Unstandardizing Testing: Low-Scoring American Minority Students in the Crosshairs of Traditionalist Policymakers

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Abstract

That standardized tests (STs) do not accurately assess the true competencies of minority test takers is a widely shared claim among conservative educationists. The opt-out-of-testing community has recently grown unprecedentedly vocal in several states, questioning even more seriously the accountability of the testing system altogether. This paper adopts a Critical Race Theory perspective to investigate the conceptual underpinnings of traditionalist criticism as well as the interpretations made popular using quantitative methodology. The key premise of this paper is that a colorblind approach to testing understates the importance of a range of unquantifiable variables, mainly the linguitic and cultural backgrounds of the test takers as well as the unfavorable past and current learning environments in determining assessment outcome. It attempts to demonstrate where specifically standardized tests may not be used as a reliable feedback mechanism and suggests that a more flexible assessment paradigm be considered, one that engages learning quality followup to keep cultural bias to a strict minimum.

Keywords: standardized testing, cultural bias, Critical Race Theory, minority education.

Introduction

Such widely used standard tests as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) are designed to achieve two closely linked goals: to measure with as much precision as possible student competence in specific academic areas, and to allow for a dependable prediction about future student performance. But although standardized testing in general is today an integral part of college admissions and assessment processes, it has over the past twenty years called down extensive criticism, notably from liberal educationists and policymakers. One should concede that after the recent reforms of some mainstream STs, such as the SAT which was adjusted in 2016 to reflect a deeper concern with scientific knowledge proper, the cultural bias factor has been more rigorously controlled (Anderson, 2016). And yet assumptions about a number of limitations to a fully reliable assessment system remain popular among liberal educationists. One major liberal reservation against STs is that they specifically fail to accurately assess the true abilities of the test takers in general, and much less so when it

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comes to evaluating the academic potentials of minority students (Soares, 2015, p.3-5). Moreover, these tests have in this liberal collimator been criticized for not only underestimating the importance of such factors as pre-admission academic performance and the discrimination experienced in college, but also for tending to predict poor performance *after* admission.

At the core of liberal criticism is the cultural bias of these tests, notably the fact that they engage test takers with situations that are often formulated in a connotative language and style that are much more easily recognized by middle-class mainstream white Americans than by ethnic students. It is specifically this claim about the cultural load of the questions which compromizes the overall reliability of STs. This paper supports the thesis that standardized testing - as used for both admissions and general performance assessment - is manifestly unfair towards non-white minorities, notably blacks and Latinos. In accordance with some fundamental principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT), it questions the traditionalist claims about the purported validity of testing as it is currently used and advocates for the adoption of a comprehensive, culturally aware assessment mode, considering that current testing fails to explain, among other things, the almost endemic poor academic achievement of disadvantaged non-white students. Findings in progressive sociological research (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Austin, 2012; Reeves & Halikias, 2017) are herein used to account for the persistence of score gaps in terms of the sizeable socioeconomic disadvantage affecting underperforming students from specific racial and ethnic backgrounds.

1. Defending Standardized Testing: The Traditionalist Perspective

It may be convenient to explain first the traditionalist claims about standardized testing. Their advocacy underlies three major areas where the latter is deemed an ideal frame of reference for valid assessment of minority academic performance. The contested issues, namely the validity of the tests, representation, testing and cultural identity are briefly discussed in this section.

1.1. Calibration, Validity, and Qualitative Assessment. Standardization is, from a traditionalist point of view, a prerequisite for calibrating the achievement standards of any given educational institution by addressing issues such as "the amount of student learning and level of achievement attained by the students at [the] campus," and whether specific critical skills attained by the students in a particular institution are "on a par with those of students at comparable institutions" (Shavelson, Klein, & Benjamin, 2009, par. 7). In this particular sense, "different types of tests and assessments may be 'standardized'" and can be used to assess student academic achievement on a regular basis to reduce "the potential for favoritism, bias, or subjective evaluations" and not just for admissions purposes ("Standardized Test," 2015, par. 1).

