

Rainwater's Motivated Reasoning

Lee Rainwater was one of the most prominent liberal sociologists of the Great Society era. He spent 23 years at Harvard; here's the *Harvard Gazette's* memorial to his work. To be honest, though, I never heard of him until last week. Yet after I stumbled upon his 1966 *Daedalus* article, "The Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower-Class Family," I was surprised that *any* academic would so candidly admit to motivated reasoning. When I discovered that he was an intellectual leader of his generation, I was stunned.

Here's what stunned me; Rainwater's in blockquotes, I'm not. He starts off promisingly enough:

The first responsibility of the social scientist can be phrased in much the same way: "Tell it like it is." His second responsibility is to try to understand why "it" is that way, and to explore the implications of what and why for more constructive solutions to human problems.

Then he runs right off the rails:

Social research on the situation of the Negro American has been informed by four main goals: (1) to describe the disadvantaged position of Negroes, (2) to disprove the racist ideology which sustains the caste system, (3) to demonstrate that responsibility for the disadvantages Negroes suffer lies squarely upon the white caste which derives economic, prestige, and psychic benefits from the operation of the system, and (4) to suggest that in reality whites would be better rather than worse off if the whole jerry-built caste structure were to be dismantled.

If you wanted to "tell it like it is," of course, your goal would not be to "disprove" any ideology, but to *fairly evaluate* it. Similarly, your goal would not be to "demonstrate" that responsibility lies squarely upon anyone, but to *accurately apportion* responsibility. In any case, it's hard to understand how *both* (3) and (4) could be true. If whites would be better-off if the system were dismantled, how can the "white caste... derive economic, prestige, and psychic benefits from the operation of the system"? I suppose you could treat "the

white caste” as the subset of whites who profit, but then the claim is almost tautologous. Or you could be really defensive and say, “He means ‘gross benefits,’ not ‘net benefits.’”

Are Rainwater’s words really so damning to his own intellectual tradition? Well, imagine I wrote:

Social research on the situation of the American immigrant has been informed by four main goals: (1) to describe the disadvantaged position of immigrants, (2) to disprove the nativist ideology which sustains the caste system, (3) to demonstrate that responsibility for the disadvantages immigrants suffer lies squarely upon the native caste which derives economic, prestige, and psychic benefits from the operation of the system, and (4) to suggest that in reality natives would be better rather than worse off if the whole jerry-built caste structure were to be dismantled.

Would any judicious reader trust my work on immigration after this declaration? No. Why not? Because I’m talking like a trial lawyer who wants to win a case. The whole point of research, in contrast, is to stay open to the possibility that you’re wrong. Sure, you’ve got suspicions. But you’re supposed to not only verify your suspicions, but energetically look for counter-evidence! Furthermore, you’re supposed to not just follow these standards yourself, but monitor your intellectual teammates. The fact that your intellectual subculture wants X to be true urges self-scrutiny, not self-congratulation.

Speaking of that, how’s this for self-congratulation?

The successful accomplishment of these intellectual goals has been a towering achievement, in which the social scientists of the 1920’s, ’30’s, and ’40’s can take great pride; that white society has proved so recalcitrant to utilizing this intellectual accomplishment is one of the great tragedies of our time, and provides the stimulus for further social research on “the white problem.”

What’s most striking about Rainwater’s article, however, is that he provides a wealth of empirical evidence against his own point (3). Indeed, most of the article is standard “culture of poverty” sociology, documenting high levels of irresponsible and criminal

behavior among the underclass. How then does Rainwater reconcile his theory with the facts? Again, by the power of motivated reasoning.

Yet the implicit paradigm of much of the research on Negro Americans has been an overly simplistic one concentrating on two terms of an argument:

White cupidity—→ Negro suffering.

As an intellectual shorthand, and even more as a civil rights slogan, this simple model is both justified and essential. But, as a guide to greater understanding of the Negro situation as human adaptation to human situations, the paradigm is totally inadequate because it fails to specify fully enough the process by which Negroes adapt to their situations as they do, and the limitations one kind of adaptation places on possibilities for subsequent adaptations. A reassessment of previous social research, combined with examination of current social research on Negro ghetto communities, suggests a more complex, but hopefully more vertical, model:

White cupidity creates

Structural Conditions Highly Inimical to Basic Social Adaptation (low-income availability, poor education, poor services, stigmatization)

to which Negroes adapt by

Social and Personal Responses which serve to sustain the individual in his punishing world but also generate aggressiveness toward the self and others

which results in

Suffering directly inflicted by Negroes on themselves and on others.

In short, whites, by their greater power, create situations in which

Negroes do the dirty work of caste victimization for them. [original punctuation]

Notice: As an ethnographer of black poverty, Rainwater offers little or no data on “white cupidity.” Furthermore, a straightforward reading of his own evidence is that irresponsible and criminal behavior is, as usual, *maladaptive*. All he directly documents is the final clause – the *intra*-racial “dirty work of caste victimization.” Only motivated reasoning allows Rainwater to casually interpret these facts as proof of that the “white caste” is to blame for anything.

You could naturally protest that Rainwater is right for the wrong reasons. Maybe so, but this protest misses the meta point. Namely: If a brilliant, eminent, and mainstream scholar of the 1960s could be right for such wrong reasons, the brilliant, eminent, and mainstream scholars of today could easily be mired in their own brand of motivated reasoning. Indeed, so could you. Or me. There’s no easy remedy, but the first step is being hyper-aware that we have a problem.