

BEHAVIOR

BEHAVIORAL RACIST: One who is making individuals responsible for the perceived behavior of racial groups and making racial groups responsible for the behavior of individuals.

BEHAVIORAL ANTIRACIST: One who is making racial group behavior fictional and individual behavior real.

DID EVENTUALLY MAKE friends, an interracial group who arrived just as my old gear from the Ave became too small for my growing body. I lost the purity of my New York accent and jump shot, but I found living, breathing, laughing friends, like Chris, Maya, Jovan, and Brandon.

My schoolwork did not recover. I never bothered much with class back in Queens—I skipped classes at John Bowne to play spades in the lunchroom and tuned out teachers like they were bad commercials, doing just enough classwork to stay married to basketball. I was definitely not living up to my academic potential—and as a Black teenager in the nineties, my shortcomings didn't go unnoticed or unjudged. The first to notice were the adults around me of my parents' and grandparents' generation. As legal scholar James Forman Jr. documents, the civil-rights generation usually evoked Martin Luther King Jr. to shame us. "Did Martin Luther King successfully fight the likes of Bull Connor so that we could ultimately lose the struggle for civil rights to misguided or malicious members of our own race?" asked Washington, D.C., prosecutor Eric Holder at an MLK birthday cele-

bration in 1995. "You are costing everybody's freedom," Jesse Jackson told a group of Alabama prisoners that year. "You can rise above this if you change your mind," he added. "I appeal to you. Your mother appealed to you. Dr. King died for you."

The so-called "first Black president" followed suit. "It isn't racist for Whites to say they don't understand why people put up with gangs on the corner or in the projects or with drugs being sold in the schools or in the open," said President Clinton in 1995. "It's not racist for Whites to assert that the culture of welfare dependency, out of wedlock pregnancy, and absent fatherhood cannot be broken by social programs, unless there is first more personal responsibility."

Black people needed to stop playing "race cards," the phrase Peter Collier and David Horowitz used to brand "talk of race and racism" in 1997. The issue was personal irresponsibility.

Indeed, I was irresponsible in high school. It makes antiracist sense to talk about the personal irresponsibility of individuals like me of all races. I screwed up. I could have studied harder. But some of my White friends could have studied harder, too, and their failures and irresponsibility didn't somehow tarnish their race.

My problems with personal irresponsibility were exacerbated—or perhaps even caused—by the additional struggles that racism added to my school life, from a history of disinterested, racist teachers, to overcrowded schools, to the daily racist attacks that fell on young Black boys and girls. There's no question that I could have hurdled that racism and kept on running. But asking every nonathletic Black person to become an Olympic hurdler, and blaming them when they can't keep up, is racist. One of racism's harms is the way it falls on the unexceptional Black person who is asked to be extraordinary just to survive—and, even worse, the Black screwup who faces the abyss after one error, while the White screwup is handed second chances and empathy. This shouldn't be surprising: One of the fundamental values of racism to White people is that it makes success attainable for even unexceptional Whites, while success,

even moderate success, is usually reserved for extraordinary Black people.

How do we think about my young self, the C or D student, in antiracist terms? The truth is that I should be critiqued as a student—I was undermotivated and distracted and undisciplined. In other words, a bad student. But I shouldn't be critiqued as a bad *Black* student. I did not represent my race any more than my irresponsible White classmates represented their race. It makes racist sense to talk about personal irresponsibility as it applies to an entire racial group. Racial-group behavior is a figment of the racist's imagination. Individual behaviors can shape the success of individuals. But policies determine the success of groups. And it is racist power that creates the policies that cause racial inequities.

Making individuals responsible for the perceived behavior of racial groups and making whole racial groups responsible for the behavior of individuals are the two ways that behavioral racism infects our perception of the world. In other words, when we believe that a racial group's seeming success or failure redounds to each of its individual members, we've accepted a racist idea. Likewise, when we believe that an individual's seeming success or failure redounds to an entire group, we've accepted a racist idea. These two racist ideas were common currency in the 1990s. Progressive Americans—the ones who self-identified as “not racist”—had abandoned biological racism by the mid-1990s. They had gone further: Mostly they'd abandoned ethnic racism, bodily racism, and cultural racism. But they were still sold on behavioral racism. And they carried its torch unwaveringly, right up to the present.

