



Was John Dewey Ethnocentric? Reevaluating the Philosopher's Early Views on Culture and Race

Thomas D. Fallace

In this historical study, the author explores the early racial and cultural views of John Dewey. The author argues that, during his years at the University of Chicago, when he wrote the majority of his works on education, Dewey considered American non-White minorities to be biologically equal to Whites but socially deficient. In particular, Dewey subscribed to two 19th-century conceptual frameworks that almost inevitably led him to such a conclusion: linear historicism and genetic psychology, which both relegated non-Western societies to the status of prior steps toward the developed status represented by the industrialized West. However, working within these broad ethnocentric conceptual frameworks, Dewey forged important new positions on the social-scientific issues of latent biological potentials and the doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics (i.e., neo-Lamarckianism).

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One hundred years ago, John Dewey, the most significant educational philosopher of the 20th century, first explicitly addressed the issue of race in the United States in a speech to the National Negro Conference. At a time when many scholars were insisting on the biological inferiority of non-White groups, Dewey (1909/1977a) defiantly declared, "There is no inferior race, and the members of a race so-called should each have the same opportunities of social environment and personality as those of the more favored race" (p. 157). Dewey reasoned that the slight differences among the races were much smaller than the differences among the individuals within each race. Consequently, Dewey argued, the idea of dismissing an individual because of his or her race was an "injustice," and he insisted that all human beings should have "a full, fair and free social opportunity" (p. 157). Dewey's African American audience that day later evolved into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Dewey would be a founding member of the organization.

Despite the enlightened views he expressed in this speech, I suggest that it is time to take a closer look at Dewey's views of culture and race during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In

this historical study I argue that during his years at the University of Chicago, when he wrote the majority of his works on education, Dewey considered American non-White minorities to be biologically and psychically equal to Whites but socially deficient. In particular, Dewey subscribed to two 19th-century conceptual frameworks that almost inevitably led him to such a conclusion: linear historicism and genetic psychology. Dewey's historicist and genetic psychological approaches relegated non-Western societies, including African, South Asian, East Asian, and Native American cultures, to the status of prior steps toward the developed status represented by the industrialized West.

However, working within these broad ethnocentric conceptual frameworks, Dewey forged important new positions on the social-scientific issues of latent biological potentials and the doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics (i.e., neo-Lamarckianism). I argue that a full understanding of Dewey's views on race must include his position on these critical issues, which—although not necessarily significant to 21st-century readers—were very important to the 19th-century scholars to whom Dewey was directing his ideas. Overall, I provide a nuanced, contextualized reading of Dewey's views on culture and race during a critical period of his intellectual development (1895–1911). As a result, I hope to re-situate the historical Dewey in relation to the issues and thought currents of his own time, while also inspiring a deeper appreciation for the complexity, intensity, and rigor of Dewey's arguments during a period when intellectuals were coming to terms with the repercussions of Darwin's theory of evolution and its applicability to human and social development.

Literature Review

The small literature on Dewey's views on race can be divided into five camps. Some scholars generally praise Dewey for his enlightened philosophical views on race and its relationship to broader social issues (Burkes, 1997; Eiesle, 1975; Goodenow, 1977; Pappas, 2002; Stack, 2009). Others view Dewey's philosophy as entirely inadequate for the multicultural world and consider his relative silence on issues of racial discrimination and injustice inexcusable (Margonis, 2009; Sullivan, 2003). Between these extremes, some scholars have outlined the racist, corporate, assimilationist theories and policies of progressive educators and locate Dewey's philosophy within these currents, but stop short of directly charging him with racism (Karier, 1972; Spring, 1970; Watkins, 2001). Still others have simply pointed out the

unfortunate and ambiguous nature of Dewey's ideas on the issue (Feinberg, 1975; Taylor, 2004; Seigfried, 1998). More recently, scholars have recognized the shortcomings of Dewey's specific views on race, but nevertheless see promise in his overall philosophical thought for a new, postmodernist conceptualization of racial identity (Eldridge, 2004; Glaude, 2007).

