

## The Opportunity and Black/White Academic Achievement Gap: It's the Economy Stupid

Carol Tomlin<sup>1</sup>, Victoria Showunmi<sup>2</sup>, Paul C. Mocombe<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Wolverhampton University/Oxford University, England

<sup>2</sup>London Institute of Education, England

<sup>3</sup>West Virginia State University, President, The Mocombeian Foundation, Inc., USA

**\*Corresponding Author:** Paul C. Mocombe, West Virginia State University, The Mocombeian Foundation, Inc., Lauderhill, FL, USA, Email: pmocombe@mocombeian.com

### ABSTRACT

The black-white test score gap in the United States is an empirical problematic that dates back to the 1940s. On many standardized tests the mean scores of black students on average are typically at least 1 standard deviation below the mean scores of white students. For the most part, the test scores indicate that on average black American students have more limited skills in processing information from articles, books, tables, charts, and graphs compared to their white and Asian counterparts. Most conservative scholars attribute the problem to black intelligence and effort, while liberal scholars attribute the test score gap to what is commonly referred to as the opportunity gap, i.e., poor quality teachers, schools, and resources among other things. In this article, we offer an alternative conceptual framework, based on Paul C. Mocombe's phenomenological structural Marxist logic, "a mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function, within which to understand the black-white academic achievement problematic.

**Keywords:** Ideological domination, Linguistic Structure, Mismatch of Linguistic Structure and Social Class Function, Capitalism, Opportunity Gap, Social Structure, African Americans, phenomenological structuralism.

### INTRODUCTION

The black-white test score gap in the United States is an empirical problematic that dates back to the 1940s. On many standardized tests the mean scores of black students on average are typically at least 1 standard deviation below the mean scores of white students. For the most part, the test scores indicate that on average black American students have more limited skills in processing information from articles, books, tables, charts, and graphs compared to their white and Asian counterparts (Wilson, 1994, 1998) Most conservative scholars attribute the problem to black intelligence and effort, while liberal scholars attribute the test score gap to what is commonly referred to as the opportunity gap. In this article, we offer an alternative conceptual framework, Paul C. Mocombe's phenomenological structural, "a mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function," hypothesis, within which the problematic ought to be analyzable.

### BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

As Roland G. Fryer Jr. and Steven D. Levitt (2004) point out, "a wide variety of possible

explanations for the black/white test-score gap have been put forth. These explanations include differences in genetic make-up, differences in family structure and poverty, differences in school quality, racial bias in testing or teachers' perceptions, and differences in culture, socialization, or behavior. The appropriate public policy choice (if any) to address the test score gap depends critically on the underlying source of the gap" (447). For the most part, conservative thinkers emphasize the former two approaches, and prescribe standardization of curriculum, testing, extra assistance programs for blacks, and teacher training (in standards) as the basis for resolving the problem. Conversely, the latter three, differences in school quality, racial bias in testing or teachers' perceptions, and differences in culture, socialization, or behavior, are emphasized by liberal thinkers under the banner of the opportunity gap. In response to this gap, they prescribe head-start programs, multicultural education, teacher training (cultural sensitivity and multicultural training), and equitable funding of schools as to the solution for the problem (Wilson, 1998; Mocombe and Tomlin, 2010, 2013). Yet in spite

of these efforts, which have been recycled over the past forty-years in the US, blacks continue to underachieve vis-à-vis their white and Asian counterparts (Wilson, 1998).

The problem for this continual underachievement, according to Paul C. Mocombe (2005, 2008, 2009, 2011), is based on the fact that both analyses are incomplete cultural incompatibility theories. One approach places the emphasis for the problem on the individual, lack of black intelligence and efforts due to their genetics and cultural milieu, while the other on societal or environmental factors, black poverty, economic opportunities, or cultural norms and values; neither, however, are able to demonstrate the dialectical interaction between the two, which can eventually lead to better solutions to resolving the gap (Wilson, 1998). Paul C. Mocombe's (2005, 2010, 2012, 2013) "mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function" hypothesis, which emerges out of his theory of phenomenological structuralism, seeks to highlight this dialectic by emphasizing both the economy, i.e., the American social relations of production/ environment, and individual black responses to its structural reproduction and differentiation as the basis for understanding the origins and nature of the black-white test score gap. In this work we offer Paul C. Mocombe's, "mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function" hypothesis, which emerges out of his theory of phenomenological structuralism, as an alternative conceptual framework within which the black-white test score gap ought to be framed, conceptualized, and analyzed.