The same behavioral racism drove many of the Trump voters whom these same “not racist” progressives vociferously opposed in the 2016 election. They, too, ascribed qualities to entire groups—these were voters whose political choice correlated with their belief that Black people are ruder, lazier, stupider, and crueller than White people. “America's Black community . . . has turned America's major cities into slums because of laziness, drug use, and sexual promiscuity,” fancied Reverend Jamie Johnson,

director of a faith-based center in Trump's Department of Homeland Security, after the election. "Although black civil rights leaders like to point to a supposedly racist criminal justice system to explain why our prisons house so many black men, it's been obvious for decades that the real culprit is black behavior," argued Jason Riley in 2016.

Every time someone racializes behavior—describes something as "Black behavior"—they are expressing a racist idea. To be an antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as racial behavior. To be an antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as Black behavior, let alone irresponsible Black behavior. Black behavior is as fictitious as Black genes. There is no "Black gene." No one has ever scientifically established a single "Black behavioral trait." No evidence has ever been produced, for instance, to prove that Black people are louder, angrier, nicer, funnier, lazier, less punctual, more immoral, religious, or dependent; that Asians are more subservient; that Whites are greedier. All we have are stories of individual behavior. But individual stories are only proof of the behavior of individuals. Just as race doesn't exist biologically, race doesn't exist behaviorally.

But what about the argument that clusters of Black people in the South, or Asian Americans in New York's Chinatown, or White people in the Texas suburbs seem to behave in ways that follow coherent, definable cultural practices? Antiracism means separating the idea of a culture from the idea of behavior. Culture defines a group tradition that a particular racial group might share but that is not shared among all individuals in that racial group or among all racial groups. Behavior defines the inherent human traits and potential that everyone shares. Humans are intelligent and lazy, even as that intelligence and laziness might appear differently across the racialized cultural groups.

BEHAVIORAL RACISTS SEE it differently from antiracists, and even from each other. In the decades before the Civil War, behavioral racists argued over whether it was freedom or slavery that caused

supposed mediocre Black behavior. To proslavery theorists, Black behavioral deficiencies stemmed from freedom, either in Africa or among emancipated slaves in America. In the states that “retained the ancient relation” between White mastery and Black slavery, Blacks “had improved greatly in every respect—in numbers, comfort, intelligence, and morals,” Secretary of State John C. Calhoun explained to a British critic in 1844. This proslavery position held after slavery. Freed Blacks “cut off from the spirit of White society”—their civilizing masters—had degenerated into the “original African type,” with behavioral traits ranging from hypersexuality, immorality, criminality, and laziness to poor parenting, Philip Alexander Bruce maintained in his popular 1889 book, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*.

In contrast, abolitionists, including Benjamin Rush in 1773, argued, “All the vices which are charged upon the Negroes in the southern colonies and the West-Indies, such as Idleness, Treachery, Theft, and the like, are the genuine offspring of slavery.” A year later, Rush founded the budding nation’s first White anti-slavery society. Prefacing Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative in 1845, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison stated that slavery degraded Black people “in the scale of humanity. . . . Nothing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind.”

Abolitionists—or, rather, progressive assimilationists—conjured what I call the oppression-inferiority thesis. In their well-meaning efforts to persuade Americans about the horrors of oppression, assimilationists argue that oppression has degraded the behaviors of oppressed people.

This belief extended into the period after slavery. In his address to the founding meeting of Alexander Crummell’s American Negro Academy in 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois pictured “the first and greatest step toward the settlement of the present friction between the races . . . lies in the correction of the immorality, crime, and laziness among the Negroes themselves, which still remains as a heritage of slavery.” This framing of slavery as a de-

moralizing force was the mirror image of the Jim Crow historian's framing of slavery as a civilizing force. Both positions led Americans toward behavioral racism: Black behavior demoralized by freedom—or freed Black behavior demoralized by slavery.