These scholars are provocative, insightful, and enlightening, but in their historical understandings of Dewey's racial views, they are limited in three ways. First, they center almost exclusively on Dewey's post-1909 writings, because this is when he most directly addressed issues of race. In particular, Dewey's address to the National Negro Conference (1909/1977a) referenced above, his essay "Nationalizing Education" (1916/1980), and his address "Race Prejudice and Friction" (1922/1983b) are cited and discussed. Regarding Dewey's racial views prior to 1909, scholars are largely perplexed or silent. But this is when Dewey was at the University of Chicago, experimenting with his famous laboratory school and doing the majority of his writing on education. Influential texts such as *Ethical Principles Underlying Education* (1897), *The School and Society* (1899/1956), and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902/1956) were written at that time. Dewey's most popular books on education, *How We Think* (1910/1997) and *Democracy and Education* (1916/1968), were also based largely on the work he did in Chicago. His views on culture and race during that period are most relevant to educators because that is when he most explicitly addressed education. Despite his silence on race prior to 1909, I argue that Dewey's views during that period (1894–1909) can, in fact, be reconstructed.

Second, these scholars tend to use presentist frameworks such as critical race theory and Whiteness studies to assess the philosophical adequacy of Dewey's racial views for today's world. While in no way denying the significance of these interpretive frameworks, I hold that they fail to explain the past in its own terms. My study recognizes that Dewey was dealing with issues and ideas from his own time, not ours. I reconstruct Dewey's own intellectual context in an effort to appreciate his original meaning.

Finally, beyond ignoring contemporaneous issues—such as linear historicism, genetic psychology, latent biological potentials, and the doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics—scholars assessing Dewey's views on race have failed to link them to his historicist conception of culture. I argue that Dewey's racial views must be understood in the context of his linear approach to cultural progress. Therefore, in the tradition of intellectual history I approach Dewey's views on race prior to 1909 as *thinking* rather than *thought*. This means that, rather than imposing a present-day interpretive framework that would have been foreign to Dewey, or attempting to iron out his inconsistencies over time, I reconstruct his views using the ideas and language of the 1890s and early 1900s. I accept that Dewey struggled to make sense of his world by working with the intellectual tools of his own time as they emerged incrementally, without knowledge of later developments.

Methodology

How do you write about Dewey's views on race during a period in which he did not explicitly address it? To do so, I base my inquiry on two historiographical assumptions.

The first is that certain words used by Dewey and his collaborators, such as *savage*, *barbarian*, and *primitive*, reveal underlying beliefs through which the world was viewed by most 19th-century social scientists. In particular, I examine the secondary literature on how Dewey's use of the term *savage* represented an unspoken set of intellectual assumptions that we no longer hold (see Bowler, 1983; Gould, 1977; Menand, 2001; McKee, 1993; O'Donnell, 1985; Richards, 1987; Ross, 1991, 1994; Schafer, 2001; Stocking, 1968; Watkins, 2001). I use this examination to bring more nuanced interpretations to his educational, social, and cultural writings. As the intellectual historian Thomas Kuhn (1977) suggests,

When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer . . . when these passages make sense, then you may find that the more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have changed their meaning. (p. xii)

Using Dewey's absurd use of the term *savage* as a window into the intellectual world of the 1890s, I argue that Dewey framed his educational, social, and cultural thought in linear historicist and genetic psychological terms. Understanding this allows us to uncover his racial and cultural views.

The second historiographical assumption is that, unless he specifically noted otherwise (as he did with regard to the ideas of inheritance of acquired characteristics and latent potentials), Dewey accepted the language and ideas of his peers and collaborators. In fact, such an approach aligns with Dewey's own philosophy. As Dewey (1916/1968) explained, "In general it can be said that things we take for granted without inquiry or reflection are just the things which determine our conscious thinking. . . . And these habitudes which lie below the level of reflection are just those which have been formed in the constant give and take of relationships with others" (p. 18). Thus, as I argue below, Dewey's use of the term *savage* represented a set of ethnocentric ideas that existed "below the level of reflection," revealing the "habitudes" that he and his peers took for granted in their "give and take" with one another. In summary, I assume that Dewey employed the term *savage* because he knew it had meaning for him and his contemporaries. Because he did not explicitly state otherwise, I assume that Dewey accepted the use of the term by his contemporaries, colleagues, and collaborators.

