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Is Research on the Genetics of Race / IQ Gaps “Mythically Taboo?”

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Abstract

Jackson and Winston ([Jackson Jr & Winston, 2021](#)) recently argued that no real taboos exist regarding the study of potential genetic links between race and IQ test scores. Instead, the authors essentially claimed that researchers in this area have protested too much. JW offered several arguments that presumably supported their claims, which we rebut here first. Empirically, however, we wondered just how “relatively taboo” this topic might be among Americans in general. Via Prolific.com, we surveyed 507 representative Americans on this issue. Our survey comprised 33 “taboo topics” (e.g., whether pedophilia is harmful), wherein each participant subjectively rated “tabooness” on five-point Likert scales. We found that the potential genetic basis of race / IQ gaps was the tabooest item in our survey. In fact, this topic was rated “more taboo” than were items regarding incest and even pedophilia. Further, the rank-ordering of “tabooness” was highly stable across the various demographic groups we looked at in our survey. At least among a (relatively large) representative sample of American adults, research on the genetics of race / IQ gaps is very strongly taboo. We conclude by discussing how our survey results further dampen JW’s claim that the taboo is real rather than mythical.

Keywords: intelligence, race and intelligence, genetics, Taboos, Mythical Taboos

1 Introduction

Taboos are intellectual boundaries whose violations cause moral outrage ([Tetlock, 2003](#)). Many taboos have been the focus of social scientific research. Examples include those relating to “death” ([Feifel, 1962](#)), “negative childhood experiences” ([Read & Hammersley, 2007](#)), “human sexual behavior” ([Farberow, 2013](#)), and “the putative cause(s) of average race differences on IQ test scores” ([Dalliard, 2019](#)).

Jackson and Winston ([Jackson Jr & Winston, 2021](#)) recently claimed that no real taboos exist against researchers who study potential genetic links between race and IQ. As one example, JW argued that “given the extensive publications, citations, and discussions of [researchers in this field] since 1969, claims of taboo and suppression are a myth.” Yet we counter here that, however spun, there exists an obvious and extensive history of attempted suppression of research investigating race and IQ. The suppression is like that seen in no other scientific discipline, and it spans up until the present day. In fact, an author of this paper (BJP) was recently (i.e., 3/4/2022) terminated by his university – despite being a tenured, full professor – for his research in this area¹.

The record clearly shows that as early as the 1960s, “widespread opposition” existed to even just the formation of behavior genetics as a subdiscipline within biology (and psychology; [Pearson 1991](#)). Likewise, around that time, renowned psychologist, Sandra Scarr noted:

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¹ To be fair, Pesta’s university claims he was fired for various instances of “academic research misconduct.” Pesta argues that these claims are pretextual, and litigation on this matter is pending.

One might have wondered why any behavioral scientists would want to study genetic variability in behavior. Not a popular topic from either a scientific or a political point of view, such research inflamed public opinion from 1960 to the early 1980s” (as cited in [Pearson 1991](#)).

Perhaps Scarr and others like Arthur Jensen are exaggerating (or worse) when they make claims like these, or perhaps the claims represent honest, yet subjective reflections about their experiences. We will now never know, but we see no other research domain where these claims occur so frequently, if at all.

Much of JW’s critique focused on the case of Arthur Jensen. In 1969, Jensen published his now-infamous and widely-cited article entitled, “How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?” ([Jensen, 1969](#)). Jensen’s answer was “not much,” and his viewpoint was met with extensive controversy ([Garfield, 1978](#)). For example, in a study on “controversies” faced by intelligence researchers, [Carl & of Menie \(2019\)](#), oft-cited by [Jackson Jr & Winston 2021](#)) found that, among 55 key figures in intelligence research, Arthur Jensen was rated the most controversial, by far. Even his obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* was titled “Article: Arthur Jensen dies at 89; his views on race and IQ created a furor” ([Woo, 2012](#)).

As JW mentioned, Jensen himself has spoken at length about his experiences with publication bias, including attempts by others to suppress research in this area ([Miele, 2002](#), p. 157). Here are some of Jensen’s (anecdotal) examples:

There is no doubt that a double standard of review still exists; articles dealing with the race-IQ-genetics nexus when the results have not come out in the politically correct direction have to pass a much more critical review process than if the results were in the opposite direction...

...My first article on Spearman’s hypothesis was also submitted to the APA’s house journal, which claims to take no more than ten weeks to make an editorial decision on unsolicited manuscripts. They took eleven months with my manuscript, and responded only after I had written to them asking for a decision. Though two of the referees wrote highly favorable comments on the article, the third one did a hatchet job on it, making utterly trivial criticisms, and the editor rejected the article without option to resubmit. I figured it must have taken the editor about ten months to find someone willing to provide the trivial and spurious reasons for rejection...it is such prima facie evidence of bias by APA’s house journal. The article was then submitted to *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (1985), was critically reviewed by no fewer than 11 referees, and was accepted and published along with commentaries by 30 experts in the relevant fields. I received over 1,500 reprint requests for that article, and it has been highly cited. I could easily go on and on with other examples from my own experience, but they are much the same.

...One quite key article submitted to an APA journal, for example, showed a racial difference on certain tests that was practically impossible to explain in terms of culture bias or any other environmental or motivational factors anyone could think of. The study was technically impeccable. But the review process took about three times as long as usual for that journal. The editor eventually accepted the article as is, and apologized for the long delay, *which resulted from the fact that the article had to be sent to seven reviewers rather than the usual three in order to get three real reviews of the paper itself* (emphasis added). The other four supposed reviews were merely ad hominem diatribes; the editor said it would be too embarrassing to the journal for me to be allowed to see them...