On the other hand, rather than underestimating the "true" abilities of minority students, standardized testing, in the opinion of traditionalist critics, tends to do just the opposite (D'Souza, 1991; Sowell, 1994; Steele, 2009). In opposition to the liberal claim that they often fail to provide an accurate picture of student performance in the

areas of logic, math or writing, for example, (see Suzuki, Ponterotto, & Meller, 2008), test scores "have […] a slight tendency[…] to predict for low-scoring minorities a higher subsequent performance than that actually achieved" (Sowell, 1994, p.173). Once admitted, minorities who are tested along the same criteria as whites or Asians are almost always expected to perform relatively better, the skills they learn at university making a difference. Conversely, those admitted under special (often subjective) testing standards and have scores comparable to those of whites tend to have relatively lower performance levels. It may be true that the correlation between scores and later performance cannot actually be empirically proved, for in light of common criticism "assessing the prospects of human beings has never been a science." Because the majority of the studies meant to establish the correlations between scores and future performance are carried out "with a relatively narrow range of scores" (Sowell, 1994), the conclusions drawn therefrom may not be fully credited. But from a traditionalist perspective, ST scores could provide the best possible estimation about a student's potential to improve.

But again, although conventional testing models cannot predict with exact precision future academic achievement, they are expected to be more reliable alternatives to recommendations and interviews. The "real question" when considering the predictive validity of conventional tests as *high* or *low* must be, in the opinion of their proponents (Sowell, 2000), posed in relation to what other alternative testing schemes could achieve as high or as low a prediction. Moreover, other alternatives to conventional testing (such as interviews) have, in line with this vision, proved far more costly not only financially, but also in terms of the efforts and time deployed for their implementation.

This basic postulate has been supported by an experiment conducted at the University of California at Irvine (Tierney and Chung, 2000). Forty percent of the freshmen class at this college were admitted on the basis of other qualitative criteria than grades and scores. Among these criteria were "initiative, self-awareness, civic and cultural awareness." Although the main objective of "maintain[ing] the percentage of minority freshmen from the previous year" was ultimately reached, the whole operation required "a staff of twenty-three" to scrutinize and assess the "7.500 admissions applications," a task that was described as "Herculean" (Sowell, 2000). In conclusion to this experiment, standardized testing was found to be the most convenient way of "economizing on knowledge," the acquisition of which could sometimes be too costly. Predicting a higher or lower performance for minority students, STs have in short been credited as the least costly evaluation method, especially when most other methods are supposedly unmanageable.

In brief, STs are from a traditionalist point of view privileged for their economy / cost-effectiveness as they help reducing test implementation costs, could be relied on to measure college applicants' pre-admission competencies, and for their *comparatively* higher precision in predicting subsequent academic performance.

1.2. Testing and Representation. It is in the context of the above controversies about accountability that the debate over racial representation in the universities and colleges grew unprecedentedly passionate, especially during the past three decades (Ravitch, 1985; Sacks, 1999; Popham, 2001; Harris-Perry, 2011). The requirement that the admission rates of the disadvantaged black and Latino students be raised has accordingly been linked to the

growing demands that these students be helped to achieve higher graduation rates, if not higher rates than white and Asian students. Only then, proponents of racial preferences argue, would the goals of compensation and inclusion be reached. In Bowen and Bok's opinion (1998, p. 172), "including race as a criterion in the admissions process" responds, after all, to the needs of American multiculturalism by "enrich[ing] the education of everyone through diversification."

In the light of the traditionalist critique of minority admissions under racial preferences, three major areas of interest can then be clearly outlined: the controversial aspects of admissions tests, the behavioral patterns induced by group favoritism, and the more disputed question of performance. It is important to note, however, that the first two points have supposedly had both direct and indirect implications for the latter. Admitting students with poor skills on the grounds that admissions tests are "irrelevant" and "invalid" has reportedly encouraged these students to grow less competitive, since they know that they would be systematically assisted even to get "promoted to the next grade" (Sowell, 1990, p.184). The final outcome is, in brief, to have a poorly qualified student body lagging behind in terms of achievement in the more sophisticated and demanding subjects.

Oppoennts of even representation (O'Neil, 1985; Sowell, 1996) decry the practice of lowering admissions standards for minority students which are said to encourage the latter to specialize in less demanding disciplines:

In education, preferential admissions policies have led to high attrition rates and substandard performances for those preferred students who survived to graduate. As with other groups with substandard educational performances in other countries, untouchables in India and blacks, Hispanics and American Indians, [black and Latino] students [...] tend[...] also to concentrate in less difficult subjects which lead lo less remunerative careers. (O'Neill, 1985, p.11)

Finally, even scholars reputed for their support of group favoritism such as Peter Hall (1997) and the Thernstroms (1997) have joined the anti-favoritism chorus to contend that it causes minority students to under-perform in the more demanding subjects because of the their lack of motivation, and this, despite their recognition that race-conscious admissions, has helped reduce the non-white/white gap in graduation rates. This places them in perfect alignment with the overtly traditionalist critics, such as Sowell (2000) who claims that the demeaning messages delivered by this "policy of patronization" has deprived many minority students of the impulse for fair competition.

