Race and the Achievement Gap

Using standardized tests to measure achievement perpetuates a system of institutionalized racism and lends the cloak of science to discriminatory practices.

By Harold Berlak

That there is a race gap in educational achievement is not news. Large numbers of the nation's children leave school, with and without high school diplomas, barely able to read, write, and do simple math. But the failures of the schools are not evenly distributed. They fall disproportionately on students of color.

Even when parents' income and wealth is comparable, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and immigrants for whom English is not a first language lag behind English-speaking, native-born, white students. The evidence for the gap has been documented repeatedly by the usual measures. These include drop-out rates, relative numbers of students who take the advanced placement examination, who are enrolled in the top academic and "gifted" classes and/or admitted to higher-status secondary schools, colleges, graduate, and professional programs. And last but not least, are the discrepancies in scores on standardized tests of academic achievement, on which teachers' and students' fate so heavily depend.

How is this achievement gap to be explained? This article focuses first on the general question and then separately on the statistical gap in standardized test scores. It then discusses the crucial distinction between academic performance and academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. Though often spoken of as though they are one, they are clearly different. The
failure to separate out the difference clouds and confounds educational and policy issues and misleads us in efforts to explain and eradicate the race gap in academic performance.

HISTORICAL EXPLANATIONS

Over the years, the major reasons given for the claimed superior attainments of whites in cultural, artistic, and academic endeavors were overtly racist. It was said that the explanation lay in the superior genes of white northern European, Anglo-Americans. As the social sciences developed in the latter years of the 19th and the 20th centuries, "scientific" tracts defending white supremacy appeared with regularity. By the 1930's, the eugenics movement (which posited a biological basis for the superiority of whites) managed to gain a foothold in North American universities. And, it is relevant to add, all the leaders of this overtly racist movement were the leaders of the newly emerging field of scientific mental measurement. Many were the same men who testified before Congress in the early 1920's and lent scientific credence to the racist immigration exclusion acts which barred or greatly restricted immigration from Asia, Latin America, and southern and eastern Europe. The eugenics movement was considered a respectable academic discipline until it was discredited following the defeat of the Third Reich and the immensity of the crimes committed in the name of Nordic racial purity.

In 1969, the scientific case for racism was revived by an article published in the *Harvard Educational Review* by University of California-Berkeley education professor Arthur Jensen. Based on his statistical analysis of IQ test scores, he concluded that African Americans were genetically inferior to whites in general intelligence. His racist thesis was widely disseminated and discussed in the popular press and in respectable academic and policy circles. In time, Jensen's conclusions were thoroughly discredited by a spate of books and articles. In 1994, once again
using standardized test data, Charles Murray and Richard Hernstein wrote *The Bell Curve* and claimed to have proven that the inferior place of Black and brown people in the social, political, and economic order was rooted in biology. The arguments for the genetic superiority of the white race were again dismembered and discredited by many geneticists and biologists.

Recently a more subtle form of "scientific" racism has gained some respectability. The inferiority of the Black and brown races is now said to lie not necessarily in genetics but in culture and history. This more quietly spoken academic version of the master-race ideology has also been thoroughly dismantled, yet racist explanations for the race gap persist.

Once all "scientific" arguments supporting racism are dismissed, how is the ever-present gap in academic school performance to be explained? Numerous social and behavioral scientists have addressed this question.

A statistical study by Professor Samuel Meyers Jr. at the Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice at the University of Minnesota sought to determine whether poverty was a primary cause of the poor performance of Black students on the Minnesota Basic Standards Test. Passing this test was scheduled to become a prerequisite for a high school diploma in 2000. In a 1996 trial run in Minneapolis, 75 percent of African-American students
failed the math test, and 79 percent failed in reading, compared to 26 percent and 42 percent respectively for whites.

The researchers found that, contrary to expectations, test scores were not statistically related to school poverty, neighborhood poverty, racial concentration, or even ranking of schools (except in the case of whites). They did find that African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics were underrepresented in the top ranked schools. African Americans were 4.5 times as likely to be found in schools ranked low in math, and twice as likely to be found in schools ranked lowest in reading.

For both white students and students of color, success on the tests was positively correlated to how an individual had been tracked. Only 6.9 percent of students of color compared to 23 percent of white students had access to "gifted and talented" programs. This study suggests that tracking and the quality of the academic opportunities available in the school affects both the test score gap and the gap in academic performance generally. While these correlational studies are suggestive, they do not examine basic causes nor explain the pervasiveness and stability of the gap over prolonged periods of time.