Dewey and Linear Historicism

Linear historicism was the belief that all the societies and cultures of the world could be placed on a single continuum of social progress leading through the stages of savagery, barbarianism, and civilization. In addition, most scholars at the turn of the 20th century subscribed to the view that the stages of sociological growth corresponded with the psychological stages of child development, and that the earlier, childlike forms still existed in the world among primitive tribes (McKee, 1993; Stocking, 1968). Dewey and his collaborators also held these beliefs. For example, James Tufts (Dewey & Tufts, 1908/1978) explained in *Ethics*, a textbook he coauthored with Dewey: "To understand the origin and growth of moral life, it is essential to understand primitive society. . . . It is beyond question that the ancestors of modern civilized races lived under the general types of group life which

will be outlined, and these types of their survivals are found among the great mass of peoples today” (p. 23). Thus, according to Tufts, non-Western cultural groups represented earlier, more primitive stages of life that had been surpassed by more advanced, superior societies.

Likewise, Dewey conceived of the social world as a series of developmental linear steps leading from the primitive to the civilized. In a letter he wrote to Clara Mitchell in 1895 outlining his plan for his laboratory school, Dewey confirmed how the “child’s interest in present forms of living” should “lead him back to social groups organized in that way [for example]—hunting and fishing to the Indians.” As Dewey (1895/2005) explained, “This is geography as well as history because practically all stages of civilization are *now* presented somewhere on earth’s surface.” In other words, like Tufts, Dewey suggested that indigenous, native, and aboriginal societies represented not merely *different* or *alternative* forms of living but *earlier* forms, which modern, civilized culture had moved beyond.

Like his contemporaries, Dewey believed that these stages could be coordinated with the linear psychological development of the child. For example, in *School and Society* Dewey (1899/1956) wrote: “Many anthropologists have told us there are certain identities in the child’s interests with those of primitive life. . . . There is a sort of natural recurrence of the child mind to the typical activities of primitive peoples” (p. 48). The “primitive peoples” to which Dewey referred all happened to be represented by non-European, non-White societies. In fact, students at the Dewey School were specifically led to reach these ethnocentric conclusions. A Dewey School teacher, Lauren Runyon (1906), taught her students: “In getting land from the Indians the same methods were used that have prevailed through the ages when a people with *superior weapons and brains* [italics added], in sufficient number, meet an *inferior* [italics added] people” (p. 49). In other words, according to Runyon, who was implementing Dewey’s educational vision, members of more technologically advanced cultures were not merely different from but comparatively superior to members of less advanced cultures. In another sample activity from the Dewey School—revealing the linear, ethnocentric scheme underlying the entire curriculum—the student was instructed to “compare the American rivers with those of Africa, the Indians with the Negroes, and the *degree of civilization* [italics added] of tribes in America with that of other peoples he has studied” (p. 55). Through such comparisons, the Dewey School students were to arrive at the conclusion that modern, civilized society had surpassed the primitive Indian and Negro ones in a process of linear cultural development. In fact, according to Dewey and Tufts (1908/1978), the primitive form of ethics was best exemplified by “the so-called totem group, which is found among North American Indians, Africans and Australians, and was perhaps the early form of Semitic groups” (p. 26). Therefore, like most of their contemporaries, Dewey and Tufts believed that these primitive groups had survived into the modern world and that they provided a rare window into the earlier phases of Western culture (see Stocking, 1968).

Dewey and Genetic Psychology

The term *genetic psychology* refers to the belief that the human mind progresses through universal, sequential, hierarchical stages

of psychological development. Dewey addressed the specific stages of child development in numerous papers, books, and syllabi (see Dewey, 1895/1972a, p. 311; 1898/1972d, p. 331; 1899/1956, pp. 105–115; 1902/1976a; 1910/1997, pp. 30–33). According to these works the entire psychological history of the child could be summarized as follows: In Stage 1, children engage in impulsive curiosity; in Stage 2, they incorporate impulsive curiosity into a centrally coordinated playful curiosity; in Stage 3, they incorporate playful curiosity into a purposeful intellectual curiosity of means toward an end; and in Stage 4, they incorporate purposeful intellectual curiosity into a calling or function. These stages of mental development corresponded with the intellectual growth of the entire human species. As Dewey (1900/1976c) explained in “Some Stages of Logical Growth,” societies first established fixed beliefs, customs, and laws (Stage 1); they then incorporated the beliefs, customs, and laws through discussions, dialogues and judgments (Stage 2); they incorporated the discussions, dialogues, and judgments into a positivistic science of induction and deduction (Stage 3); and finally, they incorporated positivistic science into differentiated sciences based on contingency and inference (Stage 4). The final contingency, or modernist, stage produced the modern disciplines and the subdisciplines within them, and each discipline had its own socially constructed symbolic forms of knowledge and communication. This stage was the level of democracy and of the modern, scientific specialist (Fallace, 2010).

