

How beliefs in biological differences can undergird racial and policy attitudes

Beliefs in biological differences between racial groups linger in both scientific and public discourse. Recent advances in genetics and genomics influence public understandings of racial inequality. In a recent study examining whites' views of race, genetics, and public policies in the U.S., [Carson Byrd](#) finds that beliefs in biological differences between racial groups can influence people's support for policies aimed at reducing racial inequalities, and uncovers the complexities of how people conceptualize and utilize race to understand everyday life.



It has been 15 years since then President Bill Clinton and leading scientists of the Human Genome Project made their [highly-acclaimed proclamations](#) that race at the genetic level does not exist. At the time this supported the long-held narrative of scholars that the once prominent beliefs in biological determinism (race as a genetic reality) and racial essentialism (human behavior is anchored in group-based biological differences) had been all but completely laid to rest in the archives of history, particularly after the fall of the Nazi regime and the end of the Holocaust after World War II. However, these beliefs in race and genetics may be making a comeback as genetic and genomic research gains in popularity and media visibility. As sociologist Lawrence Bobo and colleagues recently note in their [analysis](#) of survey data, there is a recent uptick the last decade in the belief that there are innate (i.e., biological or genetic) racial differences that drive racial inequality.

Many social scientists argue that since the peak of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s whites in the U.S. explain racial inequality as the result of individual efforts, downplaying the role of discrimination or social policy. Some [minority group members](#) have even adopted these individualistic explanations for racial inequality in recent years. Given these trends toward more individualistic and cultural explanations for racial inequality, my coauthor, Victor Ray and I wondered how beliefs in biological racial differences might influence people's perceptions of racial out-groups, and their support for policies that attempt to lessen racial inequality. We asked: does a reliance on beliefs in biological or genetic racial differences influence whites' views of blacks and racially-ameliorative policies such as affirmative action? Social psychologists call this overreliance the "[ultimate attribution error](#)." This error in reasoning explains negative outgroup outcomes as the result of genetic—and therefore innate and unchanging—predispositions. However, when someone who believes in such outgroup inferiority finds themselves in a situation whereby an outgroup member displays positive traits and behaviors that contradict the individual's beliefs, such differences are rationalized as an exceptional case, "lucky," special advantages or extreme motivation, or deft manipulation of a situation that produce such contradictory traits or behaviors. These rationalizations leave the belief in genetic differences as explanations for racial inequality intact.

We analyzed survey data from a nationally-representative sample of over 2,200 whites across the U.S. to identify how they view blacks and other whites on traits such as intelligence, athletic ability, temperament, and obesity. Respondents read vignettes portraying people of different races and then were asked about the relative influence of genetics and the social environment on the behaviors or traits of the person in the vignette. For example, one vignette read: "Brenda is a highly intelligent black woman. She did very well in school and is now a partner in a large firm." People then rated what degree this trait or behavior was genetically- or environmentally-driven. Whites generally believed that traits and behaviors for whites and blacks were more influenced by environmental factors than genetics. However, whites did not agree that all human traits and behavior are a result of environmental factors; they believed that genetics played some role. Whites saw genetics playing a slightly greater role in the traits and behaviors of blacks compared to whites. These findings were stronger for stereotypically "racialized" traits, such as intelligence and athletic ability. This is in line with a long history of white supremacist thought on innate racial differences in mental and physical capabilities.



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We then examined how these beliefs in genetic differences influence whites' views of racially-ameliorative policies (policies designed to address racial inequality). Two sets of findings indicate how complex a person's racial ideology is when considering multiple views including beliefs in biological differences among racial and ethnic groups. That is, how a person explains, justifies, or rationalizes racial inequality uses a mixture of views of race, difference, and inequality rather than wholly relying on one perspective. First, we found that white support for racially-ameliorative policies decreased among those who believed that genetics was more influential on blacks' traits and behaviors as well as that racial inequality was a result of individual efforts. Second, and somewhat more surprisingly, when these two views of race and inequality are combined, they actually lower whites' opposition to racially-ameliorative policies, not increase it. These findings held despite the many social characteristics of the people included in the study such as education and political orientation.

In order to understand how this somewhat perplexing finding of beliefs in genetic racial differences combining with the explanation that racial inequality is a result of an individual's efforts, we return to the ultimate attribution error, which states that people will rely on biological determinism and racial essentialism to rationalize inequality. With this in mind, if a person believes that (1) traits and behaviors are more genetically-determined for one group compared to their own group, which is linked to inferior traits and behaviors among outgroups, and (2) individual efforts explain racial inequality because society is structured by a meritocracy that rewards the "best and brightest," then this will lead people to believe that racially-ameliorative policies may actually help people who are genetically unable to help themselves. That is, policies such as affirmative action may be seen as remedies for the "natural" or genetic racial inequality by whites who hold these two beliefs. This dangerous reasoning of how racially-ameliorative policies may be useful in society points out how beliefs in the genetic inferiority of blacks can influence whites' policy decisions without changing their beliefs that such inequality is a result of man-made structures and culture, not a result of some biological deficiency among blacks themselves.

Our study shows that even in the twenty-first century biological determinism and racial essentialism can undergird whites' policy attitudes. These findings reflect other studies among [scientists and students](#) as well as the [general public](#) that multiple beliefs in race and difference, including those tied to supposed genetic differences among races, inform how they understand racial inequality. Scholars as well as policymakers should make active efforts to further contextualize how their findings relate genetic and environmental influences to racial inequality, and limit the deterministic and essentialist perspectives that can derive from overlooking the complexity of such studies and their implications for society.

*This article is based on the paper, "[Ultimate Attribution in the Genetic Era: White Support for Genetic Explanations of Racial Difference and Policies](#)", in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*.*

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