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THE MYTH OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY IN SPORTS

By Ian B. Kerr

Abstract Sports hold a special place in the hearts of many Americans. Indeed, athletic competition has come to define and shape our understanding in many ways of what it means to be American. There is, however, a dark side to sports and that is the racial tension that often consumes our understanding of athletic competition and the equality of athletic prowess and personal ability. Seemingly innocuous, sports bring to the forefront racial sentiments about innate superiority, that certain types of people are better athletes simply by the nature of their being born. In his book *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk about It*, John Entine posits that innate genetic differences amongst peoples leads to certain racial groups excelling at particular sporting events. It is the intent of this paper, through a close examination of Entine's theoretical arguments, to demonstrate that science and genetic experimentation have proven that natural biological variation amongst and between peoples cannot be used to validate claims of innate racial superiority in athletic competition.

1. Introduction

Sports and athletic competition in the 21st century are subject to many of the same racial prejudices and beliefs that have come to consume daily American life. Undeniably our penchant for sports and athletic competition has lead to the fact that there are few places where the idea of race as biology is as highly contested as on the playing fields of America. Notions of race and racial superiority abound when one even superficially begins to examine the plethora of recent materials written on sports and athletic competition. One of the more controversial and substantial pieces of work to have come out of America's obsession not only with sports but also with race is a book written by sports journalist Jon Entine. The book, entitled *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk about It*, sets forth the highly contentious belief that advantages in certain sports can be traced to different body types and physiological structures which are in turn derived from innate genetic differences among racial groups (Entine, 2000). Stemming from this central thesis, Entine furthers his discussion on race and sports by examining certain athletic events like long-distance running and basketball and the historical origins of racism within those sports.

This paper, however, is not merely a summation of Entine's book. Beyond closely examining the theoretical propositions that Entine's theory supposes, I will investigate and appraise the validity of Entine's thesis in light of the plethora of recent genetic experiments and discussions dealing explicitly with notions of race and racism.

2. Overview

As previously stated, in his book, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk about It* (hereafter referred to as *Taboo*) Entine contends that there is a genetic basis for the predominance of Black athletes in many sports.

Entine further contends that this predominance of Black athletes is also tied to the fact that Black athletes are so successful at those sports. Despite acknowledging that environmental influences have a role in athletic aptitude and performance, Entine asserts throughout the book that the environment remains strongly subservient to the role of innate genetic athletic ability in certain racial groups. This article will critically assess both the central thesis of *Taboo* and the logic behind Entine's use of empirical data, biomedical studies and statistical reasoning in creating such a strong argument for genetic determinism in athletic performance.

To accomplish this end, a brief outline of *Taboo* will be helpful. In the first two sections of the book, Entine discusses running events, noting the prevalence of Black sprinters with West African descent and the multitude of long distance Kenyan runners in global athletic competition. The next two sections deal with the history of racially motivated science, like the eugenics movement and early "scientifically" driven stereotypes regarding African Americans' intelligence levels and mental abilities. *Taboo* also discusses a multitude of flawed studies which concluded that genetic factors were responsible for Black athletic success. Entine ends with a final chapter reiterating his belief that genetics lies at the heart of athletic success.

I will use three conceptual frameworks: genetic, racial, and environmental determinism to illustrate the ways in which Entine creates several causational fallacies, erroneous statements, and incorrect inferences regarding the supposed genetic basis for the predominance of Black athletes in sports. To provide stronger reasoning against Entine's stance on racial superiority I will supplement my argument with several other articles and recent scholarship dealing explicitly with issues of race and athletic ability, and with various book reviews and critiques of *Taboo*. I start by examining Entine's central thesis of genetic difference among populations in light of the recent science conducted by geneticists and anthropologists.

