

PAIRED REVIEW

COMMENT

This is the first paired review to appear in *Political Psychology*. Paired reviews will be solicited occasionally, when a book is of major importance to the science and the applications of political psychology, and when its approaches or conclusions are likely to be controversial. *Prescription for Failure* meets both of these criteria. As in future cases of this sort, reviews have been contributed by colleagues who have markedly different viewpoints on the topic and implications of the book. I hope that the paired review format will give a fuller picture of the range of reactions evoked and will stimulate interest and debate among the readers of the journal. I also want to thank Linda S. Gottfredson and David O. Sears for being willing to serve as pioneers in this endeavour.

Peter Suedfeld
Book Review Editor

Prescription for Failure: Race Relations in the Age of Social Science. By Byron M. Roth. New Brunswick: Social Philosophy and Policy Center and Transaction Publishers, 1994. 392 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Like many students of race, I came of age during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It was a time of anger and outrage but still greater hope—and of tremendous confidence. The solutions to racial tension and inequality seemed so clear and close at hand. Simple morality and social science, with the force of government behind them, promised sure, even quick, results.

The intervening 30 years have cruelly mocked that optimism. Racial tensions seem only to worsen and inequalities to deepen. What went wrong? Where have we failed?

Byron Roth's *Prescription for Failure* is a thoughtful contribution to the growing number of books seeking to answer these questions. Parts I and II dispute

the received wisdom in social science that white racism is still the major problem holding blacks back today. Parts III and IV argue that the last three decades of social policy which embody that wisdom have themselves, ironically but tragically, fostered the dangerous, chaotic underclass conditions that destroy all opportunity for so many blacks and that poison race relations.

Prescription for Failure takes a different approach than other recent critiques of American social policy on race (Murray, 1984; Taylor, 1992) by delving deeper into its social science origins and by offering a compelling new explanation for how misbegotten social policy precipitated and sustains a cascade of devastating side-effects. Perhaps most importantly, the book implicitly challenges conservatives and liberals alike to rethink common presumptions about human behavior.

Part I begins by marshaling evidence that white prejudice has waned in recent decades and that other factors (like single parenthood) constitute a far greater barrier to black economic progress (to wit, the median income of black married-couple families now equals that of comparable white families). Why, then, do social scientists fail to question their "so thoroughly incorrect" claims and underestimate the dangers of false descriptions of reality? Roth's answer is that social scientists fear to appear to be condoning racism. Under the orthodoxy, any effort to deny the existence or potency of white racism reveals a possibly unconscious desire to denigrate blacks and thwart their ambitions.

Part II traces the evolution of this orthodoxy through 50 years of research on prejudice. As Roth describes in Chapter 3, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) was instrumental in convincing Americans that racial discrimination was indeed a crushing problem for blacks and that it brought great shame to the nation. Myrdal proposed massive government intervention to reverse the "vicious circle" by which white presumptions of black inferiority kept blacks in degraded circumstances, which in turn only reinforced prejudice and discrimination against blacks.

Social scientists accepted Myrdal's call for social engineering but soon rejected his belief in the essential fairness of American democracy and the decency of its citizens. Chapter 4 describes how *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) relied on scant and now-discredited research to persuade my generation of college students, wrongly, that all negative generalizations about minority groups are irrational. They are—and I remember the message well—just the product of neurotic, authority-worshipping personalities created, in Freudian fashion, by faulty (often conservative) upbringing.

The Authoritarian Personality's flaws have consigned it to the dustbin of social science, but Chapter 5 describes how that book's central claims—and ideological bias—are reincarnated in the newer notions of white prejudice, such as "symbolic" racism, that are being inculcated in new generations of college students. For example, some well-known "racism" scales tally any disapproval of affirmative action and school busing as "racist" (Kinder & Sears, 1981). This procedure

guarantees the same apparent correlation between "prejudice" and "conservatism" that allowed Adorno et al. to dismiss certain traditional American values (such as self-reliance) as antiblack prejudice in disguise. Besides unfairly branding opposing views as immoral, Roth argues that this orthodoxy does a particular disservice to minority youth by denigrating some of the very attitudes and behaviors that have helped so many other Americans to prosper.

Roth turns in Part III to detailing how orthodoxy-inspired social policy, not white racism, has created the worsening spiral of black underclass pathology. Chapters 6 and 7 depart markedly from typical critiques of the current orthodoxy by drawing on the tenets of sociobiology. One tenet is that we should not presume that culture causes (motivates or teaches) all human behavior, good or bad. Rather, it modulates and channels our natural proclivities, including sexuality, male aggressiveness, and altruism toward kin (and its dark side, ethnocentrism). As sociobiologists argue, the genes and culture which jointly control these fundamental elements of human nature have evolved together, interdependently, to meet both biological and social needs.