A set of experimental studies conducted by Stanford University professor Claude Steele, an African-American psychologist, sought to explain the circumstances and situations that give rise to the race gap in test scores. He and colleagues gave equal numbers of African-American and white Stanford sophomores a 30-minute standardized test composed of some of the more challenging items from the advanced Graduate Record Examination in literature. Steele notes that all the students were highly successful students and test-takers since all Stanford students must earn SAT scores well above the national average in order to be admitted to the university.
The researchers told half the students that the test did not assess ability, but that the research was aimed at "understanding the psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems." The others were told that the test was a valid measure of academic ability and capacity. African-American students who were told that the test was a true measure of ability scored significantly lower than the white students. The other African-American students' scores were equal to the white students'. Whites performed the same in both situations.

The explanation Steele offers is that Black students know they are especially likely to be seen as having limited ability. Groups not stereotyped in this way do not experience this extra intimidation. He suggests that "it is serious intimidation, implying as it does that if they should perform badly, they may not belong in walks of life where their tested abilities are important — walks of life in which they are heavily invested." He labels this phenomenon "stereotype vulnerability."

In another study, Steele and colleagues found, to their surprise, that students most likely to do poorest on the tests were not the least able and prepared academically. To the contrary, they tended to be among the more highly motivated and academically focused.

While Steele's research provides a plausible psychological explanation for the gap, it does not probe the historical, social, and cultural factors that have created and continue to sustain these
stereotypes. We are left with no explanation of how "stereotype vulnerability" is created by and also shapes everyday life in society and at school.

The previously cited studies focus on the gap in standardized test scores. The next study cited is one of a large number of recent "qualitative" studies — observational, historical, and ethnographic studies — that illuminate relationships of culture, gender, and race to the social relations within the classroom and school.

Signithia Fordham, an African-American anthropologist, studied a Washington, D.C., public high school and focused on how the "hidden" and explicit curriculum shapes student aspirations and achievements, and how students of differing cultural, racial, and social backgrounds respond to the schooling experience. Hers is a multifaceted, complex study, including interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, and field notes, gathered over a four-year period. She concludes that for African-American students, patterns of academic success and underachievement are a reflection of processes of resistance that enable them to maintain their humanness in the face of a stigmatized racial identity. She shows that African-American adolescents' profound ambivalence about the value and possibility of school success is manifest as both conformity and avoidance. Ambivalence is manifest in students' motivation and interest in schoolwork, which of course includes mastery of standardized test-taking skills. The following two quotes are taken from interviews with two African-American men. The first is from a young lawyer employed in a Washington, D.C., firm who had been a National Merit finalist and whose test scores were among the top two percent in his state.

Commenting on why he was disappointed with his career, he observed, "I realized that no matter how smart I was [in school] or how hard I was willing to work [in the law firm] that it wasn't going to happen for me. ... Don't get me wrong, integration has
been great for my life. Without it, I would be playing on a much more restrictive field, [but] there's no doubt in my mind that I would be much more successful today if I were white."

A high-performing, African-American high school student offers the following view of why African Americans often underperform in school, and also expresses his doubts that his own school success will be rewarded.

"Well, we supposed to be stupid ... we perform poorly in school 'cause we all have it thought up in our heads we're supposed to be dumb so we might as well go ahead and be dumb," he said. "And we think that most of the things we learn [at school] won't help us in life anyway. ... What good is a quadratic equation gonna do me if I'm picking up garbage cans?"

Fordham found that even the most academically talented African-American high school students expressed profound ambivalence toward schooling and uncertainty that they will reap the rewards of school success. Virtually all African Americans she interviewed indicated that a central problem facing them at school and in larger white society is the widely held perception by whites that African Americans are less able and intelligent and their continuing need to confront and deal with this reality in everyday experience.

These three studies taken together suggest three related explanations for the race gap in academic achievement and in test scores. First, are students' perceptions of the opportunities in the wider society and the realities of "making it." Second, are the educational opportunities available in the educational system itself — within school districts, schools, and each classroom. Third, are the cumulative psychic and emotional effects of living in a social world saturated with racist ideology, and where racist practices and structures are pervasive and often go unnamed.
GAP IN TEST SCORES

There has been long-standing concern over the race gap in test scores. What is almost always overlooked is the size and educational significance of the test score gap. Most people assume that the statistical gap in scores between persons of color and whites is enormous. It is not. Depending on the test the difference varies but hovers in the range of 10 percent. This difference in average scores has persisted over time, regardless of the type of test, whether it is an 'IQ' test, norm-referenced or proficiency test, regardless of a test's publisher, or regardless of the educational level of the test-taker, be it kindergarten or graduate school.