1.3. Testing and Cultural Identity. A substantial corpus of educational research has recently focused on the interconnection between testing and cultural identity in the context of minority academic performance (Diamond & Huguley, 2014; Scogin et al., 2017; Kloss, 2018). This section describes the traditionalist attitude towards ethnic culture and how it negatively affects student performance, a pattern allegedly observed before admission to college (i.e. likely to affect test scores) and during college years. The arguments laid out here will be examined in the section about the liberal perspective.

The traditionalist thesis argues that the whole point behind testing is specifically to assess the individual ability of the test taker to recognize, process, and reproduce aspects of the mainstream culture. If the ultimate goal of the American education system(s) is to socialize ethnic students and prepare them for a more efficient participation in the economy, then testing should target those particular aspects, attitudes, and experiences of the dominant culture which prepare the potential college enrollee for integration. Testing is thus deemed incapable of being "culture-free" simply because the standards to be reached later by the students are embedded in the target culture.

If, on the other hand, testing should address aspects of black culture, for example, and one expects that blacks would later grow competent in the subjects they study (which are taught in Standard American English, and according to methods and styles that emanate from the ethics and visions of white Anglo-American worldview), then that would seem, as Sowell observes, "almost a contradiction in terms" (1994, p.191). The argument that testing should be oriented toward the core aspects of mainstream Anglo-American culture is accordingly backed up by the fact that, ultimately, "there are no culture-free societies." Therefore, "all performances will be performances in some given culture, so that attempts to predict performance are […] attempts to predict what will happen within a particular cultural context" (ibid, 1994, p.179).

Other vocal critics assign particular importance to the different aspects of culture in relation to group performance in society, the economy and in politics. Lois Weis's studies of black students' performance in school have been notably focused on the intrinsic centrality of group culture in the process of education. In her *Between Two Worlds* (Weis, 1985), a study of the educational performance of black students in urban community colleges, she examines the impact of college culture on the efforts to "Americanize" or "socialize" black students. She argues that instead of socializing them, college culture, as a manifestation of protest against the dominant culture, "makes a significant contribution to the maintenance of an unequal social structure" (ibid, p.2).

Exclusive of the dominant culture, community college culture, in light of traditionalist criticism, alienates students from mainstream culture and social order by setting for them distinct cultural standards. Melissa Harris-Lacewell goes even more radical in her critique of ethnic culture using the metaphor "black counter-republic" in reference to many black students' current practice of creating separate spaces on campus meant exclusively for blacks, still believing that "race is a sufficient condition for togetherness" (2004, p.275-276). Such practices, she concludes, only impede effective cultural negotiation and the development of a symbolic space where that could be made possible.

Charles Murray reports that hard-working black students in Harvard are derided as "incognigroes" - meaning black students working incognito (in Mills, 1994, p.199). Assiduity and diligence in white-dominated universities are ironically regarded as "acting white" (Sowell, 1994, p.221; Hall, 1997, p.26; Dworkin, 2000, p.395). A common assumption among these critics is that minority students are affected by a crippling sense of being inferiorly equipped to cope with the highly demanding process of competition with other ethnicities, and therefore manifest a negative attitude toward learning (Hall, 1997, p.26-27). Non-white campus culture has in short become almost by definition inimical to academic competence.

2. A Liberal Perspective

2.1 Accountability. The argument for a more "balanced" representation of minority students is that admission tests are culturally biased and that, therefore, they tend to underestimate the real abilities and potentials of the applicants (Suzuki et al., 2008). The call for "culture-free" or "culture-fair" tests has, as observed earlier, centered on the premise that the current testing models propose questions that are related more to cultural attitudes and experiences than to aspects that are strictly academic (Sowell, 1994, p. 177-178). But in the light of recent research (Horowitz, 2016; Gurney, 2017), the fact that minority students pass standardized tests and perform unexpectedly better at university proves that if tests were culturally fair, students' scores could be even higher. Test scores failing to reflect the true potentials of minority students could be interpreted to bear out just the opposite of what traditionalists contend about their validity / invalidity. Bok, for example, insists that these tests (particularly the widely used Scholastic Aptitude Test) have been "only modestly correlated with subsequent academic success and give no reliable indication of achievement in later life" (Bok in Tierney and Chung, 2000), and adds that the rate of black students who attend graduate schools and get professional degrees is believed to be growing higher than that of white students.

