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More Than Just Race: A Response to William Darity, Jr. and Mark Gould[1]

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I welcome the opportunity to respond to two extensive and provocative review essays of my book, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*. An author seldom gets the chance to reply to reviews in the same issue in which they appear, including a chance to express both appreciation for the reviewers' comments and to elaborate on major points of disagreement.

I begin with William Darity, Jr.'s critical review of my book. I hasten to emphasize straight away that many of Darity's claims amount to little more than *ex catherda* assertions backed mainly by his assured personal conviction that culture is irrelevant to the study of social outcomes among the inner-city poor. Darity does not let empirical data challenge his strongly held beliefs. Indeed, he firmly asserts that evidence to support the use of cultural factors in explanations of racial disparities is "nonexistent," despite the many pages in *More Than Just Race* describing empirical research findings on how cultural variables contribute to racial inequality. I will not take up valuable space detailing this obvious evidence. Readers of my book can judge for themselves, but I am sure they will reach the conclusion that Darity's claim lacks substance.

Darity also asserts that scholars such as Elijah Anderson, and my Harvard colleagues Orlando Patterson and Mary Waters, "can be interpreted as giving roughly a 30% weight to the structural factors and a 70% weight to cultural factors;" whereas I seem "to assign approximately the reverse weighting: 70% to structural factors and 30% to cultural factors."

How he arrives at these percentages is a mystery. In *More Than Just Race*, I simply state: "Although cultural forces play a role in inner-city outcomes, evidence suggests that they are secondary to the larger economic and political forces, both racial and nonracial, that move American society" (Wilson 2009, p. 31). For example, after reviewing evidence discussed in the chapter on "The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males," I conclude: "structural explanations of the economic woes of low-skilled black men are far more significant than cultural arguments, even though structural and cultural forces jointly restrict black male progress in some situations" (p. 31).

In aligning himself with those who assign "zero weight to the cultural factors," Darity raises the question of why I now endorse "a synthetic view of the sources of Black-White inequality in the United States." And he proposes two reasons. The first is to provide a "scientific" prop for the position taken by President Barack Obama on the status of Black America "in executing an effective campaign for the presidency and thereafter." It comes as a complete surprise to me to learn that one of my motivations for writing *More Than Just Race* was to support the president's position, especially when you consider that I began writing this book at least a year

before Obama decided to campaign for the presidency. Indeed, Obama's name was not even mentioned in the first complete draft of the book. Only in the final revisions of the book did the thought occur to me that Obama's 2008 Speech on Race could be used as a model of political framing because it successfully integrated both structural and cultural forces.

The second reason Darity proposes for my writing *More Than Just Race* was that it provided grounds for my rapprochement "with various colleagues at Harvard," including Orlando Patterson, Mary Waters, Roland Fryer, and Martin Kilson, "all of whom traffic heavily in cultural determinism." Darity goes on to state: "Wilson's willingness to accommodate the cultural determinists at Harvard brings a new level of tranquility to the Yard. But the price is intellectual peace exchanged for intellectual error." Again, it is a complete surprise to me to learn that I wrote the book to improve relations with my Harvard colleagues, or that I was trying to alleviate tensions in my relations with them. These scholars are more than able to defend themselves against Darity's charges; nonetheless, I would like to add that given their focus on both structural and cultural factors, regardless of interpretations about the relative weight they assign to each factor, I think it is grossly unfair, and indeed disingenuous, to simply label them cultural determinists.

Darity furthermore states: "disadvantaged status in the labor market is far from limited to 'poor young black males' as Wilson tends to imply." This is a remarkable statement. I challenge Darity to identify anywhere in the book where I "tend to imply" that the disadvantages in the labor market are limited to poor African American males. The purpose of *More Than Just Race* was to develop a framework for understanding the formation and maintenance of racial inequality and racial group outcomes that integrates cultural factors with two types of structural forces—those that directly reflect explicit racial bias and those that do not. I then apply this framework to three topics pertaining to the inner-city African American experience that have generated the most intense debates over structure versus culture: the formation and persistence of the inner-city ghetto, the plight of Black males, and the breakdown of the Black family.

Accordingly, my discussion of the plight of low-income Black males is linked to this framework. Darity's subsequent discussion of discrimination in the labor market that relates to the Black population in general—including racial earning inequality, skin color and labor market discrimination, higher educational attainment and discrimination, African Americans' commitment to higher education, overall Black commitments to education, racial identity, and education outcomes—is then used to refute the claim that he erroneously attributes to me in the first place. These factors are interesting and important for a comprehensive study of racial inequality in America, but they are outside the scope of my book.