One of the central concerns of Dewey and his teachers at the University of Chicago laboratory school was how to coordinate the psychological stages identified in his writings with the sociological stages he outlined in “Some Stages of Logical Growth” (1902/1976a). As Dewey (1895/1972e) explained, “The ultimate problem of all education is to coordinate the psychological and social factors” (p. 224)—that is, to coordinate the emerging instinct-stages of the child with the historical modes of occupation that best represent them. The subject matter and form of the Dewey School curriculum was organized historically and hierarchically to correspond with the way humanity had evolved in relation to emerging social and environmental problems. As related by former Dewey School teachers Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards (1936), “It could be said with truth that the fundamental interests of a child at this stage of growth and of a savage are the same, food, comfort, shelter. . . . It could be said that the child is like the savage in ability but not in capability” (pp. 98–99). Even reading, writing, and arithmetic were not introduced until students learned about how and why their historical counterparts (i.e., the Phoenicians) had invented them (see Runyon, 1906).

Dewey’s approach to curriculum differed from other genetic approaches of the time in two significant ways. First, Dewey did not believe in the literal biological recapitulation of emerging instincts and impulses leading through the physical development of the human being. Education and culture allowed man to take intellectual shortcuts, making a literal retracing of development unnecessary. Second, Dewey rejected the idea that certain products or literary selections from corresponding cultural epochs would appeal more to students of a certain age, a position that put him in direct conflict with the American Herbartians. Instead, Dewey insisted that it was the activities and processes

themselves, not the products, that corresponded with students' psychological stages. Nevertheless, despite this critique of the presiding interpretation of the culture-epoch theory, Dewey still believed that the curriculum should be set up as a linear reenactment of the cultural history of mankind (Fallace, 2008, 2009). He organized the Dewey school curriculum to do just that. Dewey (1896/1972c) stated clearly that he did "not question the fact of correspondence in a general way" between the psychological and sociological stages of development (p. 248).

Dewey's genetic and linear historicist approach to curriculum not only was implemented at his famous school but also influenced other progressive reformers. For example, Katherine Elizabeth Dopp developed and published a series of textbooks based on Dewey's curriculum, including *The Place of Industries in Elementary Education*, *The Tree-Dwellers*, *The Early Cavemen*, *The Later Cavemen*, and *The Early Sea People*. As Dopp (1904) explained, "Since the experience of the race in industrial and social processes embodies better than any other experiences of mankind, those things which at the same time appeal to the whole nature of the child and furnish him the means of interpreting the complex processes about him, this experience has been made the groundwork of the present series" (pp. 9–10). In her preface Dopp thanked Professor Dewey "for the suggestions he has given me with reference to this series" (p. 11). Dewey (1903/1977b) provided an enthusiastic endorsement of Dopp's curriculum in *The Elementary School Teacher*, writing, "Dr. Dopp's book is the most helpful thing that has yet been published" (p. 308). As Dewey had done at his laboratory school, Dopp coordinated the psychological stages of the child with the hunting, fishing, pastoral, agricultural, feudal, handicraft, and industrial stages of sociological development.

In summary, Dewey's educational work at the University of Chicago was underscored by two cultural assumptions that he shared with his collaborators Mayhew, Edwards, Runyon, Tufts, and Dopp. First, Dewey subscribed early and consistently to the idea that the development of the child corresponded with the linear development of Western civilization, which just *happened to have* the most advanced culture. I say "happened to have" because it is important to note that Dewey did not believe that Western society was inherently or necessarily superior to non-Western culture (nor did it contain a latent potential for superiority), but rather that it was contingently superior because social evolution just happened to have placed it at the forefront of social order and progress. Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated, Dewey's coauthors and associates, such as Tufts, Runyon, Mayhew, Edwards, and Dopp, used what was considered to be the cultural superiority of Western society to ascribe ethical and cultural inferiority to non-Western societies, which Tufts even specifically identified as the (non-White) Africans, North American Indians, and aboriginal Australians. Dewey clearly agreed that primitive societies represented earlier forms of living, which Western society had moved beyond. In his view, these primitive societies had culture, but they had it to a lesser degree than the adults of modern society and the advanced students at the Dewey School, who had been taught to progress to more qualitatively complex and socialized forms of understanding.