Our experience is similar to Jensen’s in that we recently submitted a rebuttal article to a prestigious journal in psychology, wherein the editor had to apologize for the lengthy delay in his decision because the first 17 reviewers he invited to review our paper declined (incidentally, the editor ultimately rejected our article, which we claimed was an ethics violation, as detailed in [Pesta et al. 2023](#)).

No other area of science leads researchers to make statements like these. Could it really just be sour grapes? To wit, JW claimed that Jensen exaggerated (at best) the “taboo,” partly because of how well-published and well-cited he was in psychology. In fact, none other than the American Psychological Association (2002) ranked Jensen as the 47th most eminent psychologist of the 20th century (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug02/ eminent>). Thus, according to JW, “Claims of the difficulties of publication cannot be squared with the long publication records of hereditarian scholars.”

Among JW’s speculations was that Jensen could not have risen to such eminence if his work had been suppressed throughout his career. Here we counter JW’s speculations with our own: Highly controversial research, if also high quality (i.e. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*’ current impact factor is 21.357), will necessarily generate

significant attention and high impact, bibliometrically, for the authors who publish it. Much like sex, controversy sells.

Next, JW sought to discredit Jensen's research by claiming "We now know that Jensen's conclusions were based, in part, on the fraudulent studies of Burt." We find this claim ironic, as long ago, [Rushton \(1994\)](#) presented the following defense of Burt:

Burt was attacked by social reform advocates because his research on twins found a correlation between genetics and intelligence. This upset people who believed that environmental factors determined intelligence. Recent studies support Burt's original conclusions."

Specifically, Burt was declared a fraud partly because one of his published studies reported three correlation coefficients that were identical in magnitude. [Rushton \(1994\)](#), however, noted that research thereafter on what Burt did or did not do has vindicated him (see also Gould's "mismeasuring" of Morton's skulls, [Lewis et al. 2011](#), for a parallel example).

Several studies have shown that Burt's correlation coefficients were well within the correct range ([Rushton, 1997](#)). A further consideration is that Burt was far too statistically sophisticated to commit such a lame attempt at fraud (i.e., by reporting identical correlation coefficients). Finally, what Burt reported was not surprising given how well effects in this area replicate. Differential psychology seems immune from the replication crisis we currently see in many other subdisciplines of psychology. In sum, rather than being a fraud, we argue Burt is yet another example of how "taboos" in this area have impacted a researcher's career and even [his] legacy.

Rushton himself was also harassed. Despite Rushton passing away in 2012, in 2020, after the George Floyd riots, Elsevier decided to unpublish a legitimate paper by Rushton on the topic of the relation between melanization and aggression merely because it was deemed "racist" ([Frost, 2020](#)). At the same time, his former university denounced him as "racist" ([Department of Psychology, 2020](#)) No empirical flaw has ever been found in his work – rather, it is just called "racist." During his life, Rushton was harassed with name-calling and worse. In 1989, the Attorney-General of Ontario ordered a police investigation of Rushton for hate speech, but after six months the police concluded that there were insufficient grounds for prosecution. ([Bieman, 2018](#)). This occurred in 1989 after his presentation to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in January 1989, where Rushton stated that race is real and differences in intelligence and criminality between races are caused in part by genetics. David Peterson, the Premier of Ontario, called Rushton's presentation and papers "academically unacceptable and morally offensive" ([Gray, 1991](#)).

Additionally, [Pearson \(1991\)](#) documented various other "victims of the presumed mythical taboo," including: William Shockley, who because he promoted eugenics was intimidated with violence to such a great extent that it led Sigma Xi to cancel an appearance of his in 1968; J. Philippe Rushton, who, because he was a hereditarian, was frequently targeted by the press; E. O. Wilson, who, because of his text *Sociobiology*, was publicly assaulted, having a bucket of water poured on his head by activists shouting slurs like "racist," "fascist," and "nazi"; Richard Herrnstein, co-author of *The Bell Curve*, who received numerous death threats in response to a planned appearance for the AAAS, which he thereafter canceled; Thomas J. Bouchard, a "hereditarian," who was harassed by far-left activists with on-campus pamphlets and graffiti calling him slurs; Michael Levin, whose classes were disrupted by Marxist activists because he wrote a letter to the New York Times arguing that White store owners had a right to refuse suspected robbers entry to their store, even if they happened to be Black; and Vincent Sarich, who caused protests by pointing out that the University of California's racial quota system led to discrepancies in average merit between admitted ethnic groups. One could also argue that perhaps the second author of this manuscript should appear on this list. Again, no other research domain in all of science produces controversy remotely like this.

Next, consider [Horgan \(2013\)](#)'s semi-recent suggestion that race and IQ research should be banned via institutional review boards, because: "research on race and intelligence—no matter what its conclusions are—seems to me to have no redeeming value." Horgan's article was in reaction to the cancellation of Jason Richwine, who lost his job at the Heritage Foundation (a right-wing think tank) after he was discovered to have argued that Hispanic immigrants to the US tend to have lower IQs relative to the native population. That his writing here constituted part of his dissertation at Harvard, and was approved by highly eminent professors, did not save him.