Darity also discusses the work of Charles Murray to support the view that it is class, not race, that explains the cultural practices of Black families in poverty. Yet he neglects to mention my discussion of Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas' (2005) important book, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. These authors collected and analyzed data on Black, White, and Puerto Rican mothers in low-income neighborhoods in Camden, New Jersey (one of the poorest cities in the United States) and in eight poor Philadelphia neighborhoods. As I point out in *More Than Just Race*, their study suggests that regardless of race, poor women respond to conditions of chronic economic hardship in similar cultural ways. In response to their study I stated:

> Nonetheless, by one logic, every woman in Edin and Kefalas' study—black, white, or Puerto Rican—is likely to respond to urban poverty by finding positive

> meaning in having out-of-wedlock children. By a different logic, the unique historic racial experiences of inner-city blacks may have also influenced their cultural framing of marriage and motherhood in ways that are not captured by Edin and Kefalas. I tend to think that both logics apply—that is, that all the women in their study could find meaning and purpose in child rearing in spite of serious financial hardship, and that black women would, on balance, have particular views on family formed through the unique circumstances tied to racial segregation. However, I would place far more weight on the former because it reveals that not only blacks, but other ethnic groups, have responded to conditions of poverty in similar ways. How families are formed among America's poorest citizens is an area that cries out for further research (Wilson 2009, p. 129).

Finally, Darity maintains that I give no attention to the importance of net wealth. He states that even "when wealth is taken into account virtually every group-based disparity in behavior customarily attributed to racial differences in cultural orientation disappears." Regardless of the truth of this bold assertion, it is not relevant to *More Than Just Race*, which focuses on research on cultural forces that emerge under conditions of chronic racial and economic subordination in the inner-city ghetto, not on cultural differences between the Black and White populations in general.

In contrast to Darity's diatribe, Mark Gould provides a more thoughtful critique of *More Than Just Race*. I appreciate his discussion of my work prior to the publication of this book, as well as his summary of the structural factors that impact the poor as detailed in *More Than Just Race*. However, Gould feels that I do not sufficiently stress the "economic and political changes that have led to a profound increase of income inequality in the United States," including adverse consequences for lower-income groups such as the inner-city poor. However, the changes to which Gould refers were largely covered in my earlier books (Wilson 1996, 1999). And I did not see the need to rehash much of that material in *More Than Just Race*, which is part of a series of books on "Issues of Our Time," published by W. W. Norton and edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—a series that placed specific limitations on the number of words in each book. Succinct writing therefore was paramount.

Unlike Darity, Gould agrees that the inclusion of both structural and cultural factors "is crucial in explanations of poverty." However, he disagrees in several fundamental ways with my analysis of culture. In my discussion of cultural forces that contribute to racial inequality, I examine two types: (1) national views and beliefs on race and (2) cultural traits—shared outlooks, modes of behavior, traditions, belief systems, worldviews, values, skills, preferences, styles of self-presentation, etiquette, and linguistic patterns—that emerge from patterns of intragroup interaction in settings created by discrimination and segregation and that reflect collective experiences within those settings. And I identify racism—defined as an ideology of racial domination that features beliefs that one race is either biologically or culturally inferior to another race, and uses such beliefs to prescribe or rationalize how the "inferior" race should be treated, as well as explain its members' collective accomplishments and social position as a group—as one of the most prominent American cultural frames that has played a major role in determining how Whites and other ethnic groups perceive and act toward Blacks.

Gould maintains that my failure to adequately characterize the normative sources of racism inhibits my ability to characterize cultural traits in the inner-city ghetto that emerge from chronic racial subordination. He maintains that any discussion of dom-

inant American cultural frames must distinguish conceptually between normative and cognitive expectations. The former refers to social values, and the latter refers to expectations of actually being able to achieve these values given various constraints in society—for example lack of educational and occupational opportunities. He uses this conceptual distinction to critique my various discussions of cultural forces.

Beginning first with the issues of social values or normative expectations, Gould refers to the research my colleagues and I conducted in Chicago on employer attitudes toward inner city workers, a topic that was the focus of one of the chapters in my book *When Work Disappears* (1996). Gould states that I equivocated in that book about whether employers of entry level workers in Chicago "were simply facing the facts about inner-city Black men, suggesting that their hostile orientations towards these men should not be seen as discriminatory because Black employers as well as White employers shared them."

