

SAT Question Selection: Impact by Race

As with ethnicity, we will look at racial effects by contrasting the differences between two racial groups: blacks and whites. As mentioned earlier, on the SAT blacks score about 1 standard deviation lower than whites (about 100 points on math questions and 100 points on verbal/critical reading questions).

Sample SAT Question #3

Here is another SAT verbal question, the “actor’s bearing” question (Marcus, 1999):

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 answer is (C) unstudied ... uncontrived. As before, we’ll tackle the more important issues: namely, Who answered this question correctly? Were there racial differences in response to this question?

The comparison here will be directly between the performances of white students and black students. In a manner similar to the “three-digit question” and the “security blanket” questions above, the reader

is challenged to determine whether this “actor’s bearing” question is a white question or a black question. Who is doing better on this question? Do white students answer this question correctly more often blacks, or do black students answer this question correctly more often than whites?

As earlier, let’s divide SAT questions into three racial categories:

1. *White* questions are items for which correct answers are given by a higher percentage of white students than black students.
2. *Black* questions are items for which correct answers are given by a higher percentage of black students than white students.
3. *Neutral* questions are items for which correct answers are given by exactly the same percentages of white students and black students.

So, is the “actor’s bearing” question a white question or a black question? The “actor’s bearing” question is a *black* question, with 8% more blacks than whites answering it correctly.

Again, going back to the 1998 and 2000 SATs, we can examine how race was reflected in both the verbal and the math questions. There were 78 verbal questions and 60 math questions on each of the two tests (from 1998 and 2000), so the total number of verbal and math questions in both data sets is 276.

Do the Questions Pass the Fairness Test?

Finally, I invite you to try to guess the number of *black* questions among the total 276 verbal and math questions analyzed. Here are some hints:

1. Of the 276 verbal and math questions, there are no neutral questions.
2. On average, whites score higher than blacks on the SAT Verbal and Math sections. Therefore, there are more white questions than black questions in the pool of 276 verbal and math questions.
3. Since half of 276 is 138, the number of white questions would be at least half, and the number of black questions would be less than half, or fewer than 138.

How many of the 276 SAT questions were black questions? Once again, please guess the number before reading further.

What the Data Show

Of the 276 verbal and math questions, there were zero black questions. Each and every one of the 276 questions were white questions in this white/black comparison.

What about the “actor’s bearing” black question that appears above? Why doesn’t that appear in the tally? I apologize for sandbagging the reader. The “actor’s bearing” question, although a black question, never appeared on a scored section of the SAT.

Apparently it was rejected because a higher percentage of blacks than of whites answered that question correctly in the pretesting phase. The data set forth above relative to that question were pretesting data, not data from a scored section. So, black questions do exist, but it appears that none ever make it onto a scored section of the SAT. Black students may encounter black questions, but only on unscored sections of the SAT.