Yet another recent example of the taboo in action comes from [McArdle \(2018\)](#)'s Washington Post article entitled "Who should decide what topics are off-limits?" McArdle stated:

I already leaned toward believing that research into race and IQ should be off-limits ... Given flawed scientists and imperfect scientific methods, and given the fraught history of Western racism, isn't the likelihood of getting it wrong just too high? And the potential cost of those particular errors simply too catastrophic to risk? All societies place some questions out of bounds because they're too toxic; we don't debate whether child molestation or spousal murder is acceptable ... In fairness, however, I did emerge with two prior beliefs basically confirmed: first, that research into race and IQ should stay off limits, but, second, that those limits are better established by debate than denunciation.

McArdle wrote this article in reply to a published open letter, entitled "*Open Letter: No to Racist Pseudoscience at Cambridge* (Quadri, 2018)." The author of said letter focused on the case of Noah Carl, and how his actions "merited" his cancellation at Cambridge. The open letter's author, however, discovered that merely asking the question was akin to "poking a hornet's nest."

Regardless, it turns out that Carl had merely argued that race and IQ *should be researched* (Young, 2018). As a result, 586 academics and 874 students signed the letter, and Carl was dismissed from his position on May 1, 2019. Consider also this quote regarding Carl from Edmund College of Cambridge clearly stating (in our read) that there is a taboo:

[Carl was fired because] there was a serious risk that Dr Carl's appointment could lead...to the College being used as a platform to promote views that could incite racial or religious hatred, and bring the College into disrepute.

Again, we assert that no other research domain in science comes close to this level of "tabooness."

There are more examples. Belief in a taboo regarding race or race and IQ research seems to be widespread. Take, for example, Walsh (2020)'s recent statement that "No issue in the social sciences is as untouchable as race." Or Sagarin (1980)'s nonchalant statement that "Research into intelligence and race and their influence on delinquency is cited as a taboo area because of its potential to provide fuel for racist attitudes and even genocide." Or Entine (2008)'s basic observation "Why have blacks come to dominate sports? Are they somehow physically better? And why are we so uncomfortable when we discuss this?" All these statements align with prominent behavior genetics researcher Eric Turkheimer's claim that:

The genetic inferiority of a race on a trait as important as intelligence will rank with the atomic bomb as the most destructive scientific discovery in human history. [Therefore] the correct conclusion is to withhold judgment" (Turkheimer, 1990).

Finally, consider the case of Charles Murray, who has perhaps experienced more harassment than has any other extant researcher mentioned here (though Richard Lynn would be a close second). Murray has observed what he terms "The Inequality Taboo" (Murray, 2005):

The Lawrence Summers affair last January made me rethink my silence. The president of Harvard University offered a few mild, speculative, off the record remarks about innate differences between men and women in their aptitude for high-level science and mathematics, and was treated by Harvard's faculty as if he were a crank ... In the autumn of 1994, I had watched with dismay as *The Bell Curve's* scientifically unremarkable statements about black IQ were successfully labeled as racist pseudoscience.

We will spare the reader additional examples of tabooness in this discipline (although more exist). Instead, we wondered just how taboo this topic might be, as perceived by Americans in general (i.e., versus people who research in this area). Specifically, we were interested in how taboo the race / IQ issue is, relative to various other taboos (e.g., those relating to incest, or drug use, or homosexuality, etc.). We thus surveyed a representative sample of Americans and had them rate how "taboo" various topics were. Results here provide baseline data on just how taboo "race and intelligence" is relative to a host of other taboo items (e.g., "incest"). Finally, we also explore whether the tabooness of this topic differs by the demography (e.g., age, sex, race) of our survey respondents.

2 Materials and Methods

We surveyed 507 Americans (242 males and 265 females) with a mean age of 46.1 ($SD = 16.3$; range = 18-93) years. Surveys were presented online, using Prolific, a high-quality paid survey site which provides representative or filtered samples to researchers. Our aim was simply to have survey participants rate the “tabooness” of 33 different survey items.

Participants were given the following prompt: “Of the following questions, please indicate how taboo you think the question is.” They then rated a series of likely taboo items, such as “Whether a virus or parasite can cause homosexuality” or “Whether pedophilia is harmful or not.” For each item, participants rated how taboo it was on five point Likert scales ranging from: “Not at all taboo,” “A little taboo,” “Somewhat taboo,” “Very taboo,” and “Extremely taboo.”

Additionally, each participant was given a scientific knowledge test (see our SM file here), which included questions such as “Which gas makes up most of the Earth’s atmosphere?” Participants were then split at the median for low and high scores on this test. These results were used to assess whether scientific knowledge had any association with taboo evaluations.

3 Results

Figure 1 displays the average tabooness of each survey item. Note that “Whether European Whites are smarter than African Blacks for genetic reasons” was considered to be the most taboo item in our 33-item question set. Surprisingly, participants nominally rated this item as more taboo than items about transexuals, incest, and even pedophilia.