### THEORY

Against individual and environmental factors, Paul C. Mocombe (1999, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012) offered his "mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function" dialectical hypothesis as to the origins of the black/white achievement gap. For Mocombe the environmental and individual approaches are two sides of the same coin. That is, building on the duality and dualism language of his phenomenological structuralism, which posits practical consciousness to be the internationalization of the ideals of a social structure recursively organized and reproduced as the praxis of human actors, Mocombe posits that black American consciousness and identity are, for the most part a product of structural reproduction and differentiation. Hence, according to Mocombe, the black/white

achievement gap is an epiphenomenon of racial-class division and the social relations of capitalist production in America and black responses to its structural reproduction and class differentiation. In other words, the racial-class divisions and functional roles produced in the American social structure are the locus of causality for the black/white academic achievement gap.

Mocombe in his mismatch of linguistic structure and social class function hypothesis seeks to supplant the cultural and environment arguments by suggesting that black Americans do not have a distinct culture from that of their white counterparts, which leads to cultural incompatible norms and values among blacks that forms the basis for the black/white academic achievement gap. According to Mocombe, black American students of the inner-cities are Americans in culture and outlook. However, they academically underachieve vis-à-vis their white and Asian counterparts because of two factors, 1) comprehension, which is grounded in their linguistic structure, black/African American English Vernacular (BEV/AAEV), and 2) the social functions and roles associated with their linguistic structure in the American capitalist social structure of racial-class inequality as speakers of AAEV. The two factors are epiphenomenon of black social relations to the modes of production in American society.

Mocombe (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012) in his evaluation of Florida Comprehensive Assessment Reading Test (FCAT) data concludes that the reasons that black American students have more limited skills in processing information from articles, books, tables, charts, and graphs, and the students who lose the most ground vis-à-vis their white and Asian counterparts are the higher-achieving black children, because of two factors: black linguistic structure and the social class roles associated with that structure in the American capitalist social structure of class inequality. According to Mocombe, early on in their academic careers the poor black social class language game, "black American underclass," who, contemporarily, have become the bearers of ideological and linguistic domination for black youth the world over, created by class division and the social relations of capitalism in the US, produces and perpetuates a sociolinguistic status group, what Mocombe refers to as a social class language game, that reinforces a linguistic structure (Black/African American English Vernacular—

BEV or AAEV) among black American students in the inner-cities, which linguistically and functionally renders its young social actors impotent in classrooms where the structure of Standard English (SE) is taught. Thus early on (k-5<sup>th</sup> grade) in their academic careers, many black American inner city youth struggle in the classroom and on standardized test because individually they are linguistically and grammatically having a problem with comprehension, i.e., “a mismatch of linguistic structure,” grounded in their (Black or African American English Vernacular) linguistic structure and speech patterns (Mocombe, 2007, 2009, 2010). In other words, there is a phonological, morphosyntactical, and semantical mismatch between BEV/AAEV and the Standard English (SE) utilized in schools. Given the segregation and poverty of blacks growing up in the inner-cities of America, they acquire the systematicity of Black or African American English and early on in their academic careers lack the linguistic flexibility to switch between BEV/AAEV and SE when they take standardized tests. As a result, many black American youth have a problem decoding and understanding phrases and sentences on standardized tests, which explain their low-test scores vis-à-vis their white and Asian counterparts, when they initially enter school (Mocombe, 2010; Mocombe and Tomlin, 2013).

Later on in their academic careers as these youth become adolescents and acquire the linguistic flexibility (given their immersion in the middle class language and culture of school) to code switch between BEV/AAEV and SE, they are further disadvantaged by the social class functions (a mismatch of function of the language) this status group, black American underclass, reinforces against the social class language game of middle class black and white America. That is, success or economic gain and upward mobility amongst this “black American underclass youth culture,” who speak BEV/AAEV, within the American capitalist social structure of racial-class inequality is not measured by status or professions obtained through education as in the case of black and white American bourgeois middle class standards. On the contrary, athletics, music, and other activities not “associated” with educational attainment serve as the means to success, economic gain, and upward economic mobility in the US's postindustrial society. Thus effort in school in general suffers, and as a result test scores and grades progressively get

lower. Grades and test scores are not only low for those who grow-up in poor-inner cities, it appears to have also increased as academic achievement and/ or social-economic status (SES) rises. In other words, higher academic achievement and higher social class status are not associated with smaller but rather greater differences in academic achievement.