Gould points out that in *More Than Just Race*, however, I paradoxically "discount these contentions, suggesting that the employers are discriminating against prospective Black employees." He then states that I "cannot have it both ways. If inner-city Black workers are embedded in a culture that hinders their ability to take advantage of economic opportunities and inhibits their economic productivity, and if employers recognize this, their reluctance to hire these men is not discriminatory. It is, as they suggest, facing facts." However, Gould reaches this conclusion because of his misinterpretation of my arguments both in *When Work Disappears* and in *More Than Just Race*.

First of all, in *When Work Disappears*, I never argued that the tendency of employers to snub inner-city Black workers should not be seen as discriminatory; rather, I raised the legitimate question of the extent to which employers are rejecting inner-city Black workers because of overt racism or on the basis of qualifications. I also stated that many of the selective recruitment practices clearly represent statistical discrimination: employers make decisions about the inner-city Black workers *in general* and reach decisions based on those assumptions before they have had a chance to review systematically the qualifications of individual applicants. I argue that this is obviously a matter of race.

This position is consistent with the arguments advanced in chapter three of *More Than Just Race*, where I discuss the negative attitudes of employers toward inner-city Black males. I point out that these attitudes "are classic examples of statistical discrimination," because of the following practice:

> . . . many inner city black males are never given the opportunity to prove themselves. Although some of these men scorn entry-level jobs because of the poor working conditions and low wages, many others would readily accept such employment. And although statistical discrimination contains some element of class bias against poor, inner-city workers, it is clearly a racially motivated practice. It is a frustrating and disturbing fact that inner-city black males are effectively screened out of employment far more often than their Hispanic or white peers who apply for the same jobs (Wilson 2009, p. 75).

Accordingly, the statistical discrimination of inner-city Black workers is clearly emphasized in both *When Work Disappears* and *More Than Just Race*. As I pointed out in the latter book, this practice is an expression of employers' dominant cultural values, or what Gould calls normative expectations, that they share with other members of society. However, Gould goes on to argue: "if we recognize that there are a dominant set of values institutionalized in the United States, typified by

individualism, universalism, and egalitarianism, we can understand the employers' orientation." Nonetheless, what he is describing is in fact discriminatory. With some other scholars, I have always been baffled as to why statistical discrimination is often not seen as "real discrimination" (apparently in contrast to "taste discrimination"). But in statistical discrimination an employer judges an applicant based on what the employer perceives to be true about the group to which the applicant belongs. Regardless of the accuracy of these perceived group-level characteristics, it is still discriminatory to judge an applicant based on perceptions about his or her group. In fact, it is reasonable to think that action influenced by such judgments is what most people commonly understand discrimination to mean. There may be a "rational" basis for an employer's action based on this perspective, but it is still discrimination.[2]

Gould further states that, as the evidence in my book suggests, "inner-city African Americans share the dominant values present in the society." He then asks, "If this is the case, how can we link an analysis of normative orientations to an explanation of inner-city poverty?" He provides the following answer:

> We can do so only if we make some conceptual distinctions. If Blacks (for both good and ill) share the dominant values (obligatory characterizations of the desirable) institutionalized in the United States, we may suggest that they also share a distinct sub*culture* (constituting meaning and identity). While the latter is not a culture of poverty—it does not inhibit success due to its inherent attributes—it does inhibit success, due to how people who share it are treated in the larger society. In addition, we will have to draw a distinction between normative expectations, which do not change in the face of disappointment, and cognitive expectations, which adapt to social reality, if we are to understand why Blacks committed to (for example) education, may not act out their commitments."

However, much of this is a restatement of arguments I advanced in *More Than Just Race*—especially arguments pertaining to the economic plight of inner-city Black males and the fragmentation of the poor Black family—and it was not necessary to introduce the concepts of "normative expectations" and "cognitive expectations" to make my points. For example, in discussing studies conducted by my research team in Chicago in the late 1980s (Wilson 2009), I pointed out "that there is frequently a gap between what people state in the abstract and what they perceive to be possible for themselves given their own situations. In other words, it should not be surprising if some residents support the abstract American ideal of individual initiative and still feel that they cannot get ahead, because of factors beyond their control" (p. 84). Gould includes much of the same quotation from my book, and then goes on to state, "This is a classic characterization of the difference between cognitive and normative expectations. Inner-city African-Americans are committed to American values and they cognitively know how difficult it is for them to implement them." By inserting the terms "cognitive and normative expectations," Gould merely restates in sociologese what is specified in clearer language in *More Than Just Race*.