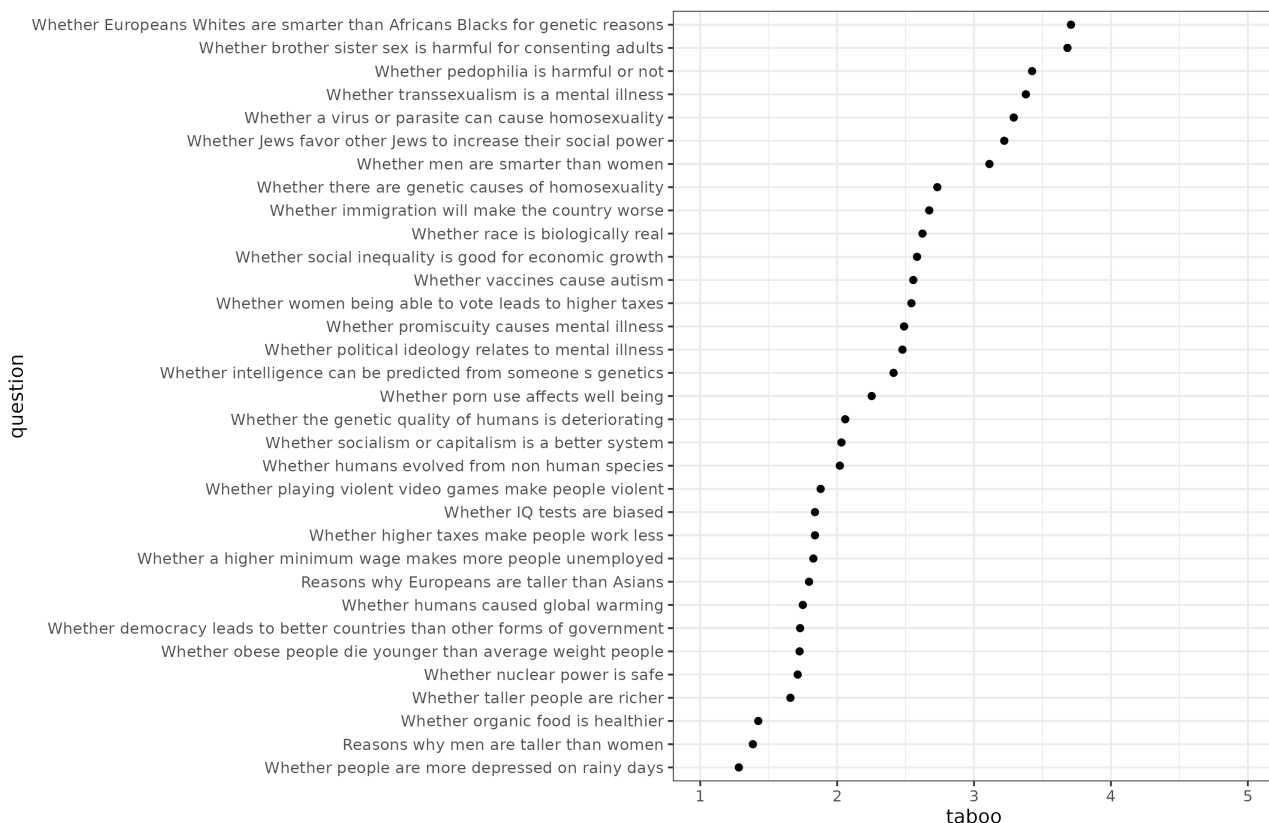


Figure 1: Average Tabooness of Each Question.

Next, Figure 2 shows that not only was the “IQ” item rated the most taboo, it also received the most “extremely taboo” and “very taboo” responses of any question in our set. In fact, more than half of all respondents thought this question was “extremely taboo” or “very taboo.” Clearly, at least among Americans in general, this item is as taboo as it gets.