Tierney and Chung, in turn, point out that "eleven percent of black students […] receive an M.D degree versus 8% of white students." Further, they assume that black students, for example, have had in recent years more successful careers and had more participation in communal activities and programs than white students. They cite Dworkin, illustrating that:

After graduation, black students are more involved in civic participation than white students; black students hold more leadership positions as a percentage than white students, and a higher percentage of black students are active in community organizations, social services, youth employment, and school-related activities. (2000, p. 171)

If that is the case, then what if the test questions were more accurately tuned with the true linguistic and cultural profiles of the test takers? It may be relevant here to critically address the credibility of the processes by which test standardization criteria are determined. The questions to be considered before developing tests for an ethnically diversified student population could as such be formulated as follows: To what extent are the social and cultural contexts of the questions recognizable by the test takers? Are there enough clues in the questions that could facilitate the linguistically and culturally less proficient test takers' task of guessing the correct answers, especially when the former are tested on "content" or "gist" course materials? The far-reaching influence of conservative educationists today makes it really difficult to expect a committed effort to be made to trade off the supposedly more economical approach to testing against fairness.

2.2. Discrimination and Academic Performance. Another pertinent factor that could possibly explain the non-white / white gap is the higher dropout rate among black and Latino students, for example. The higher dropout rate among these minorities is ironically related to the unmitigated patterns of racial bias against them. In this vein,

blacks and Latinos have been found "compelled" to leave school because of an unfavorable racial climate. Latino students specifically report that they are subject to ill-treatment by both academic supervisors and administrators. Whereas they "perceived the White and Asian American boys as ''harmless,'' [academic supervisors and administrators] consider[them] as disruptive in class and gang affiliated because of their attire" (Banks and McGee Banks, 2010, p.188).

Discussing the alienation of which black and Latino students are victims in many colleges, Feagin speaks of *barriers* which they have to surmount in their academic itinerary. He observes that at a California campus, for example, black and Latino students "were more alienated than the white students, with black and Latino students reporting the most isolation and alienation from the campus culture" and adds that at a Midwest campus, students from the same groups "dropped out more often than white students (Feagin, 2001, p.170).

One of the *barriers* to which Feagin refers here is the discrimination in treatment practised by administrators and supervisors against black and Latino students. He argues that, for example, academic advisors "gave more time to white students," while "some key administrators" showed "a lack of interest in black students." Other problems from which black and Latino students suffer are "racial biases in some curricula and courses, fewer campus activities for black students than for whites, overpolicing of black student events, and weak efforts at black student retention." The end-result of these patterns of anti-black hostility, as Feagin puts it, is that "many students had considered dropping out" or moving to a historically black college (2001, p.170).

The impact of school environment and teacher/student interaction on minority student performance has been studied by leading CRT scholars (Taliaferro, 2008; Decuir-Gunby & Schultz, 2017; Ford, 2017). Their findings substantiate assumptions by Feagin and the Banks as far as the absence of a supportive environment for minority students is concerned. As Decuir-Gunby puts it in her discussion of black/white score gaps, "within the school context, there are many potential intergroup interactions in which race/ethnicity plays a significant role including [...] student-teacher relationships, but for specific student populations, these interactions are not conducive to decent achievements" (p.203). Relaying the research by Batcher (1981) and Tinto (1987), she concludes that in the absence of such a favorable environment, students find "difficulty in sustaining academic engagement and commitment" (p.205). The high dropout rates among Latino and black students should, therefore, be explained with reference to the psychological processes involved in the dynamics of the relationships between the students and their school environment. It is obviously, as Delgado and Stefancic (2001) point out, the end-result of the persistence of racism that is "embedded in [many white people's] thought processes and social structures" (in Melina, 2015, p.213).

2.3. Disadvantage and Academic Performance. Finally what appears to bring consensus among several key race scholars is the decisiveness of the socioeconomic background of specific minority students in determining the quality of their academic performance (e.g. Hernstein & Murray, 1994; West & Smiley, 2012). Back in 1987, William

