

Book Review: *Condemned: The Taboo Science of Race and Intelligence*

Bryan J. Pesta, Apollo Books, 2026
Reviewed by Aldric Hama

Bryan Pesta, former School of Business Professor, Cleveland State University (CSU), recounts the fallout evoked by the publication of his paper that explored a potential genetic basis for individual and group differences in cognitive ability based on polygenic scores for educational attainment.¹ Critically, his paper lends support to the notion that genetics underlies a substantial portion of the differences in cognitive ability between racial groups in the United States. In his book, Pesta spends considerable effort reviewing the long-established fundamentals on cognitive ability, its measurement and its robust association with life outcomes that matter, including health, family structure, propensity to criminal behaviour, education and income. He also summarizes the considerable indirect evidence supporting the heritability of cognitive ability, such as findings from adoption and twin studies and the many large-scale genome-wide association studies that have identified thousands of DNA variants statistically associated with educational attainment. Finally, Pesta goes to great length to explain that, with respect to cognitive ability, genetics does not imply destiny, that the presence of genetics does not entirely exclude non-genetic influences. He categorically denies the notion that “individual worth” is a function of “group averages” (p. 177) and insists that evidence “does not dictate values” (pp. 263–264).

Indeed, many of the points raised in Pesta’s book concerning cognitive ability, genetics and race differences had previously been elaborated by Charles Murray. Towards the end of his *Human Diversity*, Murray stated: “you know in your gut how unimportant those differences are in deciding whether the person next to you is someone you respect.”²

It is a fact, however, that to ensure smooth functioning, institutions need to predict individual performance, as failure to screen applicants could lead to financially costly or life-threatening outcomes. Thus, “employers screen job applicants”, “schools sort performance”, and so on, so that employees and students are able to at least meet minimum standards of performance (p. 180). How institutions deal with the mismatch between expectations and results arising from “heterogeneous capacity” lies well outside empirical science (pp. 263–264).

“Soon after publication” of his 2019 paper (p. 10), academics outside of CSU complained to CSU institutional authorities, not only denouncing his findings “racist”, but that Pesta improperly handled US National Institutes of Health (NIH) data—he was accused of “research misconduct”. Thus, CSU informed Pesta that he was guilty of “research misconduct” and it was up to him to prove his innocence. “Research misconduct” is an exceedingly elastic charge that is at once broad (“departure from accepted practices”) and narrow (“fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism”) in nature.³ A letter of complaint was sent to the NIH as well, alleging Pesta engaged in “research misconduct”. Over time, activists within and outside of CSU denounced Pesta’s publication as “stigmatizing and unethical” (p. 13) and Pesta himself as a “racist” (p. 13). Furthermore, activists claimed that research uncovering differences between racial groups in cognitive

¹ Lasker, J., Kirkegaard, E.O.W., Fuerst, J., & Meisenberg, G. (2019). Global ancestry and cognitive ability. *Psych* 1: 431–459.

² Murray, C. (2020). *Human Diversity*. NY: Twelve.

³ CFR, Title 42; 93.103: “A finding of research misconduct made under this part requires that: (a) There be a significant departure from accepted practices of the relevant research community; and (b) The misconduct be committed intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly; and (c) The allegation be proven by a preponderance of the evidence.” CFR, Title 42; 93.234: “Research misconduct means fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results. Research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion.” The CSU policy on misconduct is no less elastic, stating that “[p]articular circumstances in an individual case may dictate variation from normal procedure deemed in the best interests of [CSU].” <https://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/25a0511n-06.pdf>

ability and the genetic contribution to them is “harmful” and must be banned. Thus, they reasoned, public data sets that could be utilized to uncover racial differences in cognitive abilities and other heritable traits should also be banned.⁴

A surreal aspect of CSU’s investigation was that administrators claimed that Pesta’s handling of NIH data, rather than his publication, was the subject of investigation. This claim should be viewed in light of the fact that CSU was continuously hounded by external and internal activists that CSU housed a “racist” professor performing “racist” research. Given such pressures, administrators’ claim that Pesta’s “research misconduct” was their sole focus is utterly lacking in credibility. Pesta shows that administrators in fact characterized his work as “harmful” (pp. 266–267). During this time, while Pesta received threats (p. 13), he was lucky enough not to have been assaulted. In the end, two years after publication, CSU fired Pesta, a fully tenured professor at the time.

Pesta fought CSU in court on the ground that the university violated his First Amendment right. The US Court of Appeals determined that Pesta’s claims against CSU were meritless and dismissed his suit in October 2024. An appeals court upheld this ruling in November 2025. Indeed, the appeals court warned that “[public] employees are not speaking as citizens for First Amendment purposes, and the Constitution does not insulate their communications from employer discipline.”⁵ Elsewhere, we read that Pesta’s own university union, the American Association of University Professors, declined to intercede on his behalf and to contest his firing.⁶

Thus, tenured or not, presenting findings that do not comport with that of leftist activists, orthodox academics, or the political elite are grounds for punitive action. Punishing those who point out significant differences between racial groups in cognitive ability, or any other mental trait, is unfortunately common—more so when genes are shown to have a role in this difference.⁷ Not even death stops activists from demanding one’s work be retracted.⁸

