Skin Color and Intelligence in African Americans: A Reply to Hill

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Hill's theory that the positive association between light skin color and intelligence among African Americans can be explained as a result of discrimination by whites against darker skinned blacks is implausible. There is no direct evidence for this theory. If it were true, dark skinned blacks should earn less than light skinned blacks as a result of greater discrimination against them. The NORC data show that this is not the case. Hill's analysis is an example of the Sociologists' Fallacy that consists of treating correlates as causes.

KEY WORDS: race; intelligence; skin color.

Hill has proposed an alternative theory for the finding of a significant association between light skin color and vocabulary, taken as a measure of intelligence, among African Americans. My own theory is that light skinned African Americans have more white genes and these confer a genetic advantage for intelligence. Hill's theory is that the association arises as a result of several environmental variables associated with skin color. Hill's assertion that his demonstration of the existence of these associations discredits the genetic theory cannot be accepted. All he has done is to propose an alternative theory to explain this fact. This does not affect the corroboration of genetic theory provided by the establishment of this association. The problem now is to decide which of the two theories provides the most reasonable explanation.

I do not think that Hill's theory stand up to critical examination and to

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show this I will examine in turn the factors he proposes to explain the association between light skin color and vocabulary. These are (1) Whites have discriminated less against light skinned blacks, as a result of which they have been able to acquire higher socio-economic status, which in turn has increased their IQs and vocabularies. Contrary to this contention, I assembled evidence in the last two paragraphs of my paper showing that (a) it is doubtful whether whites have discriminated less against light skinned blacks and more against dark skinned blacks; and (b) even if they have done so, it is doubtful whether being discriminated against lowers IQs and vocabularies. The most probable explanation for the higher socio-economic status of light skinned blacks is that they inherit genes for higher IQs.

To test Hill's hypothesis that whites discriminate more against dark skinned blacks and that this somehow lowers their IQs we can examine the NORC data set to see whether dark skinned blacks have lower earnings. If dark skinned blacks experience more discrimination from whites, they will have lower earnings. The correlation is .04. This is direct evidence that whites do not discriminate more against dark skinned blacks. Hill's hypothesis that whites discriminate more dark skinned blacks is disconfirmed.

(2) Mothers of light skinned blacks have more education than mothers of dark skinned blacks and this contributes to the association between skin color and vocabulary. Contrary to this theory, research in behavior genetics during the last twenty years or so has led to a consensus that this class of family environment has no effect on the IQs of adults. Rowe (1997, p. 137) explains: "Most behavioural scientists still subscribe to what might be termed the *family effects theory of environmental influence*. That is, they presume that the most important experiences for the growth of intelligence are broad, family-related ones (e.g., parental vocabulary, parental encouragement of achievement, income). Accordingly, they also presume that substantially improving such conditions would boost IQ levels. Behavior genetic research shows this theory to be false" (Rowe, 1994). One item of evidence supporting this conclusion is that the correlation for intelligence of unrelated adults reared in the same family is zero, showing that family environments have no long term effect on intelligence (Bouchard, 1993, p. 57). The most plausible explanation for the finding that the mothers of light skinned blacks have more education than mothers of dark skinned blacks is that these mothers are themselves light-skinned, come from higher socio-economic status light skinned families, and have higher IQs, all of which contribute to their acquiring more education. The association between mothers' education and children's IQs arises through genetic transmission of intelligence from mother to child, not from an environmental effect of mothers' education on children's IQs.

(3) Light skinned blacks have more education than dark skinned blacks, and this contributes to their higher vocabulary scores. The most likely explanation for this association is that light skinned blacks come from higher socio-economic status families that have higher IQs and for this reason stay longer in education.

(4) Southern born blacks tend to have darker skins and lower IQs and being born in the south has an adverse effect on IQ. It is improbable that being born in the south has an adverse environmental impact on the IQ. Hill offers no theory for how such an effect could operate. The most likely explanation for this association is that lighter skinned blacks with higher IQs have migrated north and west, bringing about an association between being born in the south, low IQ and dark skin. Several studies have shown that blacks in the south have fewer white genes than those in the north and west. Parra, Marcini, and Akey (1998) estimated the percentage of white genes among blacks as 11.6 percent in Charleston, South Carolina, and at 20.2 percent in Pittsburgh and 19.8 in New York. Reed (1969) estimated the percentages of white genes among American blacks at 11 percent in Georgia, 18.9 percent in New York and 22 percent in Oakland, California. Other studies have estimated the percentages of white genes among American blacks at 4–8 percent in South Carolina (Workman, 1968) and 22 percent in Baltimore (Glass, 1955). The effect of the lower proportions of white genes among southern blacks would be expected to reduce the IQs and darken the skin color. As predicted, the IQ of blacks is lower in the southern states as compared with elsewhere in the United States (Montagu, 1945).

(5) Blacks born outside the USA have darker skins and lower IQs than those born in the USA. It is doubtful whether this is a causal environmental factor contributing to the association between light skin color and IQ among blacks. The most probable explanation is that blacks born outside the USA come almost entirely from the Caribbean and Africa, and have darker skins and lower IQs than native born American blacks. The IQs of blacks in Africa and the Caribbean is around 70–80 as compared with around 85 for American blacks (Lynn, 1997). It is also known that blacks in the Caribbean have fewer white genes than American blacks. In Jamaican blacks the percentage of white genes is 6.8 percent as compared with about 17 percent among American blacks (Parra, Marcini, & Akey, 1998). The lower percentage of white genes among Caribbean and African blacks explains their lower IQs.

From this discussion it is proposed that the associations of the variables assembled by Hill between skin color and IQ among American blacks can all be explained most plausibly as genetic effects. Hill's theory is a variant of what is known as "the sociologist's fallacy" (Jensen, 1998) which consists

of treating socio-economic and family variables as causes of the association between race and IQ and partialing them out, when these variables are correlates and effects rather than causes of the difference. The fallacy in this procedure is that these variables are themselves functions of intelligence and regressing them out removes skin color of most of its causal explanatory power for the explanation of the association between light skin color and IQ.

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