Second, Dewey conceived of culture as singular and linear. All of the world's societies and social occupations (past and present)

were subsumed within his linear historicist definition of the term. Dewey (1911/1978) defined culture as "the habit of mind which perceives and estimates all matters with reference to their bearing on social values and aims" (p. 406). He added that "manual and industrial activities at once acquire a cultural value in education when they are appreciated in light of their social context, in their bearing upon social order and progress" (p. 406). According to Dewey's definition, culture was that which contributed to "social order and progress," and he held that at the time only Western societies did this. Consequently, for Dewey and his peers there were no "cultures," only "culture"; there were no alternative, equally valid forms of living, only one transracial, linear, hierarchical continuum of social occupations that just happened to end with modern Western society on top. Therefore—according to Dewey, his contemporaries, and contemporaneous standards—the cultures of Africans, African Americans, Native Americans, and aboriginal Australians were socially deficient and disadvantaged, because they had nothing new to contribute to the "social order and progress" of Western society.

Dewey and Latent Potentials

Although Dewey regarded non-White societies as socially deficient, he was, nevertheless, years ahead of many of his contemporaries in his dismissal of beliefs in the biological and/or inherent inferiority of certain racial groups. In particular, Dewey rejected the notion that certain racial groups had a latent potential to achieve or not achieve a particular level or degree of culture. He addressed this issue directly in 1902 in a series of essays on the historical approach to ethics. He began by critiquing the two most common genetic approaches to content: the materialist and idealist. The materialist approach assumed that "early forms of a historical series are superior to later forms"; inversely, the idealist approach assumed that "various members of the series . . . [possess] different degrees of reality, the more primitive being nearest zero" (Dewey, 1902/1976a, p. 14). Thus Dewey denied that either earlier or later forms were more fully realized than the rest of the series; instead, the reality *was* the entire series itself, and all forms and content were contingent upon the social context that produced them.

In the same year, Dewey applied this idea to the concepts of culture and race in an essay appropriately titled "Interpretation of the Savage Mind." The traits of the savage, Dewey (1902/1976b) argued, "are outgrowths which have been entered decisively into further evolution, and as such form an integral part of the framework of present mental organization" (p. 39). Thus the innovations of the savage were organically present in the occupations of contemporary civilization, not as steps that were discarded but as stages of growth that were incorporated in the present civilized world. Dewey insisted that current anthropological theory viewing racial types as predetermined and fixed had inappropriately decontextualized the "static" facts of individual societies from the cultural and environmental contexts that engendered them. These contexts, Dewey argued, were critical to understanding the specific environmental problems to which the primitive societies were responding. It was the social context, not merely the biological habits, that determined the outcome of environmental interaction. Dewey (1902/1976b) complained that most sociologists and anthropologists described

the primitive mind negatively in terms of a lack, absence, or incapacity, instead of viewing it as a necessary manifestation of progressive thought inherent in the civilized mind. Because social context and inheritance dictated the capabilities of the primitive mind, it was not fair to judge it against the social context afforded the modern mind, to which the primitive mind had no exposure. Therefore, Dewey did not view cultural differences among social groups as biologically determined, static, or fixed. They were contingent outcomes of the evolutionary process that just happened to have turned out a certain way. In other words, the qualities “White,” “Black,” “primitive,” and “civilized” were not teleological outcomes fulfilling a predetermined latent potential but, rather, interactional outcomes between universal human instincts and the degree of civilization contained in the mediating social context. The savage mind had the biological and psychological potential of the civilized mind but did not achieve that outcome because of a culturally disadvantaged context.

