

Gender and Ethnic Studies

The Impact of a Student's Familial, Socioeconomic, and Educational Background on Academic Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a sample of 461 undergraduate University of Colorado, Boulder students who attended public high schools in the United States to examine the relationships between demographic and academic variables, with a focus on predicting the academic achievement gap (AAG). Existing literature documents an AAG based on race, primarily between White students and Black students, but too often other potentially contributing or masking variables are not accounted for; thus, these models may be limited. In this study, the outcome variable, academic achievement, was measured with a normed SAT/ACT score. Consistent with other research, the current study found a significant racial AAG in bivariate analyses; however, controlling for other variables, race did not reach the $p \leq 0.05$ (although it almost did) and students' perceptions of how well their high schools prepared them for college and their family income were the two strongest and only significant predictors of an AAG. Thus, results indicate a concerning prevalence of an AAG by race and between students of different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Moreover, the multivariate analysis findings indicate that the racial AAG is primarily due to socioeconomic

factors such as high school students' family incomes and the quality of their public schools. The findings from this research are discussed in terms of addressing the systemic issues within the U.S. educational system and directions for future research on the AAG.

CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Although the academic achievement gap (AAG) is a prevalent problem in the United States, there is limited awareness, and thus, discussion of this problem. The *academic achievement gap* (AAG) refers to the disparity in academic performance among students. As reviewed in this thesis, a significant body of extant research identifies the academic achievement gap as highly related to race: Since the Coleman Report was published in 1966, a persistent and noticeable gulf remains between the standardized test scores of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC¹) and those of White and Asian American students. Critical race scholars attribute this gap to the structural effects of centuries of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness in the United States. In this study, I ask the research question, "How do the familial, socioeconomic and educational environments in which students are raised

¹ Although BIPOC typically includes Asian Americans, the extant research on AAG finds more similarities between White and Asian American students, and sometimes, that Asian American students have significantly higher academic achievement than White students. I will use BIPOC to refer to Black, Indigenous, and Latinx individuals.

impact their academic performance?” I attempt to answer this question through statistical analysis. I argue that this educational disparity between BIPOC students and White² students originates from the type of familial, socioeconomic, and educational environments in which students are raised. More specifically, relative to BIPOC, White people tend to live in wealthier areas; therefore they attend better-funded public schools (given the local tax-based school funding), with more resources and more highly qualified teachers (Emerson et al., 2017). It is critical to acknowledge that BIPOC students are disproportionately represented in lower-income families. For example, the Brookings Institution found that “at \$171,000, the net worth of a typical white family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family (\$17,150) in 2016” (McIntosh et al. 2020, para. 1). Although the discrepancy in resources that contributes to the AAG mainly comes down to the income of the student’s family, it is still race-driven, because White students tend to be wealthier. Therefore, when measuring race, we often measure class as well.

Clearly, sufficient and abundant levels of educational resources provide students with a greater likelihood of expanding their knowledge, which results in higher traditional educational levels. In addition to the discrepancy in class- and race-based resources, the overall familial and socioeconomic environment in which students are raised plays an immense role in their academic success, particularly in terms of standardized tests (Jensen, 2009). Students who do well in school are more likely to attain higher levels of education after high school, which makes them qualified for more higher-paying jobs, ultimately leading to financial success. On the contrary, those who do not perform as well in school have a smaller chance of attending higher

education institutions, which results in them not being as qualified for higher-paying jobs, ultimately leading to them not being as financially stable.

[...]

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter provides a more in-depth discussion of the findings reported in Chapter 4 and will go into more detail about what these findings mean and how they relate to my thesis question. Many of my findings support my argument that an academic achievement gap (AAG) exists between students of different familial, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. Additionally, my findings illustrate the prominence of intersectionality when it comes to the AAG. In brief, the bivariate findings from Table 2 indicate that race is related to the likelihood of growing up with a single parent (more likely for Black/Latinx than White and Asian American students), family income (highest among White, then Asian American students, and lowest among Black/Latinx students), and all three measures of ACT and SAT scores (highest among Asian American, then White students, and lowest among Black/Latinx students). The bivariate findings in Tables 3 and 4 indicate that compared to White/Asian American college students, Black/Latinx college students are less likely to agree that their parent(s)/guardian(s) were home often enough to help with homework, their parent(s)/guardian(s) were able to help with homework, that they felt safe in the town/city they grew up in, and that high school prepared them for college. However, it is important to point out that these

2 I have chosen to capitalize “White” and “Black” throughout my writing in order to promote respect and feelings of empowerment to members of each group. Capitalizations of these terms will be used throughout this thesis except for when I am directly quoting scholars who do not choose to capitalize these racial categories.

differences did not vary by much on the 7-point Likert scale.

