

Letters

Race and Academic Hiring

Although I am not the kind of Indian to whom Etzioni refers in his editorial (11 June, p. 1087), my experience suggests that, if one must belong to a minority, the choice must be made very carefully—as in the adage, the best thing one can do for oneself is to start with a good set of parents. There seems to be no advantage to being identified with a group whose time has not yet come. To change the focus of discrimination from one group to another is still racism. It is just as humiliating to be offered a job because of irrelevant qualifications as to be denied one.

I join Etzioni in asking academicians to employ academic criteria when filling academic posts. Perhaps the scientist's objectivity is like the common man's common sense—much touted but largely absent.

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Etzioni invites us to assume that "a Chicano" could not have been as highly qualified as "one of [his] brightest students," although he gives no evidence that this was in fact the case. Also, his somewhat flippant treatment of a serious problem is of little help in seeking solutions.

The problem, which Etzioni does not confront, is that because of employment discrimination against racial minorities and women by the prestigious American universities, their faculties are extremely homogeneous (virtually all white and male). At the same time, growing numbers of individuals who were previously denied admission to universities on racial grounds are now being admitted. Blacks, Chicanos, and women are demanding representation on the faculties. Such demands should hardly be surprising. It is fallacious to assume that an individual's background does not influence his scholarly work. Perhaps the most blatant evidence of this kind of influence is seen in the "scientific" support provided to the white supremacists by leading American universities in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries, in their interpretation of Negro culture and potential. Thus, in the interest of objectivity, it behooves the university to seek diversity in its community of scholars. This would seem particularly true in the field of sociology.

In these times of oversupply in the academic market, it should be to the advantage of the universities to consider the ethnic background and gender of well-qualified candidates, so that the damage already done by racism and sexism in academic hiring may be reversed.

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I wonder if the broadside assault on the problems of employment, presumably on the basis of race, is as widespread as Etzioni indicates, or whether his anecdotal references are specialized illustrations of a larger point, namely, the failure to treat all appointments by the same academic criteria, and to bring the current crop of young scholars to the same levels as those who have what Etzioni calls "a more fortunate background."

The case Etzioni cites is one in which a department chose a full 100 percent Chicano over an unspecified percent Sioux Indian. However, he does not state which of the two candidates was superior on professional and scientific grounds, nor does he make clear whether, all things being equal, the projected needs of the school, department, and geographical area were for a specialist in researches better covered by the Chicano applicant than by the assimilated Sioux candidate.

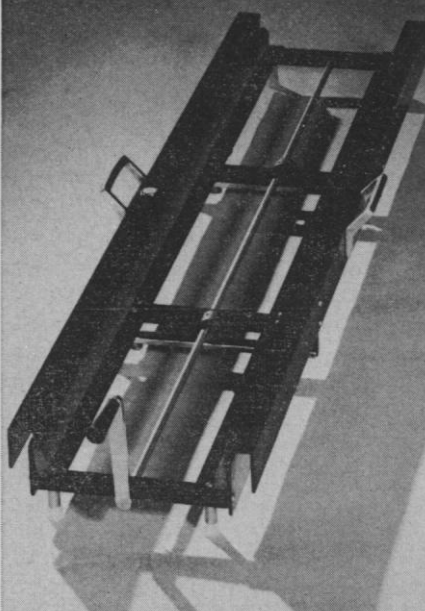
The concept of race is not merely anthropological. Etzioni's reference to the anthropological research that denies racially pure strains is quite beside the point from a sociological perspective. Racial differentials do exist sociologically, specifically in attitudes of people about themselves and in ways they treat one another. Furthermore, such treatments are not without correlation to differences in income, education, social services, and other factors

that are broadly referred to in the literature as racist. No amount of reference to anthropological research can evaporate these racially defined differences. Despite the spurious definition of race on biological and anthropological grounds, the concept has hardened rather than softened. This has been the agonizing legacy of advanced industrial societies in the West. To accuse a department (unnamed) of "racism in reverse" because it simply responded to sociological racism is erroneous on scientific grounds and misanthropic on pedagogic grounds. Concern for minority representation is a belated albeit awkward attempt to correct a grievous series of historical misstatements, misconceptions, and misanthropies committed by the social sciences about the nature of minority groups in this nation. Toward this end, it is evident that people have become sensitized to the special problems of race, religion, and ethnicity.