Overall, Dewey’s view of the savage mind was both humane and dismissive. He awarded the savage with all the potentials of the civilized man and considered his lesser degree of culture as a contingent outcome of his isolation from technology and his exposure to a deficient social environment. Yet in Dewey’s view, these savage communities—which, as we have seen, he believed had survived into the present world—were also primitive, undeveloped, and unscientific. The savage did the best he could, but without exposure to the innovations and symbols of the civilized man, he could go only so far. Historically, the savage had made his contribution to the transracial cultural fund, but he no longer had anything to contribute to the modern mind other than being studied as a prior step. Savage cultures were not to be valued on their own terms; they were to be developed and civilized. Thus Dewey considered the discrepancies among the world’s societies not as mere cultural differences but rather as representing higher or lower stages in the linear progress toward civilization.

Dewey on the Inheritance of Acquired Characteristics

Dewey was also ahead of many of his peers in his dismissal of the idea of inheritance of acquired characteristics as a mechanism for social evolution. In the 1890s there were two competing views of social and psychic development, Darwinism and neo-Lamarckianism. The Darwinian camp argued that human evolution occurred as natural variations that proved useful in the environment were naturally selected and then biologically passed on to subsequent members of the social group. In contrast, the neo-Lamarckian camp argued that characteristics *acquired* in the lifetime of the organism through interaction with the environment were biologically passed on to subsequent members of the social group. The Darwinian camp viewed mind in completely passive terms in relation to evolution, but the neo-Lamarckian camp viewed mind as an active contributor to the evolutionary process (Bowler, 1983; Stocking, 1968).

Although it may seem counterintuitive, neo-Lamarckianism was for most a more racist view than Darwinism because neo-Lamarckians used the theory to suggest that White ancestors had gradually acquired and strengthened their mental faculties over time and that their acquired mental abilities became part of the biological inheritance of the Northern European races. For

example, Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism was based on the transmission of both acquired characteristics and latent potentials (Richards, 1987). The neo-Lamarckian view made the ability of non-White races to “catch up” with Whites in the short term seem unrealistic. In addition, many Christians clung to neo-Lamarckianism because it left room for a divine force driving evolution; they rejected the Darwinians’ suggestion that the existence of mankind (and the White man’s ascendancy) was merely the result of chance, not divine guidance. So by the turn of the century, the first step in overcoming biological determinism was to reject neo-Lamarckianism and accept a view that social environment played an equal, if not greater, role in the formation of culture (see Menand, 2001; Stocking, 1968). Dewey rejected neo-Lamarckianism early on.

Dewey (1898/1972b) insisted in an essay on evolution and ethics that “We do not need to go here into the vexed question of the inheritance of acquired characteristics . . . [because] what difference in principle exists between this mediation of the acts of the individual by society and what is ordinarily called natural selection, I am unable to see” (p. 50). Dewey argued that the debate between neo-Lamarckians and Darwinians was moot because, after mankind developed associated forms of living, the environment became so permeated and transformed by education and innovation that the physical and social worlds could not be separated. In other words, the social environment as constructed by the evolutionary history of man mediated and partially controlled which traits were “naturally selected,” making the distinction between natural and social selection arbitrary. Therefore, Dewey insisted that education was the selective force of evolution, not a passive “fit” to the environment. He publicly attacked the idea of inheritance of acquired characteristics when used as a rationale for racism—a significant point that he shared when he addressed the National Negro Conference in 1909.

Dewey’s 1909 speech delivered a simple, uplifting message to his African American audience: The scientific community had largely rejected neo-Lamarckianism. “It was for a long time the assumption . . . that acquired characteristics of heredity, in other words capacities which the individual acquired through his home life and training, modified the stock that was handed down,” Dewey (1909/1977a) explained, “[but now] it is reasonably certain that the characteristics which the individual acquired are not transmissible” (p. 157). For example, as Dewey’s University of Chicago colleague William I. Thomas suggested in 1907, “the characteristics of body and mind acquired by the parent after birth are probably not inherited by the child”; and, as sociologist Carl Kelsey explained more assertively in 1903, “We know pretty definitely today that acquired characteristics are not passed on from generation to generation” (both authors quoted in Stocking, 1968, p. 258).