[...]

Pivotal Findings

The most pivotal findings of my research derived from Table 6, because it is a multivariate analysis that measures multiple variables to predict how they impact the respondents' SAT/ACT scores, the outcome variable of this study. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, intersectionality plays a substantial role when it comes to predicting test scores.

Table 6: Multivariate Analysis Predicting SAT Scores (with Students' Who only Took the ACTs, ACT scores normed to SAT Scores)^a

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig. ^e
(Constant)	3.219	0.117		0.000
Race ^b (1 = Black and/or Latinx)	-0.137	0.071	-0.106	0.054
Student Raised by Single Parent (1 = Yes)	-0.097	0.076	-0.068	0.205
Family Income ^c	0.032	0.015	0.123	0.030
Likert Item Response to: "My high school experiences prepared me for college." ^d	-0.041	0.016	-0.142	0.009
Likert Item Response to: "Growing up, my parent(s)/guardian(s) were home often enough to help with my schoolwork, if needed." ^d	0.025	0.016	0.083	0.121
Student had an after-school job in high school requiring 20+ hours per week (1 = Yes)	-0.088	0.049	-0.089	0.071

R² = 0.094 (Adjusted R² = 0.080)

Model: F = 6.537, p ≤ 0.001

^aThe outcome (dependent) variable is the three categories for the normed ACT to SAT categories listed at the end of Table 2 (700-999, 1000-1399, and 1400+)

^bRace was a dichotomous variable with White and/or Asian American = 0 and Black and/or Latinx = 1.

^cFamily income was measured as the 8 categories: 1 = < \$15,000, 2 = \$15,000-\$24,999, 3 = \$25,000-\$49,000, 4 = \$50,000-\$74,999, 5 = \$75,000-\$99,999, 6 = \$100,000-\$149,999, 7 = \$150,000-\$199,999, and 8 = \$200,000 and over.

^dLikert responses to each question were 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat disagree, 6 = disagree, 7 = strongly disagree

^eVariables that reached a p ≤ 0.05 significance are shaded in gray, but specific significance levels are reported for each variable given that the key variable race was barely over p ≤ 0.05 and that high school job was p ≤ 0.10 and could be considered a trend.

Table 6 indicates that the strongest predictor of SAT/ACT scores is whether a student reports that their high school prepared them for college, followed by family income, where, as expected, higher family incomes were related to higher SAT/ACT scores. Notably, although it almost maintained significance ($p = 0.054$), race no longer reached statistical significance when controlling for other variables in the model. In other words, the quality of students' high school experiences in preparing them for college (the standardized $\beta = -0.142$) and their family income (the standardized $\beta = 0.123$) were the best predictors of their SAT/ACT scores. Another important finding is that whether a student was raised by a single parent and whether the student had an after-school job of 20 or more hours per week were no longer significantly related to SAT/ACT scores in the OLS model when controlling for these other variables, although having an after-school job that required 20 hours or more of work per week was almost significant at $p = 0.071$. More specifically, based on this model, there was a 0.041 decline on the SAT/ACT score scale for students who reported that their high school experiences did not prepare them for college. Students who reported higher family incomes had a 0.032 increase on the SAT/ACT score scale. In other words, wealthier students tend to score higher on the SAT/ACT.

[...]

Policy Implications

My study findings support the argument that an AAG exists in the United States based on wealth, race, and community environment, as measured by the quality of high schools in preparing students for college. However, the racial differences are clearly tied to wealth and neighborhood measures. This AAG is present between students of different familial, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. My findings conclude

that out of all of the variables my study tested for, the most influential variable that predicts a change in test scores is how likely one is to agree that their high school experiences prepared them for college. Considering public schools are funded by property tax, the higher the property values in a neighborhood, the better funded the school, which results in a better education, therefore leading students to feel better prepared for college. The relationship between public schools and property taxes leads us into this study's second most significant finding, which is that family income predicts a student's test scores. The higher the student's family annual household income, the higher their SAT/ACT score. Additionally, as mentioned above, although race was only significant at the $p < 0.10$, my study found that Black/Latinx students received lower SAT/ACT scores compared to White and Asian American students. Given that class and race are heavily correlated in U.S. society, this finding is not surprising.