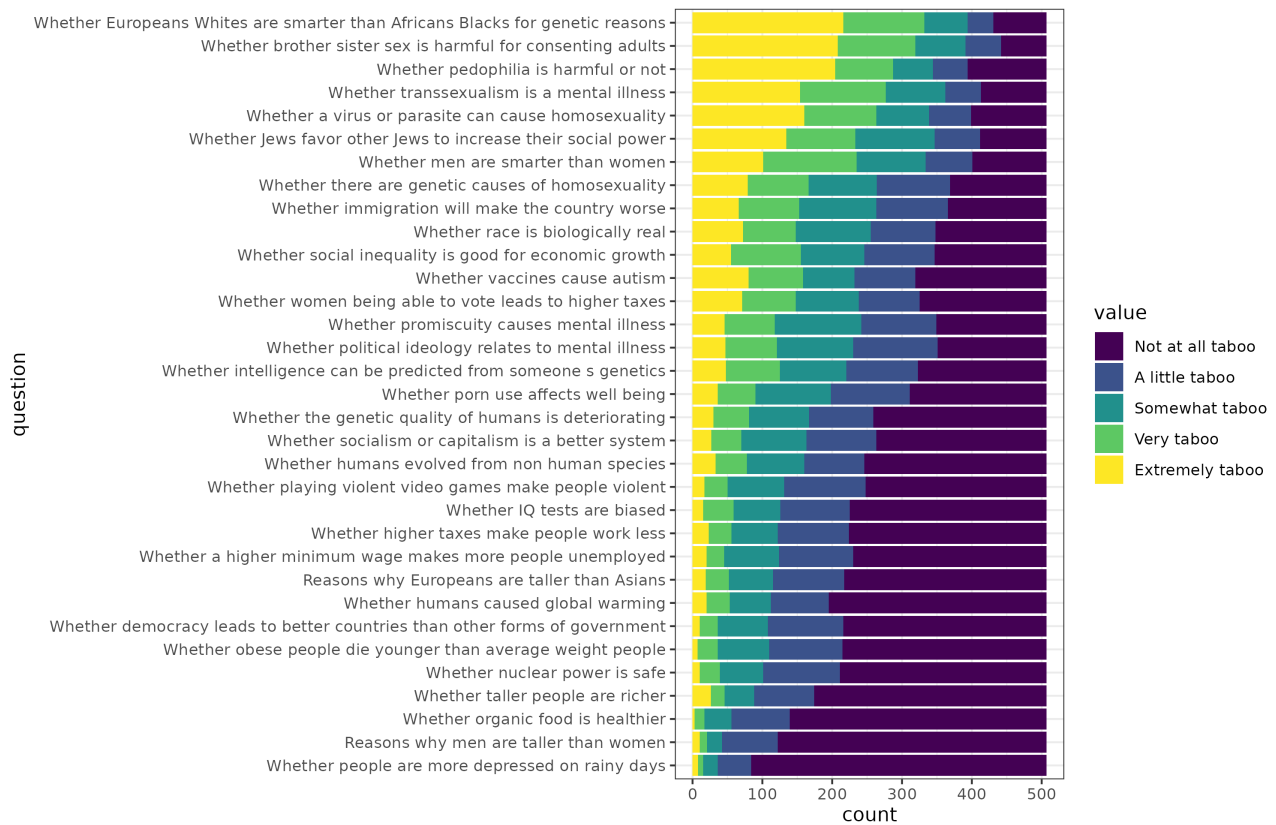


Figure 2: Distribution of Responses for Each Question.

We next assessed whether tabooess ratings varied as a function of participant demographics. Recall that our demographic variables included: Political party affiliation (voted democrat or republican), sex, age, race, plus scores on our “scientific knowledge” test. Results appear in our Supplemental Materials File as Figures 3 through 7.

Briefly here, interesting results from the demographic analyses included (1) especially for the most taboo items in the set, democrats rated “tabooess” (generally) higher than did republicans, (2) also for the extreme items, men rated “tabooess” (generally) higher than did women, (3) likewise, younger adults rated “tabooess” (generally) higher than did older adults, (4) “tabooess” ratings were surprisingly consistent across the race or ethnicity of the survey respondents, and (5) no strong differences in ratings occurred as a function of the scientific knowledge variable. These results suggest interesting follow-up studies regarding differences in perceptions of “tabooess” across various groups of people.

4 Discussion

Our survey revealed that “hereditarian research on race differences in intelligence” is considered, on average, to be more taboo than is research on brother-sister incest, or the harms of pedophilia. Furthermore, our evaluations of different demographic groups produced strongly consistent results. That is, participant-consensus existed for the taboo ratings across age, sex, race, political preference, and score on the scientific knowledge test. We conclude simply that researching race / IQ gaps is perceived by Americans in general as being very strongly taboo.

One limitation here is that we did not directly survey the research community. However, it is unlikely, given the strong convergence between all identity groups surveyed, that the academic research community significantly differs from the pattern found here (see also the lack of results for our Scientific Knowledge variable). More than that, the race / IQ taboo is so strong in our data, that it seems unlikely it would fail to have a significant outside impact on the academic research community (even if race and IQ were not considered taboo within academia). To wit, we found that scoring high on the science knowledge test did not change taboo evaluations. Thus, it

is unclear by what mechanism the academic research community could or would differ from our findings. Nonetheless, a future study could attempt to survey academics directly to address these potential concerns.

Another limitation is that we did not directly assess how likely someone is to act on their taboos. It is possible that someone may be more willing to suppress incest research, but still considers race and IQ to be more taboo. A future study could expand our survey by (e.g.) also evaluating the percent of people who agree with censoring research on each topic, and how that relates to their taboo evaluations.

In sum, our attempt to rebut JW here consisted of two prongs. The first involved a literature review of sorts, showing many examples wherein researchers have suffered unfairness (in our minds) simply because they chose to study this topic. Our second prong revealed that the “perceived tabooness of race / IQ gaps” (among Americans in general) seems second to none.

Finally, we appreciate that strong individual differences obviously exist in how people perceive the tabooeness of this topic. We hope that interested readers evaluate our arguments and augment their perceptions as they deem appropriate.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental materials link: <https://osf.io/ys9w8/>

