieved sufficient intellectual skills to score well on a test of cognitive ability and, since we know these scores correlate with performance, have a good chance for success. Please note the point here is achievement as measured by a test. I am not talking about exaggerated claims for test preparation. Third, we must realize even though we may know brilliant and not-so-brilliant people of all races, this observation is not the issue. The issue is there is a significant difference between the cognitive ability of races as groups, i.e., between the average cognitive ability. So long as we ignore this difference, attempt to explain it away or attempt to disguise it by artificially inflating test scores, for example, it will remain. And, so long as this difference remains it will propagate throughout the system and be reflected in educational and occupational achievement. If we are willing to face these data, the next step will be to use the data and attack the problem. That phase will be difficult and will embody both substantive and political hurdles but if we are successful, the results will be extraordinary.

And that success will be a population with variance in academic achievement as well as occupational success much like today. The difference will be a multivariate analysis will show race and socioeconomic background accounting for a negligible amount of the variance. Instead, the lion's share of the variance will be accounted for by cognitive ability and hard work.