Figure 1 (see below) illustrates graphically the 8 percent difference in California's CBEST, a standardized test of basic literacy required of principals, teachers, and virtually any adult who works professionally with children in school. It is first important to note that the distributions of scores are highly overlapping. In practical terms, the difference gap amounts to a mere handful of test items. In Figure 1, the gap is an average of 3.2 multiple-choice test items on a forty item multiple-choice test. (The number will vary according to the number of items on the test.) From an educational point of view, such differences have little if any significance. Because of the way the tests are normed and cut scores set, however, minor differences in the number of correct answers on a multiple-choice test create grossly inflated failure rates for persons of color. On CBEST, for example, African-American test takers
are 3.5 times more likely to fail the test than whites, Latino/Hispanics more than twice as likely, and Asian Americans more than 1.5 times as likely to fail than whites.

Numerous researchers have carefully documented the highly disproportionate adverse impact on students of color of standardized achievement testing. An argument might be made that these differences in test scores, while small, nevertheless represent real differences in performance, and that tests, though imperfect, eliminate those most likely to perform poorly at school or on the job. Steele's study suggests the opposite — that the more talented students are at greater risk of failure. There is no evidence to support the claim that standardized tests are valid and credible measures of academic achievement or intellectual capacity. There is no demonstrable connection between observed academic performance and standardized test scores. Test scores do not predict future success in school, the university, or in the workplace. Some standardized tests, the SAT for example, do correlate statistically to future grades. But this correlation is short-lived. What standardized achievement tests appear to predict best are parents' wealth and scores on other similarly constructed tests. As reported by Peter Sacks, socio-economic class accounts for approximately 50 percent of the variance in SAT test scores. He estimates that for every additional $10,000 in family income, a person on average gains 30 points on the SAT.

Among the more commonly heard explanations for the gap in standardized test scores is that the tests themselves are culturally and racially biased. What this has usually been taken to mean is that the bias is lodged in the content or language of individual test items. In the early years of mental measurement, the racism of the test items was blatant. In more recent years, major test publishers have made efforts to review and eliminate items with overt cultural and racial bias. Though item bias remains, it is implausible to conclude that all the publishers in all their tests knowingly or
unknowingly managed to create tests with an almost identical ratio of biased to unbiased items. The fact that scores on all commercially produced tests show the same 8-10 percent gap suggests that the gap cannot be fully explained by racial or cultural bias lodged in individual test items. Rather, the bias is *systemic and structural* — that is, built into in the basic assumptions and technology of standardized testing in the way the tests are constructed and administered, the way results are reported, and in the organizational structure and administrative rules of the accountability system itself.

### NUMERICAL SCALES

There is perhaps no clearer illustration of how the differences among the races are greatly exaggerated and distorted than the numerical scales used to report results. There is, as I have noted, about a 10 percent difference in scores between white and nonwhite students. On a 100 point scale, this 10 percent difference constitutes a gap of ten points. However, California's Academic Performance Index or API (which is based entirely on students' scores on the Stanford 9 achievement Test) creates a 200 to 1000 point scale, and a 10 percent difference in scores morphs into a formidable 100 points.

A major goal of social reformers of the 20th century was the elimination of legalized segregation. We still live in a society that is separate and unequal. To achieve social and economic justice,
the goal for the 21st century must become the elimination of institutionalized racism in all sectors of social, economic, cultural, and political life — in business, housing, employment, law enforcement, the courts, health-care institutions, and, of course, schools. What makes institutionalized racism so pernicious and difficult to eradicate is that racist practices are often invisible because they are accepted as standard operating procedures within our institutions.

Standardized tests are a particularly invidious form of institutionalized racism because they lend the cloak of science to policies that have denied, and are continuing to deny, persons of color equal access to educational and job opportunities. An educational accountability system based on standardized testing — though predicated on "standardized" measurements which are purportedly neutral, objective, and color-blind — perpetuates and strengthens institutionalized racism.

Significant school reform is not possible without significant reform of the current system of national and state educational assessments. Change will come about only in response to pressure by coalitions and alliances that cut across political, social class, racial, and ideological lines.

We as a nation will continue to differ profoundly on how schools ought to educate, what an educated person ought to know, and on how students learn best. We must not allow governments, panels of corporate executives, and remote "experts" to impose a singular view of curriculum and learning.

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