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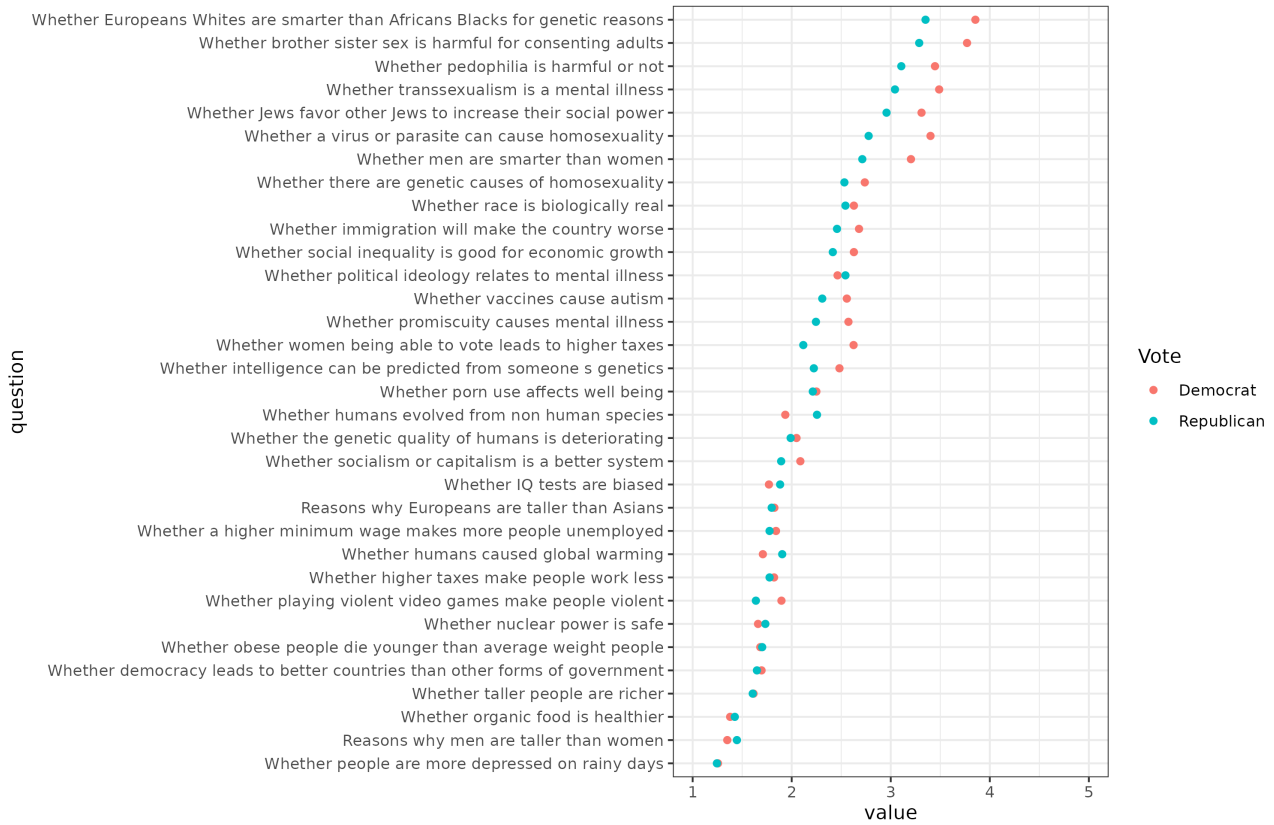


Figure 3: Tabooness per question by Party Alignment.

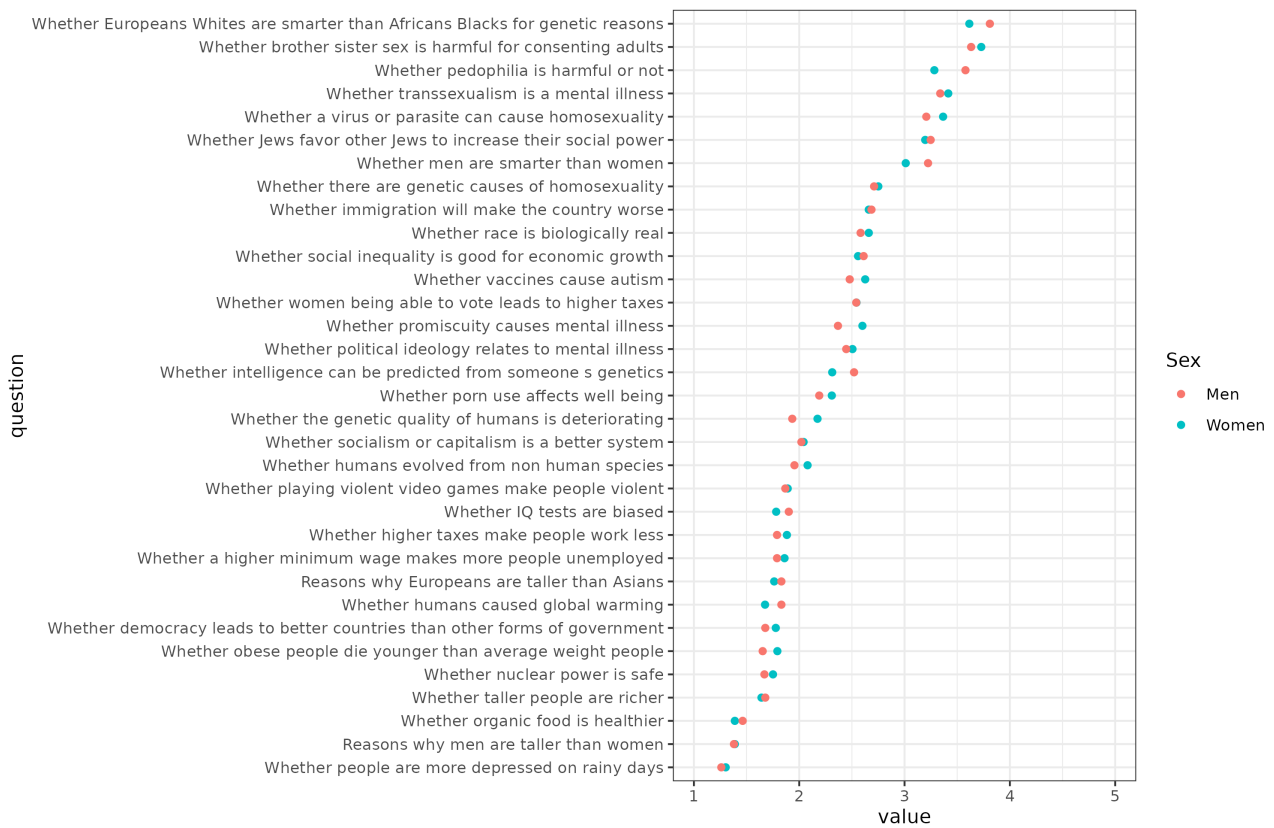


Figure 4: Tabooness per question by Sex.

