

Addressing the Ethnic Disparity in SAT scores

For high-school students, the SAT is one of the most, if not *the most*, important assessments of academic achievement. Nevertheless, the SAT is shrouded in controversy, including a persistent and substantial ethnic disparity in SAT scores for Hispanic versus European-American students. Indeed, during the 20-year period from 1987 to 2006, Hispanic students scored, on average, 70 points lower than European-American students on the math section of the SAT and on average, 63 points lower than European-American students on the verbal section of the SAT. Yet, despite the magnitude of this disparity, the research examining this disparity is largely non-existent. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to identify some of the sources this ethnic disparity. More specifically, this study examined the simultaneous influences that thinking-based or cognitive skills and social/personality-based skills contributed to the SAT scores of Hispanic versus European-American students. Are these influences the same or different?

Main findings

There were several noteworthy findings. First, consistent with previous research, cognitive skills significantly predicted SAT scores for both Hispanic and European-American students. That is, Hispanic and European-American students with better cognitive skills scored higher on the SAT than Hispanic and European-American students with poorer cognitive skills. Secondly, knowledge about learning (i.e., metacognitive skills) significantly predicted SAT scores for both Hispanic and European-American students, such that students with greater knowledge about learning scored higher on the SAT than students who had less knowledge about learning. Third, socio-economic status (e.g., parental income and parental education) significantly predicted SAT scores for both Hispanic and European-American students. That is, Hispanic and European-American students who had parents with higher educations and larger incomes scored higher on the SAT than students who had parents with lower educations and smaller incomes. Fourth, performance avoidance (e.g., a disposition in which students tend to avoid/studying because of fear of negative performance) significantly predicted SAT scores for both Hispanic and European-American students. That is, Hispanic and European-American students with a higher tendency to avoid studying/practicing for tests scored lower on the SAT than students with a lower tendency to avoid studying/practicing for tests. Finally, although test anxiety was a significant predictor for SAT scores, test anxiety had a much greater impact on the SAT scores of Hispanic students. That is, while higher test anxiety scores had some negative impact on the SAT scores of European-American students, higher test anxiety scores had a much larger negative impact on the SAT scores of Hispanic students.

Conclusions

This study observed that both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (e.g., general cognitive ability, knowledge about learning, socio-economic status, performance avoidance) contributed to the SAT scores of Hispanic and European-American students. Most importantly, test anxiety negatively impacted the SAT scores of Hispanic students more so than the SAT scores of European-American students.

Contribution to literature

This is the first study to examine the simultaneous contributions that thinking-based or cognitive skills and social/personality-based skills make to the SAT scores of Hispanic versus European-American students. Not only does this study provide insights into the contributions of these multiple skills to SAT scores, but it also begins to address an ethnic disparity in SAT scores that has existed for 30+ years. Future SAT research should consider the SAT as a multi-faceted construct. Moreover, it should also consider that any theory explaining the SAT should take into consideration disparities in scores among ethnic groups.

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Publication

[Not All Factors Contribute Equally to European-American and Hispanic Students' SAT Scores](#)

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J Intell. 2019 Aug 1