Chapter 6 shows how adolescent development, particularly in the underclass, has become decoupled from the sorts of cultural controls that have evolved worldwide. In denigrating and nullifying many such constraints on sex and aggression, social science and policy since the 1960s have allowed adolescents' "natural imperatives" to disrupt family formation and community stability. Roth's lesson is that a culture which denies its young adequate socialization and supervision has lost its ethical—and biological—moorings.

Chapter 7 shows how current social policy worsens the race relations it aims to improve. Roth makes the point here that a tendency to favor genetically close individuals over genetically distant ones is as natural as sexuality. Both enhance the probability that one's genes will survive in future generations. Neither has to be taught. Cultures only magnify or mute racial prejudice depending on the nature (race, place, religion, occupation) and number of social distinctions they highlight (cross-cutting ones being best). American social policy magnifies racial tensions by heightening the salience of racial identity (affirmative action, multiculturalism) and widening racial differences in important and highly public attitudes and behaviors (marriage, child-bearing, delinquency). Roth adds that it only compounds the folly of such policies to denounce middle-class abhorrence of underclass behavior, not the behavior itself, as requiring aggressive remediation.

Part IV explores in detail what Roth calls the "debilitating triad"—a mutually reinforcing nexus of escalating crime, illegitimacy, and educational failure—which characterizes underclass life. He builds a case that this triad is not the consequence of black poverty today, as the orthodoxy claims, but rather its major cause.

Chapter 8 argues that underclass crime is currently the single greatest impediment to black advancement. It drives businesses and jobs out of underclass neighborhoods, diverts young black men from becoming employable and marriage-

able, and creates widespread fear of young black males—not to mention making life miserable for residents of underclass neighborhoods. Underclass crime has mushroomed, in Roth's analysis, because of a combination of weakened socialization (policies and pronouncements promoting normlessness among black youth) and inadequate policing (for example, policies reducing police discretion in controlling crime).

Chapter 9 reviews various explanations of disproportionate black school failure, concluding that the most popular (inadequate funding, discrimination) are contradicted by the data, and that the truth of others (genetic differences in intelligence) remains undetermined. But whatever else may account for disproportionate black educational failure, Roth argues that high rates of crime and illegitimacy deny underclass children what all youngsters need to perform at their best, namely, "orderly families, orderly communities, and orderly schools."

Chapter 10 shows how sociobiological accounts of sexual competition, courtship, and mate choice can explain falling rates of marriage and rising rates of illegitimacy when a culture relaxes supervision and socialization of its young. American social science (its denigration of traditional mores) and social policy (such as welfare support of unmarried teenage mothers) have done exactly this, especially in black communities. Instead of communities controlling the passions and excesses of their young, adolescent passions have been freed to rule communities.

Whatever role white racism may have played in creating this spiral of pathology, the major problem now is to restore order to underclass families, schools, and communities. Roth examines the merits of various options, including curfews for adolescents, truancy enforcement, and a dramatically greater police presence in crime-ridden neighborhoods. Increased supervision of adolescent behavior would reduce opportunities for youthful aggression and sexuality, thus helping to reduce delinquency and illegitimacy directly. It would also indirectly reduce illegitimacy and educational failure by increasing the need and opportunity for young men to develop the skills necessary for employment and thus marriage, too.

Roth cautions that the public may not be ready to accept the seemingly harsh measures that worked in earlier eras, for example, in rescuing early nineteenth-century London from the rampant delinquency of the many unsupervised and abandoned children dominating its streets. Social control measures, including stigma, do not enjoy the legitimacy they once did, particularly when their targets are disproportionately black. Moreover, black leaders have a tendency to interpret any effort to impose social control as racial oppression. However, Roth suggests, there is no freedom under anarchy, and any society that refuses to carry out its most basic responsibility—to ensure public order—is morally bankrupt. Time is of the essence, he warns, because lives and race relations are both spiraling downward.

While exceptionally frank about the pathologies of underclass life, Roth points the finger of blame at misdirected social policy, not blacks themselves. He says, in effect, that bad social policy can reduce any subgroup to pathology (witness the growth of the white underclass). In supposedly freeing blacks from oppression, government has plunged many citizens, especially black ones, into the Hobbesian nightmare from which government is meant to protect individuals—and from which middle-class individuals of all races understandably seek to distance themselves.

Indeed, *Prescription for Failure* turns its graceful prose and close reasoning to laying bare the ugly harm that social science can do when it ossifies into orthodoxy, twisting all counterevidence and contrary argument into self-confirmation. In an always measured tone, the book relentlessly exposes the self-blinded hypocrisy behind today's shibboleth that it is the critics of the current orthodoxy on race who are irresponsible and divisive.