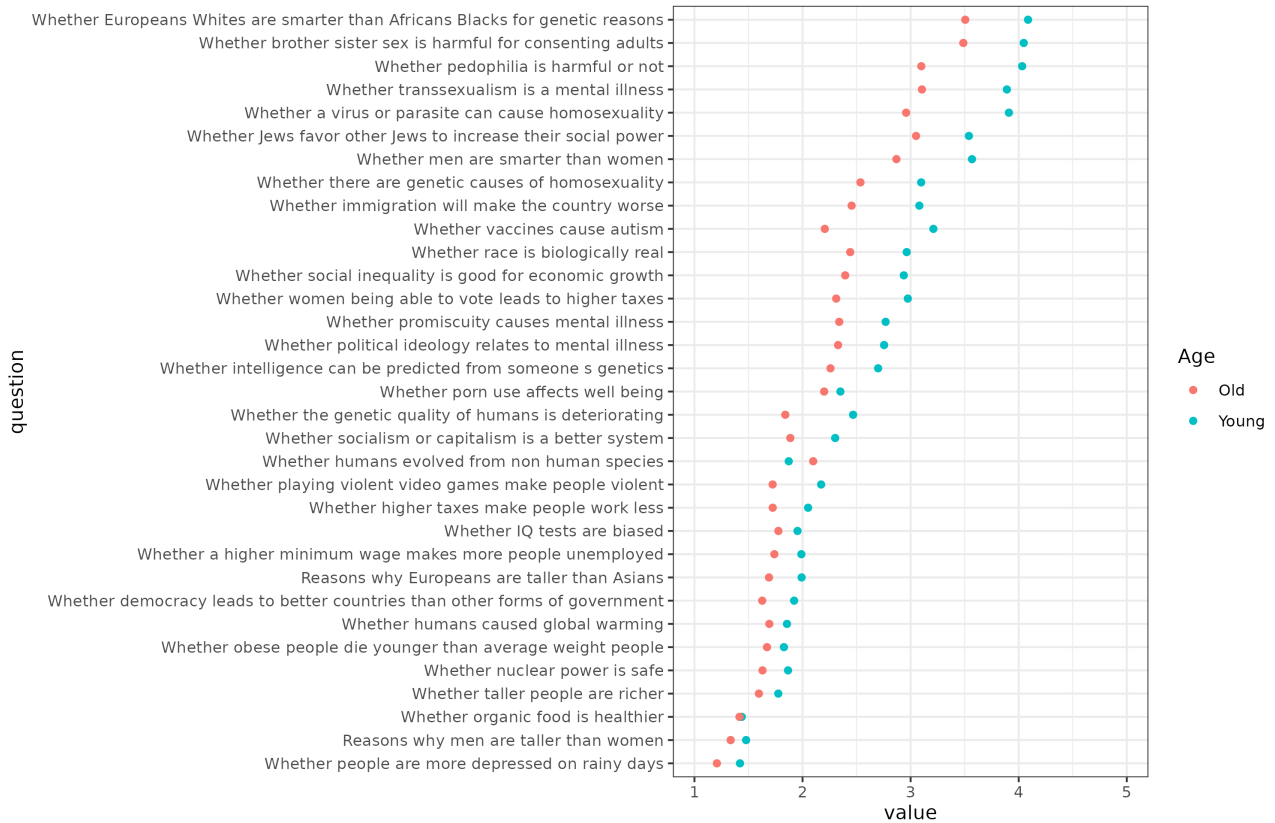


Figure 5: Tabooness per question by Age.