It is this epiphenomenon, “mismatch of linguistic social class function,” of the “mismatch of linguistic structure” many scholars, such as John Ogbu, inappropriately label “the burden of acting white” amongst black American adolescents in urban and suburban areas, who as they get older turn away from, or place less effort on, education, not because they feel it is for whites, but due to the fact that they, and the society, have rationalized other racialized (i.e., sports, music, pimping, selling drugs, etc.) means or professions, financed by the upper-class of owners and high-level executives, to economic gain for its own sake other than status obtained through education (Mocombe, 2005, 2007, 2011; Mocombe and Tomlin, 2010, 2013). In America's postindustrial economy, black American youth look to athletes, entertainers, players, gangsters, etc., many of whom are from the black American underclass and speak BEV, as role models over professionals in fields that require an education and speak SE. Historically, Mocombe concludes, this is a result of racial segregation and black social relations to the capitalist mode of production in America (Mocombe, 2006; Mocombe and Tomlin, 2010, 2013).

### DISCUSSION

According to Mocombe, historically speaking, ever since their arrival in America two dominant social class language games/groups, a black underclass and a black bourgeois class, created by the structural differentiation of capitalist processes and practices, have dominated black America. In agricultural and mercantile slavery beginning in the early eighteenth century, black America was constituted as a racial caste in class dominated by the social class language game of the black bourgeoisie (E. Franklin Frazier's term), the best of the house servants, artisans, and free blacks from the North, which discriminated against the practical consciousness and linguistic system (social class language games) of field slaves and newly arrived Africans, working in agricultural production, who constituted the black

underclass. Deagrualization and the industrialization of the northern states coupled with black American migration to the north from the mid-1800s to about the mid-1950s, gave rise to the continual racial-class separation between this urban, educated, and professional class of blacks and former house slaves whose practical consciousness and linguistic system mirrored that of middle class whites, and a black underclass of former agricultural workers seeking, like their black bourgeois counterparts, to be bourgeois, i.e., economic gain, status, and upward economic mobility, through education and industrial work in Northern cities. However, racial discrimination coupled with suburbanization and the deindustrialization, or outsourcing of industrial work to Third World countries, of northern cities left the majority of blacks as part of the poor black underclass in poor urban communities with limited occupational and educational opportunities. Whereas education and the black church became the dominant ideological state apparatuses of socialization for the black bourgeoisie; poorly funded schools, prisons, BEV/AAEV, Afrocentric scholarship, the streets, athletics, and entertainment industry became the dominant ideology and ideological apparatuses of the black underclass. Consequently, contemporarily, America's transition from an industrial base to a postindustrial, financialized service, economy beginning in the 1970s positioned black American underclass ideology and language, hip-hop culture, as a viable means for black American youth to achieve economic gain, status, and upward economic mobility in the society over education. That is, finance capital in the US beginning in the 1970s began investing in entertainment and other service industries where the segregated inner-city street, prison, language, entertainment, and athletic culture of black America became both a commodity and the means to economic gain for the black poor in America's postindustrial economy, which subsequently outsourced its industrial work to semi-periphery nations thereby blighting the inner-city communities.

Blacks, many of whom migrated to the northern cities from the agricultural south looking for industrial work in the north, became concentrated in blighted communities where work began to disappear, schools were underfunded, and poverty and crime increased due to deindustrialization and suburbanization of northern cities (Wilson, 1978 1993; 1998). The black migrants, which migrated North with their

BEV/AAEV from the agricultural South following the Civil War and later, became segregated sociolinguistic underclass communities, ghettos, of unemployed laborers looking to illegal, athletic, and entertainment activities (running numbers, pimping, prostitution, drug dealing, robbing, participating in sports, music, etc.) for economic success, status, and upward mobility. Educated in the poorly funded schools of the urban ghettos given the process of deindustrialization and the flight of capital to the suburbs and overseas, with no work prospects, many black American youth and their families became part of a permanent *social class language game*, AAEV speaking and poorly educated underclass looking to other activities (sports, entertainment, illegal activities) for economic gain, status, and upward economic mobility. Those who were educated became a part of the Standard-English-speaking black middle class of professionals, i.e., teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc. (the black bourgeoisie), living in the suburbs, while the uneducated or poorly educated constituted the black underclass of the urban ghettos. Beginning in the late 1980s, finance capital, in order to avoid the oppositional culture to poverty, racism, and classism found among the black underclass in urban cities throughout America, began commodifying and distributing (via the media industrial complex) the underclass black youth culture for entertainment in the emerging postindustrial service economy of the US over the ideology and language of the black bourgeoisie. Be that as it may, efforts to succeed academically among black Americans, which constituted the ideology and language of the black bourgeoisie, paled in comparison to their efforts to succeed as speakers of Black English, athletes, "gangstas", "playas", and entertainers, which became the ideology and language of the black underclass youth living in poor economically depressed inner-city communities of America. Authentic black American identity became synonymous with black American underclass youth hip-hop ideology and language as financed by the upper-class of owners and high-level executives of the entertainment industry over the social class language game of the black educated middle class.

