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Hidden Biases Continue to Produce Powerful Headwinds for College-Bound Blacks Aiming for Higher Scores on the SAT

Source: *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 41 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 90-92

Published by: The JBHE Foundation

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3133779>

Accessed: 28/10/2009 15:07

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❑ **Hidden Biases Continue to Produce Powerful Headwinds for College-Bound Blacks Aiming for Higher Scores on the SAT**

Questions determined to be obviously culturally biased have been purged from the Scholastic Assessment Test. But a new study claims that questions that don't appear to contain bias still produce a huge racial disparity in the percentage of students who give correct answers.

Researchers have determined that if the Educational Testing Service used only the sample questions that have been determined to have the smallest racial disparities in correct responses, the racial scoring gap could be reduced by as much as 40 percent.

At one time the following test question appeared on the Scholastic Assessment Test, which is administered to more than one million college-bound students each year, about 11 percent of whom are black. The question is an analogy and asks the student to pick the answer that best resembles the relationship between the two words in the question.

RUNNER: MARATHON

- (A) envoy: embassy
- (B) martyr: massacre
- (C) oarsman: regatta
- (D) referee: tournament
- (E) horse: stable

The correct answer is (C) oarsman: regatta. For almost all of our readers, either black or white, this SAT question is a rather easy one, but maybe not so easy for an inner-city black student who may never have even seen a boat, much less heard of a regatta. This test question is a classic example of those used by critics of the SAT to prove the contention that a significant cultural, or indeed racial, bias exists in standardized tests.

The problem with this argument is that the infamous regatta question and other questions with obvious cultural biases were removed from the SAT more than two decades ago. Since then exhaustive efforts have been made by the Educational Testing Service to purge cultural and racial biases from the SAT. Before a test is ever given to students it is picked over with a fine-tooth comb by experts in American language and culture. Any question that might seem to have even a possible or remote element of cultural bias is removed.



Or is it? A new study* by William C. Kidder of Testing for

*William C. Kidder and Jay Rosner, "How the SAT Creates Built-In Headwinds: An Educational and Legal Analysis of Disparate Impact," *Santa Clara Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2002, p. 131.

the Public in Berkeley, California, and Jay Rosner, executive director of The Princeton Review Foundation, contends that the SAT continues to contain cultural biases that work against black students. The study, published in the *Santa Clara Law Review*, finds that every one of the 138 questions included on the October 1998 SAT favored white test takers. More precisely, the authors mean that a higher percentage of white students than black students answered correctly on all 138 questions that appeared on the test. The authors believe that this preference for questions skewed toward white test takers has existed on the SAT for at least the past decade.

Furthermore, the authors' evidence shows that on the verbal portion of the SAT at least one sixth of all the questions on the October 1998 SAT test had huge, 20 point differences in the percentage of whites and blacks who answered correctly. One third had racial differences in correct response rates of 15 percentage points or more. Only one tenth of all questions on the test had differences of 5 percentage points or less.

Surprisingly, on the math portion of the test, the racial disparities were even greater. Only one sixth of the questions had a disparate racial impact of less than 10 percentage points. Nearly a third of the questions had more than a 20 percentage point difference in correct response rates between whites and blacks. On two questions that were allowed on the SAT, there was a 30 percentage point difference in correct response rates.



Critics of the work of Kidder and Rosner will correctly point out that whites outperform blacks on the SAT by 200 points, which is roughly 16 percent on the familiar 400-1600 SAT scoring scale. Therefore it is not surprising that there are significant differences between blacks and whites in correct response rates on various SAT questions. But what is surprising is that on every one of the 138 questions on the October 1998 SAT test examined by Kidder and Rosner whites outperform blacks. Moreover, the odds that this is some coincidence get even longer when it is shown that whites have outperformed blacks on every SAT test question for 10 years or more.

How ETS Chooses Questions for the SAT

Before they are included on an actual SAT test, all potential questions are put on sample tests. These sample tests are given as one section of the actual SAT. The sample test sec-

tion does not count in the student's score, and the student is not told which, if any, of the sections are samples. Only after this careful sampling is completed are questions approved for inclusion on an actual SAT test.

Thus, before a question is used on an actual SAT, the ETS is well aware of the disparate racial impact of the particular question. Nevertheless, ETS continues to select questions for inclusion where the disparate racial impact is 20 percentage points or more.

What would happen if the results of a sample question returned a disparate racial impact in favor of blacks? According to Kidder and Rosner, such questions do exist but they are thrown out as unreliable for the simple reason that blacks are more likely to answer them correctly.

Here are two sample questions given to students on a recent SAT. Students were asked to fill in the blanks with the two words that make the sentence the most meaningful.

- The actor's bearing on stage seemed _____; her movements were natural and her technique _____.
 (A) unremitting/blasé
 (B) fluid/tentative
 (C) unstudied/uncontrived
 (D) eclectic/uniform
 (E) grandiose/controlled
- The dance company rejects _____, preferring to present only _____ dances in a manner that underscores their traditional appeal.
 (A) invention/emergent
 (B) fidelity/long-maligned
 (C) ceremony/ritualistic
 (D) innovation/time-honored
 (E) custom/ancient

The correct answer to Question 1 is (C). The correct answer to Question 2 is (D). Both sample questions seem fair on the surface. And they do not appear to contain cultural or racial biases that would automatically disqualify them from inclusion on an actual SAT test. However, the racial differences in response rates are huge. On Question 2, 62 percent of whites answered correctly whereas only 38 percent of blacks got the right answer. On Question 1, a greater percentage of black test takers actually answered the question correctly than did white test takers. Kidder and Rosner say they have no clue why blacks do so poorly in relation to whites on one question and actually do better than whites on the other. They simply note that there are major differences in correct response rates between the races and that ETS is well aware of the disparities.