Although my study solely focused on 2020 undergraduates at CU Boulder, these results still contribute to the crucial goal of producing a more equitable public school system. Based on these findings, the U.S. Department of Education should build a more fair and consistent public education system. A drastic, yet influential step would be to unaffiliate property taxes with public schools. Instead, every public school in the United States could receive an equal amount of funding from federal taxes, with allocation requirements. This step would ensure that students in less-wealthy neighborhoods are not at a disadvantage when it comes to the availability of resources within schools. However, as established in my literature review and in my study's findings, a significant advantage when it comes to receiving higher test scores derives from the socioeconomic status of the student's family, because these students have access to more beneficial resources. According to Welner and Carter (2013), "these out-of-school learning

and learning-related resources and opportunities for children who live and grow in the nation's many disadvantaged communities must improve significantly before we can realistically expect to see achievement gaps close" (p. 3). In order to address the discrepancy between students who have access to these beneficial resources at home and those who do not, the U.S. government should establish some sort of program that provides underprivileged students with said resources. Although this solution is a large investment, it would be an incredibly advantageous decision on behalf of the U.S. government because it would help eradicate the large AAG that exists between students of different backgrounds, ultimately leading to a more educated society throughout the United States.

Additionally, over 900 universities and colleges in the United States do not require applicants to submit their SAT/ACT test scores. The application options for these schools vary, but mainly consist of being test optional (an applicant has the choice of whether or not to submit their SAT/ACT scores), test flexible (an

applicant can submit other standardized test scores, such as an AP test), or an applicant can substitute their test score with a class rank or GPA. There are also "test blind" schools that do not consider SAT/ACT scores, even if they are included in one's application (Muniz, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many other universities and colleges temporarily suspended the requirement of an SAT/ACT score. As one can see, many universities and colleges in the United States have begun to entertain the idea of not requiring SAT/ACT scores for admissions or not weighing them as heavily. My research findings exemplify the many variables that impact a student's SAT/ACT score, therefore supporting the idea of eliminating standardized test scores for college admissions in the United States.

[...]

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The Coal Ash Community: An Analysis of Environmental Racism in Uniontown, Alabama

Ellie Bach

The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For full text, please visit www.colorado.edu/honorsjournal/

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) External Civil Rights Compliance Office (ECRCO) has failed to serve vulnerable communities suffering from systemic environmental racism through regulation reform and enforcement, and has instead dismantled communities' environmental justice demands while consequently supporting private sector perpetrators of environmental racism, by operating in a "colorblind" manner that stems from white supremacy and upholds white privilege. This failure is exemplified by the ECRCO's "resolving and closing" of the complaint filed by residents of Uniontown, Alabama in 2013, who continue to suffer from the storage of coal ash in nearby Arrowhead Landfill, despite clear violations of environmental regulations and civil rights law.

More than a billion tons of toxic coal ash containing arsenic, mercury, and lead were spilled into the Emory River in Kingston, Tennessee on December 22nd, 2008 (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). Particles of coal ash are known to permeate the lungs, and exposure can lead to leukemia, lung and brain cancer (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). Under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), the spilled coal ash was classified as hazardous in Tennessee, and the location of the spill was declared a superfund site (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). A decade later, residents of Kingston, and the workers who sought to clean up the spill, are still pressing charges for the health consequences of the accident (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). In 2010, the

Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) approved the transfer of 4 million cubic yards of the ash from the spill to Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown, Alabama (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). Once in Uniontown, that very same ash was reclassified as nonhazardous under the Resource Conservation Recovery Act (RCRA) (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). As of 2017, Kingston, TN was an 89.8% white community, with a median household income of \$48,616, that had risen from the previous year ("Kingston, TN"). Uniontown, Alabama, on the other hand, was composed of 7.54 times more Black residents than all other racial groups, with a median household income of \$14,094 (a decrease from the year prior) ("Uniontown, AL"). Over 40% of residents live under the poverty line, the vast majority of whom (89.2% to be exact) are Black ("Uniontown, AL"). These very same Uniontown community members banded together and petitioned the construction of the Arrowhead Landfill in 2007, before the coal ash was even spilled from the Tennessee powerplant, but the project was permitted nonetheless (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). The disposal site now receives waste from 33 different states and even endorses receiving more coal ash from power plants, plus a plethora of other contaminated substances, in order to maintain business (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019).