The latest expression of the oppression-inferiority thesis is known as post-traumatic slave syndrome, or PTSS. Black “infighting,” materialism, poor parenting, colorism, defeatism, rage—these “dysfunctional” and “negative” behaviors “as well as many others are in large part related to trans-generational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression,” maintains psychologist Joy DeGruy in her 2005 book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. (Some people believe, based on misleading studies, that these trans-generational adaptations are genetic.)

DeGruy claimed “many, many” African Americans suffer from PTSS. She built this theory on anecdotal evidence and modeled it on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But studies show that many, many people who endure traumatic environments don't contract post-traumatic stress disorder. Researchers found that among soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, PTSD rates ranged from 13.5 to 30 percent.

Black individuals have, of course, suffered trauma from slavery and ongoing oppression. Some individuals throughout history have exhibited negative behaviors related to this trauma. DeGruy is a hero for ushering the constructs of trauma, damage, and healing into our understanding of Black life. But there is a thin line between an antiracist saying individual Blacks have suffered trauma and a racist saying Blacks are a traumatized people. There is similarly a thin line between an antiracist saying slavery was debilitating and a racist saying Blacks are a debilitated people. The latter constructions erase whole swaths of history: for instance, the story of even the first generation of emancipated Black people, who moved straight from plantations into the Union army, into politics, labor organizing, Union leagues, artistry, entrepreneurship, club building, church building, school building, community building—buildings more commonly razed by the fiery

hand of racist terrorism than by any self-destructive hand of behavioral deficiencies derived from the trauma of slavery.

Increasingly in the twentieth century, social scientists replaced slavery with segregation and discrimination as the oppressive hand ravaging Black behavior. Psychoanalysts Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey expressed this alarm in their 1951 tome, *The Mark of Oppression: A Psychosocial Study of the American Negro*. "There is not one personality trait of the Negro the source of which cannot be traced to his difficult living conditions," they wrote. "The final result is a wretched internal life," a crippled "self-esteem," a vicious "self-hatred," "the conviction of unlovability, the diminution of affectivity, and the uncontrolled hostility." Widely taken as scientific fact, these sweeping generalizations were based on the authors' interviews with all of twenty-five subjects.

AS A STRUGGLING Black teenager in the nineties, I felt suffocated by a sense of being judged, primarily by the people I was closest to: other Black people, particularly older Black people who worried over my entire generation. The Black judge in my mind did not leave any room for the mistakes of Black individuals—I didn't just have to deal with the consequences of my personal failings, I had the added burden of letting down the entire race. Our mistakes were generalized as the mistakes of the race. It seemed that White people were free to misbehave, make mistakes. But if we failed—or failed to be twice as good—then the Black judge handed down a hard sentence. No probation or parole. There was no middle ground—we were either King's disciples or thugs killing King's dream.

But, of course, while that may have felt true in a larger social sense, individual Black parents responded as individuals. My own parents privately etched out probationary middle grounds for their own children. I did not make Ma and Dad proud. But they didn't treat me as a thug and lock me away—they kept trying. When I was in eleventh grade at Stonewall Jackson, my parents

nudged me into International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, and even though I didn't have particularly high expectations for myself, I went along with it. I entered the sanctimonious world of IB, surrounded by a sea of White and Asian students. This environment only made my hatred of school more intense, if now for a different reason. I felt stranded, save for an occasional class with my friend Maya, a Black teen preparing for Spelman College. None of my White and Asian classmates came to save me. Rarely opening my lips or raising my hand, I shaped myself according to what I thought they believed about me. I felt like a person in a leaky boat as they sailed by me every day on their way to standardized-test prep sessions, Ivy League dreams, and competitions for teachers' praises. I saw myself through their eyes: an impostor, deserving of invisibility. My drowning in the supposed sea of advanced intelligence was imminent.

