Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective

J. Philippe Rushton

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Race, Evolution, and Behavior merits study, both for its contents and for its hostile public reception. The book collates J. Philippe Rushton’s decade of research on the pattern and evolutionary origins of race differences in behavior. His constituent studies have appeared in many journals, including Behavior Genetics, Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Ethology and Sociobiology, and Psychological Bulletin. The book dispassionately catalogs a vast array of data (intellectual, personality, reproductive, and physiological) on the three major races (Mongoloid, Caucasoid, and Negroid), much of it secondary data from wide-ranging sources. Rushton then straightforwardly applies reigning theories in evolutionary biology, namely, r-K selection and life-history theory, to explain how the three races evolved somewhat different reproductive strategies and social organization.

Rushton’s thesis is that when fully modern humans migrated out of Africa, perhaps only 100,000 years ago, the colder Eurasian climate selected for larger brains, more forward planning, greater family stability, and increased longevity, with concomitant reductions in sex hormones, speed of maturation, reproductive potency, and aggressiveness. This thesis emphasizes a trade-off between parenting and mating and the concept of coordinated life histories of characteristics, evolving together. The selection for large brains and parenting skills, according to Rushton, was taken furthest in northeast Asia.

Although Rushton’s theory of the evolutionary divergence of the races has been hotly debated for some years now, no one has succeeded in demolishing it. Nor has anyone offered any alternative theory to explain the consistent pattern of differences among the three races. A new cadre of commentators has been quick to denounce Rushton’s book as “inflammatory,” “indecent,” “pseudo-scientific,” “racist trash.” However, these critiques have usually been highly misleading, often grossly mistaken and ad hominem, and sometimes crudely scatological as well as vicious (for example, Barash, 1995). The book deserves more thoughtful assessments (see, for example, Brand, 1995; Francis, 1995; Horowitz, 1995), because Rushton has built too strong a case to be toppled by flurries of anger and jabs at its periphery.

His strongest claims are that (1) there is a highly consistent pattern of average differences among the three major races on a wide range of attributes (aggregated averages for Caucasoid populations are always intermediate to those for Mongoloids and Negroids), and (2) this pattern cannot be explained in strictly environmental terms. Some of the averages disfavor Negroids (smaller head size, lower intelli-
gence, higher rates of crime, promiscuity, and social disorganiza-
tion), others favor them (earlier physical maturation, larger body size), and some seem neutral (higher rates of ovulation and multiple births, higher extraversion than introversion).

Critics have disputed the accuracy of some of the aver-
ages that disfavor Negroid populations (head size) and at-
tributed others (lower intelligence and higher crime rates) to
strictly environmental origins; they have attributed to mere
prurient interest Rushton’s mention of other differences
whose truth they do not dispute (genital size); and they have
ignored socially neutral differences (personality, rate of
gamete production) as well as ones that favor Negroids
(earlier head-lifting, teething, walking), all of which contra-
dict the environmental deprivation theories critics use to
explain the unfavorable averages. Although differences
within each race are far larger than the average differences
between them, as Rushton notes, the latter can nonetheless
be quite substantial. To cite just one interesting example, the
frequency of dizygotic twins is 4, 8, and 16 per 1,000 births,
respectively, for Mongoloids, Caucasoids, and Negroids
(and three-egg triplets constitute, respectively, 10, 100, and
1,700 per million births).

Rushton and others (such as Herrnstein and Murray,
1994) have shown that considerable racial disparities (for
example, in low birth weight babies, sexual behavior) often
remain after controlling for differences in social class. If
social and cultural factors account for the pattern Rushton
has documented, then they must operate in far different ways
than we have long assumed—indeed, in ways that often
mimic genetic mechanisms.

Research in behavior genetics during the last decade
(Plomin and McClearn, 1993; Rowe, 1994) has provided
Rushton firm ground for arguing that the traits and behaviors
he catalogs tend to be moderately to highly heritable (within
race). Rushton even understates his case by failing to high-
light that heritabilities tend to rise substantially with age and
that the effects of shared environments (such as parents’
child-rearing style and social class) tend to dissipate by
adulthood, which clearly undermines currently popular theo-
ries of cumulative environmental effects.

Although there is no similarly definitive evidence that
average differences between the races are also partly genetic,
Rushton marshals indirect and sometimes compelling evi-
dence that they are. For example, he reviews evidence that
average black-white differences on diverse mental tests are
strongly correlated with the tests’ heritabilities as deter-
mined in other samples. Those average black-white score
differences are also highly correlated with the degree of
inbreeding depression (a genetic phenomenon) among Japa-
nese children on those same tests. These well-established
correlations are consistent with genetic, but not with strictly
environmental explanations of racial differences in
intelligence.