To this reviewer, the story outside of science is the more interesting—and more troubling—part of Pesta’s book. The fact that anyone can write to the NIH, the world’s largest source of public funding for biomedical research,⁹ and allege “research misconduct” to silence someone whose findings run against one’s values or ideology is frightening. In 2021, the NIH punished Pesta not for “research misconduct” but for “violations” over NIH procedure. He was suspended from accessing the NIH data base for three years. Cleveland State University Provost Laura Bloomberg stated that Pesta’s suspension “was the most serious sanction ever meted out by the NIH against a Principal Investigator”.¹⁰ Bloomberg probably never heard of the David Baltimore-Teresa Imanishi-Kari case, in which Imanishi-Kari in 1991 was wrongly accused by the NIH of “research misconduct” and banned from receiving NIH funding for 10 years.¹¹ Nonetheless, the accusation of “research misconduct” and NIH debarment is a death sentence for researchers dependent on NIH funding. The fact that such an accusation is targeted and at the same time arbitrary is also chilling. Pesta’s accusers specifically pointed to his alleged abuse of NIH data. In the same issue of *Psych* that carried Pesta’s paper, there was a study that reached a similar conclusion, one that utilized a somewhat similar database.¹² That database received funding from the NIH and is now “supervised” by the NIH.

⁴<https://doi.org/10.3389/fgene.2024.1345631>

⁵<https://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/25a0511n-06.pdf>

⁶https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ohnd-1_23-cv-00546/pdf/USCOURTS-ohnd-1_23-cv-00546-2.pdf;
<https://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/25a0511n-06.pdf>

⁷<https://www.aei.org/society-and-culture/fecklessness-at-middlebury/>; Dutton, E. (2018) *J. Philippe Rushton: A Life History Perspective*. Oulu, Finland: Thomas Edward Press.

⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/dec/10/elsevier-reviews-national-iq-research-by-british-race-scientist-richard-lynn>; <https://www.science.org/content/article/misconduct-allegations-push-psychology-hero-his-pedestal>

⁹<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/impact-nih-research/serving-society/direct-economic-contributions>

¹⁰https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ohnd-1_23-cv-00546/pdf/USCOURTS-ohnd-1_23-cv-00546-2.pdf;
<https://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/25a0511n-06.pdf>

¹¹<https://news.mit.edu/1996/imanishi-0724>. Three years debarment is average: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.354.6311.408>. Issued in 2021, before NIH’s notice to Pesta was a voluntary 10-year debarment by a researcher at the University of Texas Health Science Center: <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-21-061.html>

¹²Kirkegaard, E.O.W., Fuerst, J., & Piffer, D. (2019). Biogeographical ancestry, cognitive ability and socioeconomic outcomes. *Psych* 1: 1–25.

However, that paper—as far as we know—was not targeted by activists.

Given the long and vociferously hostile attitude in academia to race and group differences research and the genetics of cognitive ability, such an environment would be sufficient to suppress such research.¹³ However, Pesta points out that there does not need to be a “formal policy” or “formal bans” on politically incorrect research. He suggests that scientists can be steered away from the “wrong” type of research based on feedback from thesis advisors, colleagues, grantors, and journal editors (Chapter 25: “The Architecture of Silence”). Pesta observes that “evidence reaches print” not after peer review but “after passing through incentives. . .” The result, Pesta suggests, is “not banned conclusions but a narrowed research space.” Those opposing “dangerous” research may not be acting on nefarious motives. Pesta points out that opponents “believe they are acting responsibly” (p. 150) to prevent social harm and further believe that it is worth the cost of not fully understanding the basis for group differences, such as intellectual malaise and endless less-than-efficacious environmental manipulations.

In hindsight, one might say that Pesta could have covered himself earlier so as not to incur NIH’s attention in the future—which would have required supreme clairvoyance and mind reading abilities. For example, obtaining explicit and written NIH permission to upload NIH data to an external non-CSU server for data processing. Pesta describes not obtaining explicit permission to do this for data analysis as an “oversight” (p. 30). Also, explicit and written NIH permission beforehand to publish *anything* (Chapter 41: “Unauthorized Use of Controlled-Access Data”). Even though Pesta stated what he planned to do with the NIH data in his data based access request, the NIH claimed that his paper was unrelated to his previously submitted request.

Trying to second-guess a government bureaucracy, however, is pretty exhausting and demoralizing to those without an infinite amount of patience. Furthermore, one is at the mercy of capricious and faceless activists who have ready access to the media as well as the ears of the NIH and university compliance officers: you punish these scientists because their findings are “racist” and “harmful”. Pesta appears to be one of the few with patience, persisting from the start of the NIH’s and CSU’s “research misconduct” investigations until the US Court of Appeals sustained the US District Court’s decision to throw out his lawsuit against CSU.

Rather than an encouraging story of tenacity, Pesta’s book shows a very grim world of activists lying in wait to ambush scientists, and institutions concerned primarily with self-image rather than scholarly research.

¹³ Carl, N. & Woodley, M.A. (2019). A scientometric analysis of controversies in the field of intelligence research. *Intelligence* 77:101397.