In 2013, after unfruitful years of continually contesting the landfill's operations at local and state levels, 35 community members filed a complaint to the

EPA's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), now the ECRCO, claiming that the ADEM's arrangement with the landfill violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d, and agency regulations, 40 C.F.R. Part 7; in other words, the ADEM (as an agency that receives federal financial assistance) violated the legal prohibition of discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in their endeavors (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). The initial complaint fell on deaf ears, so to speak, and after consistently submitting additional proof of the toll of toxic coal ash storage on the community to the EPA, a second complaint was submitted in 2016 (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). The follow-up complaint was then followed by a lawsuit against community members for \$30 million, filed by Arrowhead Landfill (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). The lawsuit was dropped thankfully, but was a clear attempt by the private sector to further silence the community, which was already a victim of neglect and impoverished living conditions. Finally, in 2018, the EPA published a 29-page letter that rejected the case under the assertion that there was "insufficient evidence" to find the ADEM guilty of violating Title VI or Arrowhead Landfill guilty of noncompliance with air and water quality regulations (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019; Environmental Protection Agency 2018, March 1; Environmental Protection Agency 2018, March 16). Such a conclusion by the EPA reinforces the systemic pathways through which environmental racism is perpetuated, contradicts the purpose of the agency (especially its ECRCO), and harms the predominantly Black community of Uniontown while profiting the private sector.

The EPA defines environmental justice as, "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies," and goes on to proclaim that, "this goal will be achieved when everyone enjoys: the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards

and, equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work" ("Environmental Justice" 2019). The EPA's Office of Environmental Justice, then called the Office of Environmental Equity, was created in 1992 and environmental justice became increasingly prioritized in an agency-wide manner during the following twenty years ("Environmental Justice" 2019). Interestingly, a study published in 2007 called "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty" (endorsed by the EPA), concluded that "people of color are found to be more concentrated around hazardous waste facilities" than was previously thought ("Environmental Justice" 2019). In 2010, during the Obama administration, the first White House Forum on Environmental Justice was held, at which a variety of agencies and offices were present, and this event represented a peak in federal commitment to "federal protection from environmental and health hazards" for all Americans ("Environmental Justice" 2019). Over the subsequent five years, the EPA's environmental justice division continued to develop protocols and increased efforts to make information about federal environmental justice programming more visible and accessible to the public, but after August 2016, virtually no accomplishments are listed on the EPA's official timeline of the agency's involvement in the Environmental Justice Movement ("Environmental Justice" 2019). Intriguingly, the end of achievements coincides with the initiation of the Trump administration; the president himself criticized the agency while campaigning and his first budget proposal cut all funding for the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice, with approval from the head of the EPA at the time, Scott Pruitt, a move that was described as "racist" by leaders in the field (Lockhart 2018). The Uniontown coal ash case was concluded under Trump's administration of the EPA, and the outcome may have been impacted by the near overhaul that the agency has undergone during his time in office.

The removal of toxic waste from the coal ash spill

in the predominantly white Kingston, Tennessee community and its imposition onto the predominantly Black and largely impoverished community of Uniontown, Alabama, by storing said waste in the local Arrowhead Landfill, contradicts the EPA's definition of environmental justice and was an act of environmental racism. The transplant of coal ash from the Kingston spill to Uniontown was not necessarily motivated by racial animus, but violated the civil rights of Uniontown residents regardless. Laura Pulido (2015), in her analysis of environmental racism sustained by Exide (a battery recycling facility) on the Latinx community surrounding Los Angeles, explains that regulatory noncompliance (which it seems that, by all accounts other than the EPA's, Arrowhead Landfill is guilty of) and "uneven patterns of regulatory enforcement," create and propagate environmental racism against communities of color (Pulido 2015, p. 810). In her analysis, Exide was processing 88 chemicals in its facility, surrounded by neighborhoods comprised largely of low-income immigrants, and was not complying with regulations for decades, such that the community consequently faced a greater risk of cancer and poisoning by lead and arsenic (Pulido 2015). She argues that Exide as the polluter is primarily responsible for its actions, and is "fully aware of what it is doing and does not wish to harm its neighbors, but the financial well-being of the institution, which overwhelmingly benefits whites, is prioritized," meaning Exide perceives the surrounding community of color, which is additionally of low socioeconomic status, as "racially expendable" (Pulido 2015, p. 814). Furthermore, the state has been either unwilling, unable, or both, to demand that Exide complies with regulations for the sake of the environment and the community, which "illuminates a larger regulatory culture that is mutually constituted by the racial formation" (Pulido 2015, p. 810). Together, the state and Exide (which in this case may represent industry or the private sector), forced the Latinx community

to remain at a low socioeconomic status and suffer from declining health, and upheld the popular and detrimental narrative of "people of color as undeserving and responsible for their own poverty" that is accepted by many whites (Pulido 2015, p. 811). Exide's case, as discussed by Pulido, is a clear parallel to the Uniontown people's conflict with Arrowhead Landfill and the ADEM.