3. Racial Biology: Race And Genetics

According to Entine, "the scientific evidence for Black athletic superiority is overwhelming," and "cultural explanations do not, cannot, account for this phenomenon" (2000: 341). What then does the scientific community say to those statements which are tantamount to stating that "Blacks" are inherently, genetically, not only different from "Whites" and thus set apart biologically, but somehow different enough from the rest of the human population to be able to dominate athletics globally?

First, it is important to note that Entine is not working in a vacuum; his assertions about race and sports are part of a larger ongoing argument about folk notions of race. Folk notions of race founded on the idea that deep, mutually exclusive biological categories dividing groups of people have scientific and cultural merit. This type of thinking is rooted in the notion that there are underlying, essential differences among people and that those observable physical differences among people are rooted in biology, in genetics (Ossorio, Duster, 2005: 2).

4. Genetic Determinism

Underlying Entine's assumption that genetic differences account and provide for solid differences in athletic abilities is the notion that we can best account for these

differences by looking through the catch-all lens of genetic determinism. Genetic determinism can best be defined as the idea that genes are a determining factor in the formation of certain complex traits in humans and their behavior (Harpalani, 2004). Claims of genetic superiority in certain groups or “races” of people, to be scientific and valid, must be proved in order to conclude genetic determinism. Using that idea as a framework, authors like Entine who deduce that there is a genetic basis for Black athletic predominance have three main objectives to prove. Vinay Harpalani is one of the most outspoken critics of using genetic determinism to validate notions of inferiority or the superiority of certain groups (in this case Black athletes). He argues that in order for any of Entine’s claims to be valid he must prove that: 1) there is a systematic way to define Black and White populations; 2) consistent and plausible genetic differences between the populations can be demonstrated; 3) a link between those genetic differences and athletic performance can be clearly shown (2004).

An examination of those three criteria, using prominent biological and anthropological theories, can shed light onto racial genetic determinism in regards to Entine’s thesis. It has been accepted generally by anthropologists that race is neither a genetically nor biologically sound paradigm but instead a social construct based largely on Western society’s obsession with superficial physical features such as skin color (Harpalani, 2004). Even those who make arguments for a biological definition of race acknowledge that that definition would not correspond to simplistic notions of people being labeled as “Black” and “White” (Andreasen, 1998). Prominent anthropologists such as Jonathon Marks have also recently weighed in on this issue, debunking notions of genetically-based racial differences. Marks writes that Entine is saying one of three things: that the very best Black athletes have an inherent genetic advantage over the very best White athletes; that the average Black athlete has a genetic advantage over the average White athlete; that all Blacks have the genetic potential to be better athletes than all Whites. Clearly these three propositions are both unknowable and scientifically untenable. Marks writes that “the first statement is trivial, the secondly statistically intractable, and the third ridiculous for its racial essentialism” (Marks, 2000: 1077).

The second criterion -- demonstrating across the board genetic variations between populations -- has in recent years been roundly debunked. Recently, out of the scientific community we have seen a huge influx of genetic work, testing, and experimentation in determining the linkage, if any, between notions of race and biology. Recent work on alleles, a part of a gene that produces variation in inherited characteristics, has shown that allele frequency comparisons among different human populations rarely show any discontinuities between them (Marks, 2002; Molnar, 1998). Like the allele analysis, studies that focus on comparing different and varied human populations help to support the perception that human physical traits vary gradually across the entire global landscape. Differences in height, skin color, and hair texture are simply the result of climate-related variation. The reason for the different appearances of an individual from China and a native Kenyan is that across the environmental landscape small changes have produced different ways of dealing with those environments. To say that a Kenyan is naturally more attuned to becoming a champion runner is simply false; he or she is simply more attuned to living in his or her environment in the best way dictated or determined by human evolution.