J. Wilson published *The Truly Disadvantaged,* his groundbreaking ethnographic research on the relationship between race and class in the US. In this seminal work, he postulates that racial discrimination alone cannot account for the high poverty rates among blacks. More important than discrimination were the lack of decent educational preparation and a deficient family structure. Today research seems to corroborate Wilson's findings. In the chart below, the figures suggest that the majority of black children (78%) - who should be today aged between 20 and 35 - were born in a "highly" disadvantaged socioeconomic environment.
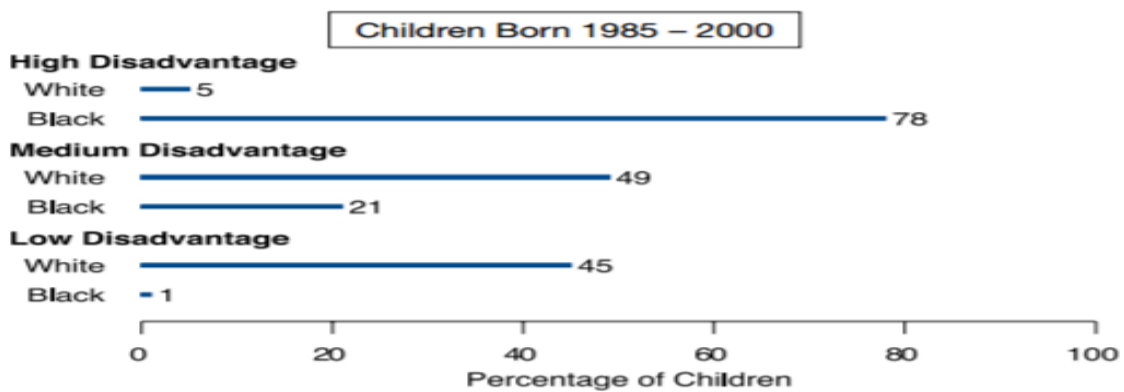

Figure 2. Black children born in deprivation between 1985 and 2000 (source: Sharkey, 2009, p. 10)

Poor school preparation among specific minorities, notably blacks and Latinos, reflect to a large extent the substandard quality of schooling they receive in the early stages of their academic itinerary. Patterns of ill-preparation continue to affect their performance in college. This is specifically what eminent educationists Banks and McGee Banks judiciously note in *Multicultural Education* (2010) when they argue that "students in low-income communities of color experience a less rigorous academic curriculum, have inadequate material and intellectual resources, are sorted into lower academic tracks, and are overrepresented in special education and vocational programs" (p.188).

Minority students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are, thus, doubly victimized as the patterns of disadvantage *constantly reproduced* throughout their academic itinerary. Disadvantage becomes even more noticeable in terms of the scoring gap between them and students from more favorable socioeconomic backgrounds (Banks & McGee, 2010).

Conclusion: Towards a comprehensive testing mode

With complaints being filed by civil rights groups to put pressure on the government to seriously investigate minority underrepresentation at specific public schools and colleges in areas where minority presence is statistically

significant, ethnicity (and, therefore, national origin, religion, native language, etc.) has become a relatively important factor in designing testing policies. It could be conceded that standardized testing may be becoming more culturally sensitive (as noted earlier), and that it might be evolving towards a more equitable assessment / admission practice, especially after the 2016 reform. This paper argues, however, that other assessment methods, such as portfolio, stealth assessment, and interviews should be used to promote accuracy and to consolidate cultural fairness towards sizeable segments of student population, knowing that the increasing numbers of educational institutions are either "deemphasizing" the use of standardized tests or withdrawing from most conventional testing systems altogether.

This paper does not recommend giving up STs, although research proves that there is a relatively substantial decline in the number of students taking tests (Johnson, 2016). Nor does it support opting out of testing, as a growing community that calls for abandoning testing - because of its cultural bias. It argues for "Just Say No to Standardized Tests", and as the prospect of radical reform itself may not be tolerated by white society unless minority interest is aligned with that of the white majority (Parker, 2001). Figures (Samsel, 2017) point to a "roughly 21 percent of eligible students between third and eighth grade opted out of federally mandated standardized tests in 2016" (par. 11), while research to assess the impact of this movement on student performance is yet to be conducted. It does not even support the idea of using tests for mere advisory purposes, as is suggested by some members of New York State United Teachers ("Opting Out of State Tests").

What this paper strongly suggests, however, is the possibility of adopting a comprehensive approach to testing minority student achievement (both for college admissions and for regular classwork student assessment). Almost by definition, standardized testing cannot be culturally fair or neutral. Test development implies a subjective involvement of the designer and, therefore, to cite educationist Donna Y. Ford (2005), "tests can never be bias-free or culturally neutral as absolute fairness to every examinee is impossible to attain" (par.4). Testing could instead be used in association with other modes of assessment, such as portfolio and stealth assessment. They alone cannot be considered fully valid because, as one should admit, despite its many advantages, they may be time-consuming for both students and instructors. Moreover, the goals and criteria used in portfolio assessment, for instance, might very often lack the objective rigor of regular testing.

The trade-off implied in an eclectic approach to testing involves an *incremental adaptation* to the reality of minority students' level of preparation: it encourages the adoption of a *flexible assessment paradigm* that takes into consideration the limits and potentials of this category of students whose mother tongue is quite often other than English, and whose academic performance might be significantly affected by specific socioeconomic and social factors such as poverty and marginalisation.

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