In Uniontown, it seems obvious that Arrowhead Landfill understood that its storage of coal ash was harmful for the Black community, as evidenced by its attempt to sue Uniontown's residents into silence about the issue, but the profit produced by conducting business with majority white communities outside of Alabama was of greater importance to the company than its integrity and the lives of its neighbors. Additionally, the ADEM at the state level, and the EPA at the federal level, literally invited coal ash into the community knowing the harms of improper storage on people's health and well-being. Toxic living conditions in Uniontown have only made it that much more difficult for Black residents, many of whom, as mentioned, already live below the poverty line, to receive the care they deserve *and* have made the community that much more vulnerable to exploitation by polluting industry and negligent agencies. In fact, the EPA failed to adequately investigate the wrongdoings of both Arrowhead Landfill and Alabama's environmental management; no investigation of the environmental, economic, and health consequences of the coal ash was conducted by EPA personnel, and instead the ECRCO relied on inappropriate data (collected from monitoring sites too far from the landfill and Uniontown to demonstrate any pollution), thereby allowing the agency to conclude that sufficient evidence lacked (Engleman-Lado et al. 2019). This methodology promotes the spread of "toxic uncertainty," as in it spreads doubt within the community about the legitimacy of its experience in toxic living conditions because the EPA labels the environment as "safe,"

and thus serves to dismantle organized community members and their claims of injustice (Bruno & Jepson 2018). Such dereliction of EPA, and specifically ECRCO, investigation protocol and of the people of Uniontown (from the conception of the landfill through the closing of the case), provide sufficient evidence that Black residents were considered “racially expendable” by the state and industry in this instance.

[...]

Finally, the Arrowhead Landfill case fits into a larger and long-standing narrative of environmental racism in the United States, that is perpetuated by colorblindness and white supremacy, and which reinforces white privilege. The notion of colorblind operations allows agencies and industries to continue business-as-usual under the guise of innocence. David Roediger (2008) illustrates that the claim is often made by the state, institutions, and/or industry that programs are “race-neutral,” or colorblind, when realistically such programs adhere to “local racist practices” and their basis on “ordinary business principles” begets inequality based on race (Roediger 2008, p.178). The ECRCO at the EPA, which has often been perceived as a liberal agency due to its goal of advancing eco-social justice through government intervention, fails to acknowledge and investigate the impact of past and present institutionalized white supremacy, within other organizations and within itself, and in this way embodies “liberalism’s complicity with the persistence of race” (Roediger 2008, p. 173). In reality, the EPA, the ADEM, and Arrowhead Landfill are built upon, and profit from, a foundation of white supremacy (Pulido 2015). By denying the existence and effects of white supremacy on “fenceline” minority communities, and officially operating in a colorblind manner that does not address the race-structured rates of poverty and subjugation to polluting industry that Black citizens face (particularly in Uniontown), the EPA

consistently denies the civil rights of communities of color and only widens the socioeconomic gap between these communities and their white counterparts as a result (Roediger 2008). These white communities, in contrast, maintain their white privilege with tremendous assistance from the environmental justice branch of the EPA.... Most notably, whites can make social systems work to their advantage and expect positive change when they criticize the status quo; communities of color, conversely, cannot expect the same respect and results, as illustrated by the interaction between Uniontown residents, and the EPA and Arrowhead Landfill, when juxtaposed with the attention received by the white community of Kingston, Tennessee, following the coal ash spill (“Black Belt Citizens...” n.d.; Engleman-Lado et al. 2019; McIntosh 1990). It is crucial that the ECRCO, and the EPA at large, recognize and work to change the agency’s own racial biases so that it can effectively do its job of preventing and dismantling racially motivated and disproportionately harmful projects, in both the public and private sectors, that affect the environment. Only then can the positive advantages afforded to whites be shared with all racial groups, and the negative advantages be rejected across the board.

In conclusion, community members in the predominantly Black and impoverished city of Uniontown, Alabama, have been the victims of environmentally racist public initiatives and private operations following the powerplant malfunction and coal ash spill in Kingston, Tennessee. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management chose to enable profiteering by Arrowhead Landfill whilst endangering local residents in the process. The Environmental Protection Agency’s External Civil Rights Compliance Office upheld this decision and enabled its consequences for the community’s health and well-being, by ignoring residents’ complaints for years and then completely dismissing the community’s testimony of prolonged injustice. This

case demonstrates the foundation of white supremacy upon which even federal and state agencies designed to advance racial equality stand, and exposes the severe harm of institutional colorblindness on communities of color, whilst highlighting the persistence of white privilege in an environmental context.

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