

This Passes for a Harvard Dissertation?

By: J. Mijin Cha - May 10, 2013

This week, the Heritage Foundation released a deeply flawed immigration study, debunked by none other than the conservative Cato Institute. It then came to light that one of the co-authors, Jason Richwine wrote his PhD dissertation, IQs and Immigration Policy, on how immigrants tend to have lower IQs than White Americans and only high IQ immigrants should be let in. I don't expect much from the Heritage Foundation, but I'm deeply troubled by the role played by Harvard University in legitimizing this work.

Richwine received his PhD from Harvard, which means the University supervised this work and, even worse, found it fit to meet the rigorous academic requirements of a doctorate.

Richwine's work should have never been approved not because it is politically incorrect, but because it is academically weak and falls far short of what should be considered doctoral level work. In my doctoral program, as I assume is the case for the vast majority of PhD programs, successful dissertations must meet high academic standards for rigor and intellectual thought. Richwine's dissertation has neither. For instance, among Richwine's conclusions: "The average IQ of immigrants in the United States is substantially lower than that of the white native population, and the difference is likely to persist of several generations," and "the average black [is] at roughly the 16th percentile of the white IQ distribution."

Where is Richwine's empirical data? Did he follow generations of immigrants with a control group? Did he ensure that variables were controlled for in his sample size? No. Instead his dissertation is based on weak secondary source studies, which is fine for an undergraduate seminar paper but falls far short of doctoral level research. Particularly because, as Jamelle Bouie points out, there are serious flaws in this type of analysis, the least of which is that race is a social construct. There is nothing about a person's biological or genetic background that makes them "black" or "white." By granting him a doctorate that does not meet basic standards of rigor or intellectual thought, Harvard legitimizes work that should be dismissed as academically irrelevant.

Consider Harvard's standard for public policy PhD dissertations:

The dissertation is expected to represent a significant contribution to knowledge in a policy area, or to yield insight aimed more broadly at improving the functioning of government. Most dissertations involve the application of analytic techniques to the solution of a substantive problem.

Richwine's dissertation, which was submitted to the Department of Public Policy, aims to improve immigration policy by employing discriminatory standards that have no intellectual merit. What does this contribute to the academy? Moreover, what happens if

you replace "Hispanics" with "Italians" or "European Jews" in the sentence below?
Would his dissertation still have been written?

"[n]o one knows whether Hispanics will ever reach IQ parity with whites, but the prediction that new Hispanic immigrants will have low-IQ children and grandchildren is difficult to argue against"

That very argument of inferior intellect was made against Italians and European Jews in the 1920s to stop European immigration. It was false then and it is false now. And, this is what is so troubling about the role of Harvard in approving Richwine's dissertation. For an institution like Harvard to say that there is merit to an idea that has already been discredited, like the idea that IQ is based on race ethnic origin, doesn't advance academic work. It legitimizes racism and discriminatory practices. And, the result is Heritage's report, which is devoid of evidence and humanity but backed up by the Harvard degree.