There is a final point that perhaps represents a more subtle error in judgment and therefore requires precise elaboration. Etzioni implies that academic centers, as they now exist, must not be diluted by a selection process that takes such a criterion as being a Chicano into account. This arrogation of knowledge without power is exactly what minority groups contest and find most difficult to accept about research on minority peoples.

The peculiarities of minority group life have had a great deal to do with changing the social sciences, far more perhaps than the peculiarities of social science have changed attitudes toward minority groups. The critical examination of the inexactitudes of intelligence tests, of assuming the genetic basis of environmental performance, of the reduction of minority problems to problems of group interaction, and of the use of theories of matriarchy and esoteric doctrines of familial life to explain minority behavior have all come about not through patient social science observations, but through the forceful persistence of minority groups in expressing discontent with shortcomings in the work of social scientists. Given the special difficulties in ethnographic research, extending from linguistic to cultural barriers, it would make perfectly good sense for a department to hire a Chicano and weigh that factor heavily in any evaluation of a candidate's fitness for appointment. To argue from abstract logical premises, and to justify these arguments on the grounds

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of scientific purity, is not only spurious reasoning, but reveals a view of social science that is by no means uniformly shared.

Etzioni trots out familiar arguments about an educational system that for the first time, in part at least, has started applying the canons of social research to people who inhabit this country. The arguments that he adduces are no more, no less than those used in recent years by those who have opposed, on the basis of a Platonic theory of educational verities, the special programs that have enabled blacks to enter college. The penetration of racial minorities has not ruined the higher educational system in America. It might be argued that thus far it has not helped much and that special interest politicking is scientifically irrelevant. But I doubt that there is evidence that would show any actual measure of deterioration as a result of minority entrance into the higher educational sphere. If the alternative to benign neglect is an occasional serious injustice, this must be weighed against injustices committed on the side of neglect. Even if in this particular case there has been a possible injustice committed to Etzioni's graduate student, we can at least empathize with the reasons for this slight. In the past, the same kind of injustices have been committed for quite other reasons—not nearly as noble in purpose. If this was simply an isolated case, Etzioni had an obligation to engage in quiet diplomacy, or, in other words, not to transform an individual case into a universal condemnation. A personal grievance is not a social problem, and a unique example is not a law of nature.

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Irony seems to be a dangerous way of making a point; both Preer and Horowitz seem not to address the issue I sought to raise (which naturally makes me grateful to Singh).

First, the Chicano's qualifications were compared to those of others, but the reason he was hired was the need to balance the color chart. That is the whole point of hiring by genes.

Second, the issue I raised was not protection of academic purity, which was never free of pecuniary and status considerations; surely it deserves to be diluted somewhat for greater social justice. What I fear is its destruction, as

master color charts, or quota systems, replace other hiring criteria. This tends to happen when "exceptions" made for one group (initially, chiefly blacks), are extended to many others. It is a sad truth that the academic system can live with concessions to one minority group but cannot survive the bending of standards for blacks and Chicanos and Indians and women and others.

As to how widespread the tendency to hire by race is, the reader can judge himself—is it an isolated incidence or a spreading practice?

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Margin of Safety

The manner in which Swenerton and Hurley (2 July, p. 62) carried out their recent investigation into the teratogenic effects of ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) appears to be a well-executed, if uninspired, classical toxicological investigation. I do, however, question its applicability to reality. I would appreciate being advised of the circumstances under which a human being could ever be exposed, during pregnancy, to a chronic dietary intake of 2 to 3 percent (by weight) of EDTA, or its equivalent in strong chelators. Even if one includes nonchelating antagonists, the possibility appears to be exceedingly remote.

I am aware that a large margin of safety (a factor of around 100) is commonly employed in the certification of chemicals designed for human use. It seems to me that there is a large uninvestigated gap in this report between intake of 2 percent and intake of 0.02 percent. Indeed, to one used to dealing in microgram quantities of material, the range between 0 and 2 percent is simply enormous. If, as I suspect, this study represents the testing of "safety" factors far in excess of those commonly in use, then it serves little purpose save to alarm the uniformed. I believe that toxicologists have some responsibility to design their experiments to approximate reality. Should they fail to do so they must inevitably undermine their credibility not only with other scientists but, far more importantly, with the public at large.

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