

## Putting Scientific Achievement in Context

It is worthwhile to add some historical context to Bucky Cochrane's recent letter summarizing contributions to science of "European Caucasians and their descendents", the tripe about "professional communist racists" notwithstanding.

Historically, science was primarily an invention of European men. This is likely an historical accident, though there are cultural and geographical reasons that are partly responsible. Greater intelligence is almost certainly not a reason since there is no credible evidence that white men are more intelligent than women or men of color.

Progress in science prior to the twentieth century was largely due to men who were sufficiently wealthy not to have to work to make a living or to take time to deal with domestic issues. Such men were almost invariably white and from imperialist countries. Much of their wealth was built on the backs of people of color, and their leisurely opportunities in science were provided to them by the women and other servants who took care of their basic living needs.

Note also that nearly all women and people of color were forbidden even basic education for most of the history of science. In our own country, educational institutions for girls/women and people of color were generally inferior to those for white boys/men, especially at post-secondary levels, until the latter part of the twentieth century. Remember how long the "separate but equal" lie was maintained in the South? Even years after integration, the schools available to (e.g.) African Americans have been inferior because poverty and systemic racism kept them from living in wealthier neighborhoods, where the better schools were located. This almost universal "redlining" is a matter of historical record.

Until relatively recently, even when a woman or person of color managed to achieve a higher degree in science, they suffered a large amount of discrimination from their white male compatriots. Few found colleagues with whom to collaborate (essential in modern science) or unbiased referees to judge their work for professional advancement or funds to support their research. Hundreds of older scientific women or people of color have testified to this discrimination. (Substantial discrimination still

exists, though now it's more likely caused by the fact that many white male scientists just don't feel comfortable working with colleagues who "aren't like them" than by overt sexism or racism.)

Context is essential because too often white [male] supremacists try to equate greater achievement with greater intelligence, either through ignorance or malice. We cannot allow such an analysis to go unchallenged.

I'll just end by quoting Cochrane's summarizing statement, one with which i strongly agree: "Denigrate no one, nor their values, and challenge all students to do better than those who preceded them, regardless of the amount melanin in their skin." Or, i would add, the number of x or y chromosomes in their genes.