Although Dewey had rejected neo-Lamarckianism all along, the empirical work of biologist August Weismann was most effective in convincing others to abandon that widely accepted theory. In an important and influential study, Weismann cut off the tails of laboratory mice only to observe that their offspring grew full-length tails. Thus the acquired trait of the cut-tail was not inherited. Weismann, an ultra-Darwinian, used his experiment to confirm that natural selection was the *only* force that drove evolution and not the transmission of characteristics acquired in the lifetime of the organism.

Weismann's experiment was reinforced by the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900. According to Mendel's famous study on peas, the inherited genes of individuals (recessive or dominant) either did or did not appear in their offspring; genes did not gradually blend or strengthen over time through acquired habits and traits (see Bowler, 1994, p. 240; Menand, 2001, p. 382). Mendelian genetics implied that a new gene could bring about a change at any and all stages of growth, and that the change was not merely added to the end of the ontogenetic sequence but rather replaced existing traits altogether (Gould, 1977, pp. 203–204).

On the basis of studies such as these, the doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics—which was a prerequisite for the ethnocentric biogenetic recapitulation theory—had been essentially disproved by 1909 when Dewey addressed the National Negro Conference. Such studies provided convincing scientific evidence that Dewey was correct in his emphasis on the significance of social environment in evolution, culture, and growth.

Conclusion: Dewey on Culture and Race

So, was John Dewey ethnocentric? By the standards of today, Dewey was indeed ethnocentric because he viewed non-White societies as culturally disadvantaged and deficient. However, in his view the deficiency of non-White groups was not directly related to their skin color, because he rejected the biological mechanism of neo-Lamarckianism and the philosophical notion of latent potentials. For Dewey, the social deficiency of non-White groups was a contingent outcome of the entire history of the world, which happened to have left non-White societies behind. Because Dewey conceived of culture in functional terms—as the ability to subordinate the social environment to the greatest degree possible—he had little appreciation for the artistic, religious, and social achievements of racial groups that did not contribute to human progress in other ways. Therefore, even though Dewey did not link skin color to cultural potential, as most scholars did at the time, he nevertheless failed to see value in the cultures of non-White societies, beyond the value of studying them for insight into the evolution of the modern mind. Dewey held this ethnocentric view until the First World War.

What does Dewey's ethnocentrism mean for his early educational philosophy? Can't we just update his ethnocentric views and move on? Yes and no. As demonstrated above, linear historicism and genetic psychology were the guiding frameworks for the curriculum that Dewey and his peers enacted at the University of Chicago laboratory school. Dewey's functional approach to knowledge dictated not only the pedagogy of the Dewey School (e.g., cooperative learning, hands-on activities, reflective inquiry) but also its content (i.e., tracing the stages of sociological development). Most scholars have focused on the pedagogy rather than the content. However, for Dewey, form and content were coterminous and united through action; they were different sides of the same coin. Because Dewey's curriculum was based on the reenactment of the social occupations of mankind in a particular sequence in accordance with his genetic psychology and linear historicism, his approach to knowledge inherently emphasized the ethnocentric narrative shared by most of his contemporaries (Fallace, 2008, 2009). Ethnocentrism was built into the pedagogy of his early and middle years. The only way for Dewey to

remove the inherent ethnocentrism in his educational vision was to drop his linear historicism and genetic psychology. That is, Dewey had to remove the elements that made reference to the cultural deficiency of non-White groups.

In fact, this is exactly what Dewey did. After the First World War, he never again made reference to the psychological and/or sociological stages of development. Instead, he focused more on reflective thinking, interaction, and plurality as major components of his educational vision. In an essay on individuality, equality, and superiority, he (1922/1983a) even remarked, "Inferior races are inferior because their successes lie in different directions, though possibly more artistic and civilized than our own" (p. 295). Dewey expanded his view into a pluralistic appreciation of cultures as different, equally valid ways of looking at the world. His subtle revision of his earlier views on culture represented a significant addition that allowed his work to remain relevant well into the 20th century and beyond. However, the cultural pluralism found in his later works did not negate or erase the ethnocentrism found in his pre-1916 writings on education, which continue to be his most cited and revered.

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AUTHOR

THOMAS D. FALLACE is an assistant professor at the College of Education, William Paterson University of New Jersey, 300 Pompton Road, Wayne, NJ 07470; tfallace@hotmail.com. His research focuses on curriculum history and social studies education.

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