However, the seemingly valid sample question on which

Standardized Test Scores and Course Grades as Reliable Predictors of a Person's Potential

At theological seminary, Martin Luther King Jr. received a C grade in public speaking



In 1951 Martin Luther King Jr. took the Graduate Record Examination in order to fulfill an admissions requirement for the Ph.D. program at Boston University. His score on the verbal portion of the test was in the second quartile of all test takers that year. Dr. King's score on the mathematics or quantitative portion of the test was among the lowest 10 percent of all test takers.

Also, King scored in the lowest quartile of all Graduate Record Examination test takers in the fields of physics, chemistry, biology, social studies, and the fine arts.

Finally, we note that Dr. King's course grades were dead wrong as predictors of his potential for success later in life. The lot of some 7,000 personal items of Dr. King's that recently went on display at Sotheby's in New York City included a 1948 report card that King received while attending Crozer Theological Seminary. One of his grades was a C in a course on public speaking.

blacks scored higher than whites was rejected as "psychometrically flawed" and discarded. The other question, on which the white correct response rate was 24 percentage points higher than blacks, eventually was included on an actual SAT test.

It appears that when test administrators at ETS develop a question used on sample SATs on which the results show that blacks do comparatively well in relation to whites, ETS concludes that there must be something wrong with the question. Because blacks historically don't perform as well on the SAT as whites, ETS concludes that any question which breaks this pattern must be flawed. But sample questions on which whites outperform blacks by a large margin are considered appropriate. Therefore, the test makers seem to perpetuate the racial scoring gap on the SAT by the questions they choose to place on the test as well as by the questions they choose not to include.

Hidden Bias on Mathematical Questions?

OK, some readers may now be convinced that there are some hidden biases in test questions that for some unknown

reason create a huge disparate racial impact on blacks. Reasonable people might say that it would make sense to choose questions that seem fair on their face and in fact produce a result where score differences between the races are not so great.

But what about the mathematics portion of the SAT? Surely there can't be hidden racial biases on mathematical questions? Wrong again, say Kidder and Rosner. Consider the following two sample SAT questions:

1. If the area of a square is $4x^2$, what is the length of a side?
 - (A) x
 - (B) $2x$
 - (C) $4x$
 - (D) x^2
 - (E) $2x^2$

2. If the square root of $2x$ is an integer, which one of the following must also be an integer?
 - (A) square root of x
 - (B) x
 - (C) $4x$
 - (D) x^2
 - (E) $2x^2$

The correct answer to Question 1 is (B). The correct answer to Question 2 is (C).

But a higher percentage of black testers answered Question 1 correctly than white test takers. On Question 2, a higher percentage of white test takers answered correctly. You guessed it, Question 1 was rejected for inclusion on an actual SAT whereas Question 2 was included on a future SAT.

Kidder and Rosner conclude: "Would it shortchange America's high school seniors if items like Question 1 appeared on the scored SAT in addition to or instead of items such as Question 2? While the content of both items is ostensibly neutral, can it be said that the SAT is truly unbiased if, time and time again, the test construction process tends to prefer items like Question 2 (that favors whites) and rejects items like Question 1 (that favors African Americans)?"

Thus the authors conclude that a significant portion of the SAT racial scoring gap could be eliminated simply by constructing a test with some questions that had been tested to have a lower disparate impact on racial minorities.

How much of a reduction in the gap could be achieved? Rosner told JBHE that he believes a revised SAT which included only those questions which ETS has determined are fair and which have a small disparate impact on racial minorities could produce a significant reduction in the racial scoring gap on the test. "I did an experiment with four tests

from 1988 to 1989. From the pool of 580 questions appearing on those tests, I created a composite test form using the smallest racial scoring gap questions. This process, limited to SAT questions which appeared on real tests, reduced the average correct answering percentage gap between whites and blacks by 40 percent." This could translate into an 80-point reduction in the black-white SAT gap.

**England's Youngest A-Level Achiever This Year
Is a 12-Year-Old Black Youth Named Jonathan Prior**



A-level courses in British education are the primary qualifying mechanism for admission to the U.K.'s colleges and universities. A-level study is usually completed by 17- and 18-year-old students after they have graduated from high school.

Over 70 courses of instruction are currently offered in A-level education. Nearly 98 percent of students who successfully complete the courses of study pass the A-level examinations. Passing grades are on a scale of A to G. But the highest-scoring students are deemed eligible for admittance to the nation's elite institutions of higher education such as Oxford and Cambridge.

This year Prince Harry, third in line to the British throne, received a B on his A-level examination in art and a D on his A-level geography examination.

In the current year, the youngest student to pass an A-level examination was Jonathan Prior, a black youth who turned 12 this past July. Prior's father is a fireman and his mother is a former schoolteacher who now home-schools her child. Prior earned a respectable grade of D on the information technology A-level examination, a score in the lower midlevel of the scoring grid. Prior had taken a nine-month A-level preparation course at the private tutorial Ryde College, which has a reputation for fast-tracking young prodigies through A-levels. This year 40 students age 16 or younger who studied at Ryde College passed an A-level examination.

Prior, like many young children his age, is an avid fan of Harry Potter books. He also plays the guitar. But his first love is computers, particularly computer games.

Although Prior is the youngest student to pass an A-level exam this year, he is well short of the all-time record. Ganesh Sittampalam, whose ancestors emigrated to Britain from Sri Lanka, earned a grade of A on the math A-level in 1988 when he was nine years four months old. He is now a research officer in the programming tools group at the computing laboratory at Oxford University.