I internalized my academic struggles as indicative of something wrong not just with my behavior but with Black behavior as a whole, since I represented the race, both in their eyes—or what I thought I saw in their eyes—and in my own.

The so-called Nation's Report Card told Americans the same story. It first reported the math scores of eighth- and fourth-graders in 1990, the year I entered third grade. Asian fourth-graders scored thirty-seven points, Whites thirty-two points, and Latinx twenty-one points higher than Black fourth-graders on the standardized math test. By 2017, the scoring gaps in fourth-grade mathematics had slightly narrowed. The racial "achievement gap" in reading between White and Black fourth-graders also narrowed between 1990 and 2017 but widened between White and Black twelfth-graders. In 2015, Blacks had the lowest mean SAT scores of any racial group.

As a high school student, I believed standardized tests effectively measured smarts and therefore my White and Asian classmates were smarter than me. I thought I was a fool. Clearly, I needed another shaming lesson about how King died for me.

NOT UNTIL MY senior year in college did I realize I was a fool for thinking I was a fool. I was preparing for my last major standardized test, the Graduate Record Exam, or GRE. I had already forked over \$1,000 for a preparatory course, feeding the U.S. test-prep and private tutoring industry that would grow to \$12 billion in 2014 and is projected to reach \$17.5 billion in 2020. The courses and private tutors are concentrated in Asian and White communities, who, not surprisingly, score the highest on standardized tests. My GRE prep course, for instance, was not taught on my historically Black campus. I had to trek over to the campus of a historically White college in Tallahassee.

I sat surrounded by White students before a White teacher at Florida State University, a flashback to my lonely boat at Stonewall Jackson. I wondered why I was the only Black student in the room and about my own economic privilege and the presumed economic privilege of my fellow students. I wondered about another stratum of students, who weren't even in the room, the ones who could pay for private tutoring with this teacher.

The teacher boasted the course would boost our GRE scores by two hundred points, which I didn't pay much attention to at first—it seemed an unlikely advertising pitch. But with each class, the technique behind the teacher's confidence became clearer. She wasn't making us smarter so we'd ace the test—she was teaching us *how* to take the test.

On the way home from the class, I typically stopped by the gym to lift weights. When I first started weight lifting, I naturally assumed the people lifting the heaviest weights were the strongest people. I assumed wrong. To lift the most required a combination of strength and the best form; one was based on ability, the other on access to the best information and training. Well-trained lifters with exquisite form lifted heavier weights than similarly or even better-endowed lifters with poorer form.

This regular commute from the GRE prep course to the weight room eventually jarred me into clarity: The teacher was not making us stronger. She was giving us form and technique so we'd know precisely how to carry the weight of the test.

It revealed the bait and switch at the heart of standardized tests—the exact thing that made them unfair: She was teaching test-taking form for standardized exams that purportedly measured intellectual strength. My classmates and I would get higher scores—two hundred points, as promised—than poorer students, who might be equivalent in intellectual strength but did not have the resources or, in some cases, even the awareness to acquire better form through high-priced prep courses. Because of the way the human mind works—the so-called “attribution effect,” which drives us to take personal credit for any success—those of us who prepped for the test would score higher and then walk into better opportunities thinking it was all about us: that we were better and smarter than the rest and we even had inarguable, quantifiable proof. Look at our scores! Admissions counselors and professors would assume we were better qualified and admit us to their graduate schools (while also boosting their institutional rankings). And because we’re talking about featureless, objective numbers, no one would ever think that racism could have played a role.

The use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies. We degrade Black minds every time we speak of an “academic-achievement gap” based on these numbers. The acceptance of an academic-achievement gap is just the latest method of reinforcing the oldest racist idea: Black intellectual inferiority. The idea of an achievement gap means there is a disparity in academic performance between groups of students; implicit in this idea is that academic achievement as measured by statistical instruments like test scores and dropout rates is the only form of academic “achievement.” There is an even more sinister implication in achievement-gap talk—that disparities in academic achievement accurately reflect disparities in intelligence among racial groups. Intellect is the linchpin of behavior, and the racist idea of the achievement gap is the linchpin of behavioral racism.