Gould also maintains that although I have an understanding of racism as a dominant cultural value, I adopt a position "that precludes a successful analysis of the values and of their implementation." He states that I agree with Michèle Lamont and Mario Luis Small (2008), who argue, as quoted in *More Than Just Race*, "'Instead of imputing a shared culture to groups' . . . it is better to examine empirically 'the range of frames through which people make sense of their reality and how they use them to orient their action.'" (Wilson 2009, p. 84). Unfortunately, Gould misinterpreted the paragraph in which that quotation appeared. I follow that quotation up with the

following sentences: "Lamont and Small further argue that cultural 'frames do not cause behavior so much as make it possible or likely.' In other words, cultural frames are necessary but not sufficient for behavior. For the purpose of pursuing a cultural analysis of life in poverty, I fully agree" (Wilson 2009, p. 115). Accordingly, what I fundamentally agreed with is Lamont and Small's argument that "cultural frames are necessary but not sufficient for behavior." I certainly do not agree with their argument that discourages the idea of a shared group culture. In fact, the idea of shared group cultural values is emphasized throughout *More Than Just Race* in my discussion of one of the two types of cultural forces that contribute to racial inequality—national views and beliefs on race. It is puzzling to me how Gould overlooked my detailed discussions of the impact of shared national cultural values on race in America.

Gould devotes five paragraphs in response to my critique of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve* in chapter five of *More Than Just Race*, where I emphasize that their controls of the effects of the environment—family education, father's occupation, and household income—are incredibly weak. I state: "Herrnstein and Murray did not provide measures of the cumulative and durable effects of race, including the effects of prolonged residence in racially segregated neighborhoods" (Wilson 2009, p. 115). And I refer to two groundbreaking longitudinal studies, discussed earlier in the book, that reveal that these cumulative effects are both structural and cultural.

Gould focuses on one of the two studies, authored by Robert Sampson et al. (2008), on the development of language skills; a study that shows the adverse effects of prolonged residence in poor segregated neighborhoods on children's verbal ability. Gould then provides an extended discussion of a related study by Patrick Sharkey and Felix Elwert (2009), which is not discussed or even cited in *More Than Just Race*. Sharkey and Elwert point out that multigenerational neighborhood poverty has negative effects on cognitive ability, which is "sensitive to family, school, and social environment" (Sharkey and Elwert, 2011, p. 1941).

After commenting on this research, Gould concludes: "the indices we use to measure these capacities, 'cognitive abilities,' often show them to be correlated with class and race. This is the case because capacities can be measured only through performances and the performances measured are often more associated with certain social and cultural positions than with others." But, while indices of cognitive ability may indeed be biased, it is still important to emphasize, as Sharkey and Elwert (2009) clearly reveal in their longitudinal research: that children with multigenerational exposure to poverty score lower on cognitive tests than children with the same race and income, but who do not have the same multigenerational exposure to poverty.[3] This point reinforces my argument in *More Than Just Race*: that the measures used by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) to control for the effects of the environment are incredibly weak.

If there is a major point of agreement between Gould and me, it is that the discussion of the social-policy implications of my arguments in *More Than Just Race* is not comprehensive. This is in part due to page limitations that I referred to previously; I therefore made a firm decision to focus on framing, as opposed to developing, specific policy options that might flow from my analysis. However, I fundamentally disagree that I need to conceptualize the notion of shared social values to make my arguments about political framing clearer. Gould reaches this conclusion because of misinterpretations of my arguments, including arguments that are taken out of context. Indeed, as stated above, a good part of *More Than Just Race* is devoted to a discussion of the impact of shared cultural values.

Finally, in the concluding paragraph, and elsewhere in his review, Gould carelessly labels my discussion of cultural traits in the inner city as "culture of poverty." This notion carries a lot of baggage and is often used to belittle or dismiss a scholar's work on culture. More careful writers make a distinction between "culture of poverty" and a cultural analysis of life in poverty. I associate my work with the latter. The former is often associated with the idea that the cultural traits of the poor are immutable and cannot be changed through social policy. This position is clearly so far removed from the discussion of culture in *More Than Just Race* that the unqualified attachment of the label "culture of poverty" to my arguments in the book is, to put it politely, misleading.

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank Anmol Chaddha, James Quane, and Edward Walker for their very helpful comments on a previous draft of this manuscript.
2. Anmol Chaddha clearly reminded me of this point.
3. I am once again indebted to Anmol Chaddha for his insights on this point.

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