The most interesting of Rushton’s speculations (although
not original with him) is that ethnocentrism has an evolu-
tional basis. He describes how race consciousness—and its
frequent concomitant, racism—occur in cultures throughout
history and the world over. Buttressing his historical ac-
counts with recent empirical evidence, he also reviews evi-
dence that humans and other species recognize, prefer,
invest in, and grieve most for the members of their species
with whom they share the most genes. The data are startling
for the uninitiated. For example, spouses and close friends
tend to be most alike on the most heritable traits. This
recognition of genetic similarity and self-segregation of
breeding populations, in turn, forms a pillar of the most
speculative of Rushton’s claims, namely, that r-K selection
accounts for the differences among the life histories of
different races.

This theory has drawn fire not because it is racist or bogus
science, for it is neither. Rather, it has drawn fire largely
because it violates egalitarian sensibilities, undermines ide-
ologies of cultural determinism, and ignites smoldering ra-
cial fears that are, in fact, exacerbated by racial differences,
whatever their basis in nature or nurture. Race, Evolution,
and Behavior confronts us as few books have with the
dilemmas wrought in a democratic society by individual and
group differences in key human traits (Gottfredson, 1996).

Indeed, Rushton’s obdurate dispassion and refusal to
genuflex to social sensitivities on these issues only fuel the
firestorm of anger. To remain detached and objective in
the midst of turbulent emotions is to risk being branded “uncar-
ing” or “mean-spirited.” To trigger fear and fury on matters
the public badly misunderstands, but about which it desper-
ately seeks relief, is to court demagogic retaliation. The
monstrous ideology that critics attribute to this admirably
non-ideological book reflects primarily the extreme, unex-
amined fears that it unleashes and that opportunists use to
advantage.

The book’s weakness is that it is not particularly peda-
gogical. It objectively delivers what seems to be bad news,
but does not help readers make sense of it in the context of
widespread hopes, fears, and miseducation. However, no-
where is the need for thoughtful pedagogy greater than the
challenge more daunting than on emotion-ridden issues such
as those Rushton examines. The public badly needs guid-
ance in learning how to think and talk constructively about
racial differences, some part of which may eventually be
proved genetic. In fact, misconceptions about that possibil-
ity abound and produce unwarranted anxiety and pessimism.
They flood into and quickly derail any otherwise productive
discussion of racial differences that does not anticipate and
counter them explicitly, systematically, and repeatedly.

To be sure, Rushton addresses many such misconcep-
tions. He points out that variation within races is far greater
than the differences between them; heritability (even 100
percent) does not mean unchanging or immutable; genes
work through, not apart from, nurture; genetic and environ-
mental influences are probabilistic, not deterministic; ge-
netic and cultural heritage evolve together; the social and
biological meanings of race differ but overlap; and, while
constraining our options, his data do not prescribe any particular social policy or practice, conservative or liberal. But where Rushton has a single sentence or page on these issues, there might be many.

Chapters might begin and conclude with more explanation of Rushton’s train of thought in reviewing different kinds of data, which is not always obvious and thereby creates a vacuum for readers’ imaginings. The early chapter on “Behavior Genetics” provided a wonderful opportunity, not taken, to teach readers that we have all totally misunderstood how environments create differences among us, thus offering new hope for more effective environmental intervention. While behavior genetics may dash old, mistaken beliefs in environmental determinism, it promises to revolutionize our thinking about how people choose and can change their environments.

It is impossible to speak forthrightly on race today and not be misunderstood or misrepresented by some people. However, it is possible to reduce the rate of misreading and misconception, in part by providing extended, close consideration of what the research in question does and does not document or imply. While such informed reflection does not supply the solutions that disturbed readers sometimes demand, it does help clear the way for others to search more effectively for them. The need to provide it is surely a special burden, but also a special opportunity.

References

RACE, EVOLUTION, AND BEHAVIOR: A LIFEHISTOR Y PERSPECTIVE by J. Philippe Rushton. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. 1995, 334 pp. His basic thesis is that race differences in behavior are explainable from the viewpoint of life history analysis, particularly the difference between r- and K-selected evolutionary strategies. According to Rushton, modern humans appeared first in Africa roughly 200,000 years ago and, being the â€œoldest,â€ are the most r-selected. Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective is a book by Canadian psychologist and author J. Philippe Rushton. Rushton was a professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario for many years, and the head of the controversial Pioneer Fund. The first unabridged edition of the book came out in 1995, and the third, latest unabridged edition came out in 2000; abridged versions were also distributed.