Hence, contemporarily, in America's post-industrial service economy where multiculturalism, language, and communication skills, pedagogically taught through process approaches to learning, multicultural education,

and cooperative group works in school, are keys to succeeding in the postindustrial service labor market, blacks, paradoxically, have an advantage and disadvantage. On the one hand, their linguistic structure growing up in inner-cities are influenced by the black American underclass youth hip-hop culture who in conjunction with the upper-class of owners and high-level executives have positioned athletics and the entertainment industries as the social functions best served by their linguistic structure and underclass ideological apparatuses in the service economy of the US, which subsequently leads to economic gain, status, and upward social mobility for blacks in the society. This is advantageous because it, black urban youth hip-hop culture, becomes an authentic black identity by which black American youth can participate in the fabric of the postindustrial social structure. On the other hand, their linguistic structure inhibits them from succeeding academically given the mismatch between their linguistic structure and the function it serves in the postindustrial labor market of the US, and that of Standard English and the function of school as a medium to economic gain, status, and upward social mobility for blacks in the society.

School for many black Americans, in other words, is simply a place for honing their athletic and entertainment skills and hip-hop culture, which they can subsequently profit from in the American postindustrial service economy as their cultural contribution to the American multicultural melting pot. Many blacks in America enter school speaking Black or African American English Vernacular. Their linguistic structure in schooling in postindustrial education, which values the exchange of cultural facts as commodities for the postindustrial economy, is celebrated along with their music and athletics under the umbrella of multicultural education. Therefore, no, or very few, remedial courses are offered to teach them Standard English, which initially leads to poor test scores on standardized tests because the phonology, morphology, and syntax, or the way its expressions are put together to form sentences, of BEV/AAEV juxtaposed against that of Standard English (SE) prevents many black Americans early on in their academic careers from grasping the meaning or semantics of phrases and contents of standardized tests, which are written in Standard English. As blacks matriculate through the school system, with their emphasis of succeeding in music and

athletics, those who acquire the systemicity of Standard English and succeed become part of the black professional class (a comprador bourgeoisie, Frantz Fanon's term) celebrating the underclass culture, from whence they came, of those who do not make it and therefore dropout of school constituting the black underclass youth culture of poorly educated and unemployed social actors looking to the entertainment industry (which celebrates their conditions as a commodity for the labor market) and the streets as their only viable means to economic gain, status, and upward social mobility in blighted inner-city communities.

### CONCLUSION

So Mocombe's structural Marxist approach, in building on the structural logic of Althusser, prioritizes black social relations to the modes of production in American society vis-à-vis their socializations in its different ideological apparatuses as the basis for the black/white academic achievement gap. Many blacks grow-up poor in the American capitalist social structure of racial-class inequality. Opportunities and assistances to succeed in the society are plentiful, from head-start and after-school programs, schools, multicultural education, etc. However, many black students seek economic gain and achieving success in the society not through education, but through social class roles, athletics, entertainment, and the street life, they are over-represented in that do not require an education. These roles and their power elites, i.e., athletes, entertainers, thugs, pimps, etc., become associated with black culture and identity, and their peer pressure prevent many blacks from applying themselves to achieve academically.

Be that as it may, to resolve the gap, the emphasis should be threefold: 1) reconstitute the American capitalist social structure of class inequality into the Cuban economic model thereby negating the need for blacks, black males in particular, to place an emphasis on solely achieving economic gain via athletics, entertainment, and the streets; 2) establish mentoring programs that pair educated black professionals with black students throughout their academic careers so as to undermine the influence of the black power elites, rappers, athletes, and street personalities, of the black underclass; and 3) emphasize standards based curriculum as the common core state standards are trying to implement. We foresee the latter two taking place. However, so long as the

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American capitalist social structure of class inequality, with its emphasis on economic gain, upward mobility, and status, is in place, the black-white test score gap will always be among us. Even more perplexing with the emerging climate change problematic tied to capitalist expansion, exploitation, and overproduction the prospect of resolving the gap via economic growth and the expansion of educational opportunities is bleak to say the least.

Future research must continue to explore this relationship highlighted by Mocombe between the modes of production of the capitalist world-system, its ideological apparatuses, and the black/white academic achievement gap.

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