Remember, to believe in a racial hierarchy is to believe in a racist idea. The idea of an achievement gap between the races—with

Whites and Asians at the top and Blacks and Latinx at the bottom creates a racial hierarchy, with its implication that the racial gap in test scores means something is wrong with the Black and Latinx test takers and not the tests. From the beginning, the tests, not the people, have always been the racial problem. I know this is a hard idea to accept—so many well-meaning people have tried to “solve” this problem of the racial achievement gap—but once we understand the history and policies behind it, it becomes clear.

The history of race and standardized testing begins in 1869, when English statistician Francis Galton—a half cousin of Charles Darwin—hypothesized in *Hereditary Genius* that the “average intellectual standard of the negro race is some two grades below our own.” Galton pioneered eugenics decades later but failed to develop a testing mechanism that verified his racist hypothesis. Where Galton failed, France’s Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon succeeded, when they developed an IQ test in 1905 that Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman revised and delivered to Americans in 1916. These “experimental” tests would show “enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture,” the eugenicist said in his 1916 book, *The Measurement of Intelligence*.

Terman’s IQ test was first administered on a major scale to 1.7 million U.S. soldiers during World War I. Princeton psychologist Carl C. Brigham presented the soldiers’ racial scoring gap as evidence of genetic racial hierarchy in *A Study of American Intelligence*, published three years before he created the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, in 1926. Aptitude means natural ability. Brigham, like other eugenicists, believed the SAT would reveal the natural intellectual ability of White people.

Physicist William Shockley and psychologist Arthur Jensen carried these eugenic ideas into the 1960s. By then, genetic explanations—if not the tests and the achievement gap itself—had largely been discredited. Segregationists pointing to inferior genes had been overwhelmed in the racist debate over the cause of the achievement gap by assimilationists pointing to inferior environments.

Liberal assimilationists shifted the discourse to “closing the achievement gap,” powering the testing movement into the nineties, when *The Bell Curve* controversy erupted in 1994 over whether the gap could be closed. “It seems highly likely to us that both genes and the environment have something to do with racial differences” in test scores, wrote Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein and political scientist Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve*. The racist idea of an achievement gap lived on into the new millennium through George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act and Obama’s Race to the Top and Common Core—initiatives that further enlarged the role of standardized testing in determining the success and failure of students and the schools they attended. Through these initiatives and many, many others, education reformers banged the drum of the “achievement gap” to get attention and funding for their equalizing efforts.

But what if, all along, these well-meaning efforts at closing the achievement gap have been opening the door to racist ideas? What if different environments lead to different kinds of achievement rather than different levels of achievement? What if the intellect of a low-testing Black child in a poor Black school is different from—and not inferior to—the intellect of a high-testing White child in a rich White school? What if we measured intelligence by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environments? What if we measured intellect by an individual’s desire to know? What if we realized the best way to ensure an effective educational system is not by standardizing our curricula and tests but by standardizing the opportunities available to all students?

In Pennsylvania, a recent statewide study found that at any given poverty level, districts with a higher proportion of White students receive significantly more funding than districts with more students of color. The chronic underfunding of Black schools in Mississippi is a gruesome sight to behold. Schools lack basic supplies, basic textbooks, healthy food and water. The lack of resources leads directly to diminished opportunities for learning. In other words, the racial problem is the opportunity gap, as antiracist reformers call it, not the achievement gap.

BACK IN HIGH school, those final days in 1999 were taking forever. I sat bored during free time in my government class. As my mind wandered, my eyes wandered and latched on to Angela, sitting behind me. Brown-skinned with high cheekbones and a sweet disposition, Angela appeared to be writing intently.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m writing my speech,” she said with her usual smile, not looking up from her writing.

“Speech for what?”

“For the MLK contest. You haven’t heard?”