Roth concludes by echoing the expectation for equality that most of us held 30 years ago: "if we can manage to restore [the institutions and values and orderly communities that enable families and children to thrive and prosper] . . . it is reasonable to assume that black children will complete the task of securing racial equality that America began with so much hope almost a half-century ago."

Roth's prescriptions hold much promise for reversing the devastation wrought by current social science orthodoxy on race. Restoring key institutions would go a long way toward ameliorating racial inequalities and, eventually, racial tension. However, such restoration, by itself, will not satisfy our yearning for full racial parity any more than did the iatrogenic policies that Roth condemns. While it may be true that bad social policy can dehumanize any human group, it does not follow that good social policy will yield full group parity.

America's deeper dilemma is this. Equal opportunity does not produce equal results in social and economic life because individuals do not possess relevant capabilities in equal measure. By the same token, nondiscrimination cannot be expected to produce equal results by race in a field of endeavor when relatively fewer members of some groups possess the requisite levels of capability. One highly consequential difference in capability in modern life is general mental ability (*g*), or intelligence (Gottfredson, 1986, in press; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Moreover, racial disparities in *g* are the rule and not the exception worldwide, meaning that nondiscrimination assures some racial disproportion in education, occupation, and the like (Sowell, 1994). Their source may be uncertain, but their impact is not.

Proportionately fewer blacks than whites in American society (roughly 2% versus 15%) have IQs high enough to cope readily with the challenges of our increasingly complex world and to enjoy its many benefits (that is, above IQ 115, where the odds become favorable for being able to enter and function effectively in a profession). By the same token, proportionately more blacks than whites

(roughly 15% versus 2%) are in the lowest ranges of intelligence, where individuals have great difficulty understanding and successfully negotiating the complexities of modern life (below IQ 70, where the odds become unfavorable for mastering the elementary school curriculum and becoming employed). Similarly, relatively more blacks than whites (about 50% versus 25%) fall in the range of IQ where life tends to be an uphill struggle (IQ 70–90, a range in which admission to a four-year college or military training is unlikely). While other disadvantages for blacks have abated during this century, this distressing disproportion in IQs has remained unchanged since it was first quantified almost eight decades ago. Moreover, its practical significance seems only to rise as the dictates and opportunities of the information age suffuse our lives at school, home, and work.

It became all too evident in the 1960s and 1970s that nondiscrimination policies, which seemed at first to yield high dividends for blacks, were not producing equal outcomes by race. This lent spurious credence to the claim that an invisible and insidious racism was built into white psyches and institutions. Any suggestion that remaining inequalities might be traced in part to group disparities in mental capability was exhibited as self-evident proof of an unyielding, mean-spirited prejudice against blacks. Policy-makers responded to the manifestations of the dilemma they would not acknowledge by altering institutions in ways that put low-ability individuals at yet greater risk. Black youngsters, who more often need the best schools and most orderly communities, instead ended up with increasingly chaotic ones. Until America confronts the racial dilemma upon which current orthodoxy and policy secretly nourish themselves, their power to destroy may only increase.

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Prescription for Failure: Race Relations in the Age of Social Science. By Byron M. Roth. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994.

This book addresses the state of black America today. It shows compassion, describing “the African slave trade (as) perhaps the darkest episode in human history,” and Jim Crow as “an unfair and brutal regime of racial separation and discrimination” (p. 327). It harshly critiques American social science, especially for its continuing diagnosis of racism in American society. And it proposes some policy changes much in vogue among political conservatives. To me there is a kernel of truth in the critique, but the portrait of today’s quantitative social scientists looks too much like 1960s radicals to be a very close fit. The author shows little understanding of how academics’ view of racism has changed. The discussion of current social policy is frank and often perceptive, but in the end the policy recommendations too often seem naive, oblivious to their costs and reluctant to confront honestly the trade-offs that must be made to meet the diverse needs of a complex society. And throughout, the role of racism in American life seems to me understated.

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

The first half of the book is a history of social scientists’ ideas about race. It begins with the “racialism” of the 1920s, influence by social Darwinism, which explained racial differences through biological determinism. The cultural relativism of the 1930s, influenced by cultural anthropology, behaviorism, and a reaction against the Nazi doctrine of racial supremacy, quickly attained a much more lasting intellectual dominance. It was most decisively reflected in Myrdal’s view that the South’s institutional discrimination would soon pose an “irreconcilable moral dilemma” for the rest of white America, and ultimately lose out to “the essential decency of American democracy, of its values and institutions” (p. 344) though neither prejudice nor its effects would disappear overnight. By the late 1960s the war against American racism had been won, with both Southern segregationist institutions and genetic explanations for racial differences in full flight.

To Roth, the problem is that, despite that victory, “the lives of many black Americans are bleaker now than at any time since World War II” (p. 329). Why