The wide range of physical differences among people across the global environmental landscape makes it exceedingly difficult to entertain the notion that there are four or five non-overlapping, distinct races. The more scientists measure human traits, the fewer discrete differences they find. As Marks writes, "Nature has not created four or five distinct, non-overlapping genetic groups of people, but rather the human species possesses remarkably little genetic variation when compared with other organisms" (2002: 34). However, in his preface, Entine initially sets up his argument by stating, "Biological factors specific to populations can exaggerate the impact of anatomical differences" (2000: xi). This is in stark contrast to scientific studies which, time and time again, have failed to locate concrete biological differences specific only to certain populations. Noted social critic Pilar Ossario observes, "We can't find any genetic markers that are in everybody of a particular race and in nobody of some other race" (2003).

Beyond the realm of scientific endeavors, race in America is not even generally defined or discussed in terms of genetics. An individual is not assigned a racial category based on what percentage of genes he or she shares with any other person, nor do any outward appearances give any indication of what that percentage would even be. Regardless, racial determinists, Entine among them, equate the racial category of "African" with common notions of being "Black" (Harpalani, 2004). This is a highly erroneous assumption because it neglects entirely the sexual mixing of different groups of people. What of the countless African American slaves forced into sexual relationships with "White" masters? A large portion of any gene pool is derived from many different ancestries; African Americans are no exception. Many individuals who appear ostensibly "Black" or "African" may have large portions of European ancestry in addition to other ancestries. By equating dark skin with notions of solely African heritage, Entine muddles his intentions of linking African ancestry with innate athletic superiority.

5. Biological Variability And The Environment

When Entine does cite supposed "genetic" data on the differences between Blacks and Whites, he is in fact citing biological data. These include studies on African fast twitch muscle fibers and development of motor skills. Entine includes these studies to demonstrate irrevocable proof of embedded genetic differences between populations but refuses to accept the fact that any differences may be due to environmental factors or training. Entine then is unfairly giving an undue strong preference to genetic factors while disregarding social and environmental factors (Harpalani, 2004).

Moreover, external differences like height or weight, which play an instrumental role in helping define an individual's athletic prowess, have not been proven to be exclusively rooted in biology or genetics. Genetic differences among people cannot solely account for why certain people are more athletic than others, as scientists cannot find any specific genetic markers that define the characteristics of athleticism (speed, height, strength) in one group or "race" more than any other. Kenyan athletes may have won the majority of long distance racing events this decade but their victories cannot be inherently tied to their "Blackness" because a classification of these athletes as "African" cannot explain any deep set biological differences that one might purport they have in order to explain their prevalence for winning. The answer

to their high success rate as runners must be innately tied to the social and cultural environment in which they find themselves. Perhaps by looking at the ways in which Kenyans have adapted to their environment we might be able to come to a better understanding of their running dominance.

Indeed, many anthropologists have suggested that evolutionary factors, like the natural selection of larger lung capacities for populations living in high altitudes or lean body structures in tropical climates, play a larger role in determining an individual's predisposition for running (Moore, 1992). Discussions of environmental factors, however, do not begin to explain or validate any notion of long-standing genetic divergence but instead highlight different selective processes at work across the global landscape. Entine downplays, in his own words, the "environmentalist case against innate Black superiority in sports" to an alarming degree. In fact, Entine dedicates an entire chapter in *Taboo* to relegating the environment to a secondary role behind the "primary of innate (genetic) advantage" (Entine, 2001: 280). Seemingly the social environment where one lives, grows up, and trains means nothing to Entine, who presumes that instead, genetic good fortune has everything to do with athletic success. Entine states that "all the hard work in the world will go for naught if the roulette wheel of genetics doesn't land on your number" (Entine: 2001, 271). How does one explain, then, the athlete who trains countless hours a day fine-tuning a jump shot, like LeBron James or shaving seconds off sub-four minute miles like Robert Kipkoech Cheruiyot, a four time Boston Marathon winner? Both of these individuals were not born in affluent conditions, nor into families with particularly athletic parents yet they reached the pinnacle of their respective sports. How, would Entine explain how an individual born in squalid economic and social conditions rise to the top of his teams? Entine seems to purport that being born to Black parents who are athletic themselves trumps environmental and social factors.