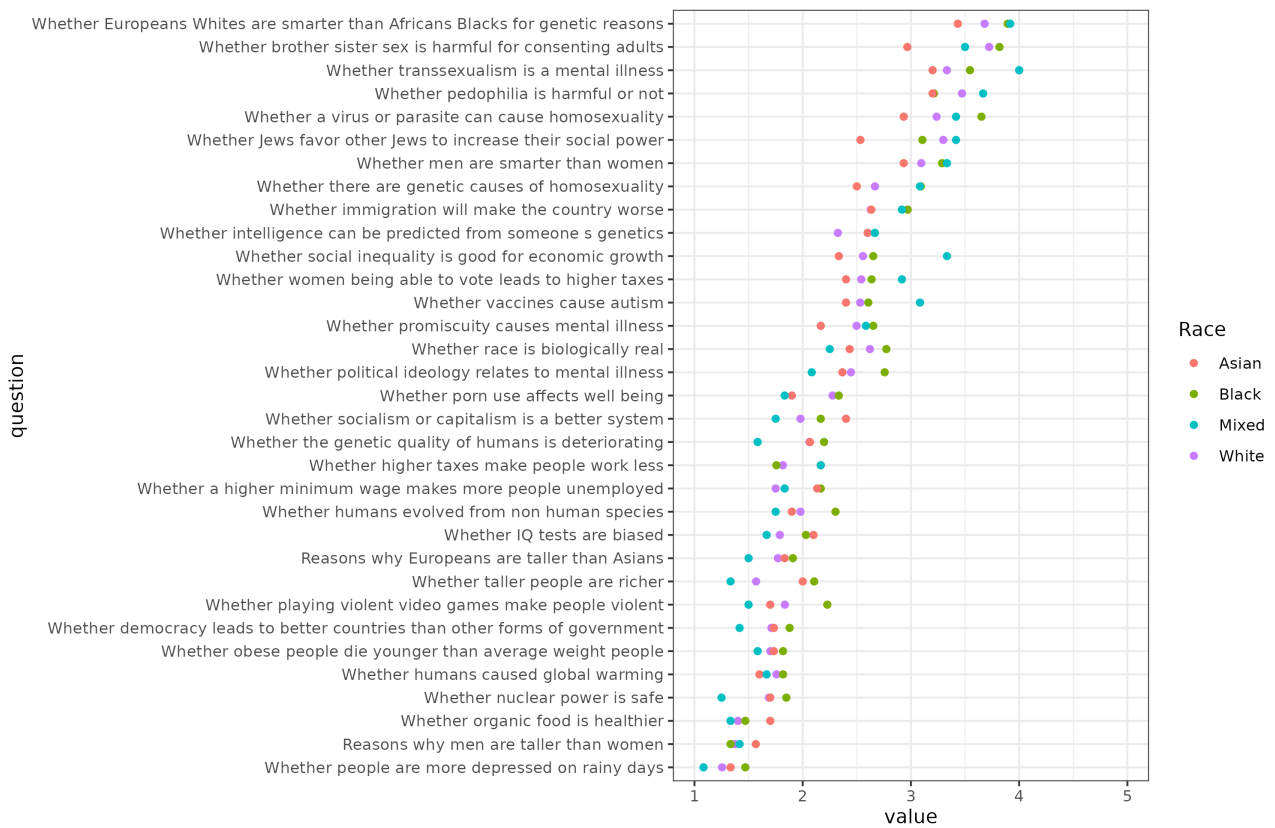


Figure 6: Tabooness per question by Race.

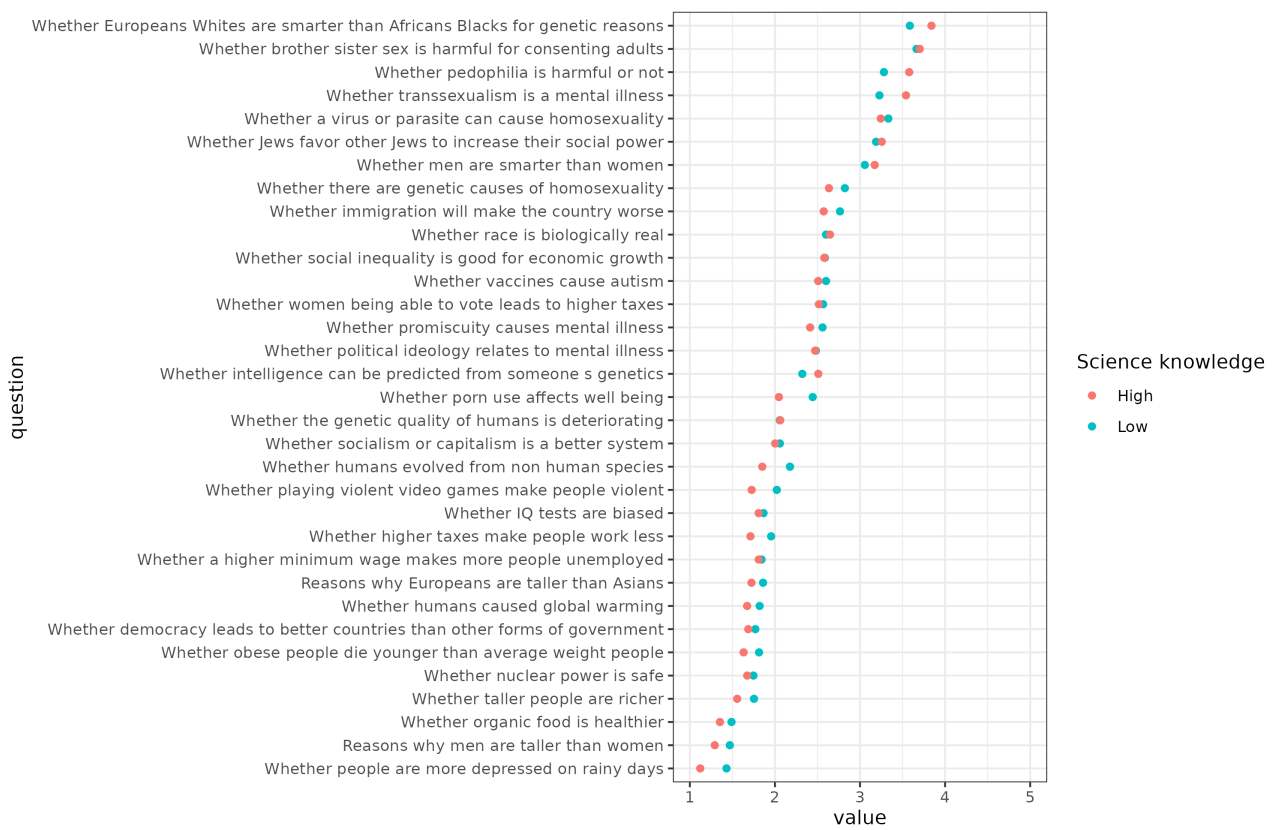


Figure 7: Tabooess per question by Scientific Knowledge.