I shook my head, and so she told me all about the Prince William County Martin Luther King Jr. oratorical contest. Stonewall Jackson participants would give their speeches in two days. Stonewall’s winner would go on to the county competition. The top three finalists would speak at the Hylton Chapel on MLK Day in 2000.

She urged me to participate. At first, I declined. But by the time she finished with me, I was in. The prompt for the contest was “What would be Dr. King’s message for the millennium?” and what came to my pen were all the racist ideas about Black youth behavior circulating in the 1990s that, without realizing, I had deeply internalized. I started writing an anti-Black message that would have filled King with indignity—less like King himself and more like the shaming speeches about King that I heard so often from adults of my parents’ generation. If only I’d spent more time listening to King instead of all the adults who claimed to speak for him. “We must no longer be ashamed of being Black,” King would have told me, as he told a gathering of Black people in 1967. “As long as the mind is enslaved, the body can never be free.”

As long as the mind thinks there is something behaviorally wrong with a racial group, the mind can never be antiracist. As long as the mind oppresses the oppressed by thinking their oppressive environment has retarded their behavior, the mind can

never be antiracist. As long as the mind is racist, the mind can never be free.

To be antiracist is to think nothing is behaviorally wrong or right—inferior or superior—with any of the racial groups. Whenever the antiracist sees individuals behaving positively or negatively, the antiracist sees exactly that: individuals behaving positively or negatively, not representatives of whole races. To be antiracist is to deracialize behavior, to remove the tattooed stereotype from every racialized body. Behavior is something humans do, not races do.

I FINISHED A draft of the speech that night. “Let me hear it!” Angela excitedly asked the next day, before our government class.

“Hear what?” I said shyly, turning around, knowing exactly what.

“Your speech!” She beamed. “I know you got it there. Let me hear it!”

Feeling obligated, I slowly recited my speech. The more I read, the more confidence I felt. The racist ideas sounded so good, so right, as racist ideas normally do. When I finished, Angela was ecstatic.

“You’re going to win! You’re going to win!” she chanted softly as class started. I kept turning around and telling her to stop. Angela saw my smiles and did not.

I did not sleep much that night. Between fine-tuning my speech and quieting my nerves and fears, I had too much going in my mind. I fell eventually into a deep sleep, so deep I did not hear my alarm. When I awoke, I realized I had missed the competition. Upset but also relieved, I made my way to school.

Angela was waiting for me at the competition all morning. After the last participant had spoken to the Stonewall judges, Angela demanded they reconvene when I arrived at school and she did not take no from them—the same as she didn’t take no from me.

And sure enough, when I got to school, the judges recon-

vened for me. Hearing all that Angela did, a storm surge of gratitude washed away my fears and nerves. I was determined to give the speech of my life. And I did. I won, racist ideas and all.

WINNING STARTED TO melt away the shame I felt for myself and my race regarding my academic struggles. The Black judge was proud of me. I was more than proud of myself. But my racist insecurity started transforming into racist conceit. The transformation had actually already started when I decided to attend Florida A&M University. "It felt right," I told people. I did not disclose to anyone or myself why this historically Black university felt right.

On my visit during the summer of 1999, everyone gushed about Florida A&M as the biggest and baddest HBCU—historically Black college and university—in the land. *Time* magazine and *The Princeton Review* had named it College of the Year in 1997. For the second time in three years, Florida A&M had outpaced Harvard in its recruitment of National Achievement Scholars (the best of the best of Black high school students). President Frederick S. Humphries, a six-foot-five-inch bundle of charisma, had personally recruited many of those students, while growing his university into the nation's largest HBCU.

Whenever we say something just feels right or wrong we're evading the deeper, perhaps hidden, ideas that inform our feelings. But in those hidden places, we find what we really think if we have the courage to face our own naked truths. I did not look within myself to see why Florida A&M just felt right—a reason beyond my desire to be around Black excellence. The truth is, I wanted to flee misbehaving Black folk.

Florida A&M became for me the best of Blackness, all right. I never could have imagined the enrapturing sound of Blackness at its peak. Two weeks after landing on campus, I heard it in all its glory.