Furthermore, Entine's stance stands in stark contrast to the accepted belief of anthropologists, sociologists, and behavioral scientists that there exists a strong interplay between the socio-cultural environment and the biology of human growth and development (Bogin, 2001). In fact it is socially and scientifically understood that environmental forces, including social and economic ones, regulate the expression of DNA as much as DNA regulates the growth patterns of individuals (Bogin, 1999: 397).

6. African Dominance: The Crisis Of "Whiteness"

Beyond its treatment of human genetics, *Taboo* dedicates several chapters to long distance running in an attempt to elucidate valid reasons for the supposed African, specifically Kenyan, dominance in this sport. A look at the contemporary scholarship on this complex relationship between notions of "Whiteness," "Blackness" and men's long distance running is highly useful in exploring and critiquing Entine's notions of genetically superior athletic inheritability. A 2006 study conducted by sociologists Theresa Walton and Ted Butryn examined over 700 printed sources dealing explicitly with distance running in the U.S from the 1970s through to the present. They came to the conclusion that distance running was and is still largely framed as being an issue of "White space," that it's explicated as a conflict between the imagined understanding of the historical domination of long distance running by American males and cur-

rent increasing Black African dominance. The U.S media has largely structured the so-called “crisis” of long distance running as a two-pronged threat: externally, by a perceived dominance of African athletes; internally, and concurrently, by a lack of American White male success.

This crisis of whiteness within distance running can clearly be seen in the 1960 Olympic Games, when Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila won the Olympic gold in the marathon, the standard for long distance running. Before 1960, the overwhelming majority of medals awarded in long distance running had gone to White athletes (Walton and Butryn, 2006:7). By the late 1980s, the American media had subverted the African dominance in running in a way that spoke to White anxieties over their “space” in the realm of distance running. In other words American media failed, quite purposely, to provide any real coverage or attention to African American running victories in order to maintain the illusion of White dominance in athletics. These “White anxieties” over the dominance of non-White runners translated into genetic differences almost immediately, with the popularly held assumption that racial physiology must account for the recent African dominance in running. The genetic differences people argued over were conflated with differences solely of skin color. Popular theories abounded on the link between darker skin and athletic aptitude (Dyer, 1997). This was the historical and cultural context that gave rise to Entine’s *Taboo*.

Since Entine so readily subscribes to using statistics and athletic results to confirm his belief that advantages in certain sports can be traced to genetic differences among people (Entine, 2000), let’s briefly examine recent results from several of the elite marathons races. The 2008 Boston Marathon saw a winner in Kenyan Robert K. Cheruiyot. However, the next four top places went to non-Kenyan runners. The 2008 running of the New York City marathon saw only three Kenyans in the top 15, with four American runners in the top 10 (marathonguide.com). On the women’s side, arguably the world’s best marathoner over the past five years is Paula Radcliffe, a Briton. Although Kenyan women and men still win a large percentage of marathons and earn high rankings, they are certainly not alone on the winner’s podium, as Entine would have us believe.

If Entine’s conjectured correlation among skin color, genetics, and Black athletes’ successes seems illogical and egregious, there may be a reason for it. Entine’s thesis creates what historian Amy Bass calls the “fantasy of authority” wherein the logic of a statement, in this case the statement that race determines success, seems to be supported by the results (that Kenyan runners seem to dominate distance running). The assumed correlation is reified as something natural and factual, based wrongly only on the chance reoccurrence of the results, and thus appears to legitimize the results of the statement. In other words, because we see Black runners succeed and White runners not as frequently, we attribute Black success to the marker of the group’s difference, skin color. Clearly the causation drawn from the correlation stated above is fraught with problems.

Yet why has the genetic theory of Black athletic dominance been so difficult to debunk? Part of the problem are the roles of professional athletes and the media in reinforcing negative stereotypes regarding race and athletic ability. Officials reporting on the 1995 World Distance-Running Championship stated that Wilson Kipketer, a Kenyan athlete, despite winning the 800 meter championships, “loped around like a

sightseer” (Barbash, 1995: 1). The media’s incredulousness over Kenyan dominance in sports has caused many reporters and journalists to posit that Africans need not try hard or train with any difficulty to ensure their success. Further, many of the United States’ top runners have also stated at different times their own beliefs in the concept of genetic predisposition. Steve Holman, one of the top U.S. mile runners up until the late 1990s, publically stated that he felt that his African competitors had a genetic preponderance for speed. Holman, himself an African American, also went as far as to say that although he himself has African ancestry, he was “different from the Kenyans, whose bodies were designed for distance running” (Noden, 1996: 148). In using the term “Kenyan” to stand in for male elite distance runners, Holman commits one of the greatest fallacies in the entire African genetic-edge debate; by treating a particular subsection of a group of people interchangeably with the group as a whole, Holman is bringing essentialism into play. There are plenty of native Kenyans who have no better running ability on average than anyone else on the planet. Placing all Kenyans into the small group of elite runners is thus highly suspect.

The term “Black African” seems to have emerged as the dominant blanket term for all Africans, save Moroccans and Algerians who are largely identified as “White.” Seeing as how several high-profile Algerian and Moroccan runners have had great success in long distance running, this conflation of the terms “Black African” and “African” should be seen as a red-flag in the inadequacies of the supposed theories of Black dominance of running. Inherent in this debate over athletic aptitude is a revival of a new kind of racial labeling. Black African success in running has forced a new cultural context to emerge in which Whites are viewed as the victimized group (Hoberman, 1997). The idea held by much of the media is that, putting aside the socioeconomic benefits and privileges of belonging to the Caucasian majority group in American society, White athletes struggling against the “naturally superior” African athlete are locked into this stark cultural dichotomy of Whiteness versus Blackness (Kurtz, 2003). Popular culture at large seemingly casts everything in the terms of this “Black” and “White” divide. Regardless of the multitude of other groups of athletes participating in distance racing, many of which are difficult to openly categorize, the debate has sadly and unfairly come down to “White” versus “Black.”

7. Conclusion

Race is not a legitimate biological category and, as a social construct, does not influence sports or sports performance in the myriad of biological ways Entine purports. In *Taboo*, Entine falsely conflates race with culture, and biology with social and environmental factors. Entine also wrongly equates notions of inherent natural ability with environmental occurrences and predicaments. The example of male Kenyan dominance in long-distance running to which Entine devotes several chapters is not a matter of genetic isolation at all. Statistically, Kenyans are no more genetically different from any other African or European population on average. If the Kenyan body was inherently genetically more adapted to running than any other group of people in the world, then Kenyans would handedly win every long distance race. That, of course, is not the reality of the situation. It is important to note here that the identifier Kenyan although often used as describing a biologically—or-genetically defined population instead denotes a nationality, a well-defined political and cultural group.

Instead of validating Entine's objectives, the "Kenyan example" demonstrates the power of human adaptation to a particular environment. The fact that runners coming from Kenya do so well in running events attests to the fact the combination of intense high altitude training, consumption of a low-fat, high protein diet, and a social and cultural expectation to succeed have created in recent decades an environment which is highly conducive to producing excellent long-distance runners. It is important to remember that until the early 1980s, Australian, American and British runners dominated long distance running events. Simply put, athletic performance simply cannot be labeled a race-related phenomenon if race is not a valid genetic or biological determinant.

Entine and other quasi-genetic determinists fall into a mode of thinking wherein physical differences between individuals are read as proof that separate races of people exist. By focusing on physical differences and insignificant genetic variations rather than providing insight into the biodiversity among humans, Entine muddies the waters of racism and racial superiority.

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