

Why do Black American males earn less than Black American women? An examination of four hypotheses

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Four hypotheses to explain why black men in the United States and Britain earn less than black women are examined. These are (1) Sowell's thesis black males have lower average intelligence than black females; this hypothesis is rejected; (2) black males have lower educational attainment than black females; new American evidence on the educational attainment of 8^h grade students in reading, mathematics and science is presented that disconfirms this hypothesis; (3) black males have lower work motivation than black females; evidence on the amount of homework disconfirms this hypothesis; (4) employers are reluctant to employ black males; it is proposed that this is the most plausible explanation for the low earnings of black males compared with black females.

In both the United States and Britain blacks have lower earnings than whites, but the difference is greater for males than for females. The black-white earnings differences for men and women in the United States for the period 1949-1985 obtained from census returns have been calculated by Farley and Allen (1989) and are given in Table 1. The figures are for per capita incomes and show the incomes of black men and women as percentages of those of whites. It can be seen that throughout the period the earnings differential was substantially greater for men than for women. It can be seen also that both black men and women improved their earnings relative to whites from 1949 to 1969, but from 1969 to 1985 black men achieved only a very small improvement in their earnings while black women lost ground. A similar difference in the earnings of black men and women relative to whites has been found in Britain. In a study of a nationally representative sample of 2,867 whites and 1,205 blacks carried out in the mid-1990s it was found that among employees black men earned 91 per cent of white men, while black women earned 109 per cent of white women (Madood & Berthoud, 1997).

Table 1. Earnings of Black Men and Black Women as Percentages of the White Population in the United States of America

Year	1949	1959	1969	1979	1985
Men	46	50	55	57	57
Women	66	79	91	88	88

There are four possible explanations that have been proposed, or could be proposed, for the fact that black men have lower earnings, relative to whites, than black women. These are that black men have a disadvantage in intelligence, in educational attainment, in work motivation, or that they are subject to discrimination from employers. The intelligence deficit version of the human capital theory has been proposed by Sowell (1994, p.171) who writes that "research findings have consistently shown that black females have higher IQ test scores, and most other test scores, than black males". If this is so, it would explain some or perhaps all of the disadvantage of black men in earnings because intelligence is a determinant of earnings at a correlation of around 0.35 (Brown & Reynolds, 1975; Jencks, 1972; Murray, 1998), and also because intelligence is a determinant of educational attainment at around 0.58 (Jencks, 1972) to 0.72 (Yule, Gold & Busch, 1982), which also determines earnings. A variant of the human capital theory of the disadvantage of black men in earnings is that this is due in whole or in part to poorer

educational attainment, caused either by lower intelligence, as maintained by Sowell or by some other factor such as lower work motivation or conformity. A second possible explanation for the lower earnings of black men is that black men have lower work motivation than black women. Some American ethnographic studies of the high rates of unemployment among black men in inner cities have concluded that a major factor responsible for these is unwillingness to work harder. Thus, Anderson (1980, p.75) writes that "there are many unemployed black youth who are unmotivated and uninterested in working for a living, particularly in the dead-end jobs they are likely to get." Petterson (1997, p.605) writes that "it is commonly contended that young black men experience more joblessness than their white counterparts because they are less willing to seek out low paying jobs."

A third theory of the lower earnings of black men, as compared with black women, is that they are subject to discrimination by employers. This explanation proposes that mostly white employers regard black men as more of a threat than black women and as a result discriminate against them. This is suggested by Farley and Allen (1987, p.357) who ask "Do employers frequently assume that young black men are involved more in a street culture of drugs and violence, an assumption that is not made about whites or black women? Are black men viewed as competitors for the jobs of white men while women of both races are not?" Farley and Allen do not provide any answers to these questions.

In this paper we present evidence to test two hypotheses on possible causes of the earnings deficit of black males. The first is that black males may have lower educational attainment than black females, relative to gender differences in other racial and ethnic groups. The second is that black males may have lower work motivation than black females, again relative to other racial and ethnic groups.

Method. The data for this study are derived from the American National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), sponsored by the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1990). The sample consists of a nationally representative sample of 8th grade students randomly selected from 1,052 schools stratified by size, urban vs. rural, regional, and percent minority population. Samples were weighted to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection and to adjust for non-response rates. Asian-American and Hispanic students were over-sampled in order to ensure adequate sample sizes for subgroup analyses. The numbers in the sample consist of 1,527 Asian American (6.2%), 3,171 Hispanic (12.9%), 3,009 Black (12.2%), 15,692 White (63.8%), and 924 Native American (3.8%) students. The detailed sampling procedure is described by the National Center for Educational Statistics (1990). The students that participated completed an 85-minute battery of cognitive tests (reading, mathematics, science, and social studies). Students were also asked to give an estimate of hours of homework they did per week.

Results. Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of the four racial and ethnic groups and for the total sample for reading, mathematics, science and homework. It can be seen that girls obtain consistently higher mean scores than boys for reading and for the amount of homework, while boys obtain consistently higher mean scores than girls on mathematics and science. We examined whether there are sex differences in these measures and found that black boys obtain lower scores on these measures than black girls, but the difference wasn't as great relative to the sex differences in the three other groups. Table 3 shows the raw score sex differences and these differences expressed as d scores (the differences divided by the standard deviations of the total samples). The data set out in this table show that in general there are only small differences in all the measures and that there is no consistent trend for black boys to perform more poorly than black girls, as compared with the sex difference in the other three groups. Thus, in reading, the advantage of black girls is the smallest among the four groups. In mathematics and science, the advantage of black boys is not as great as that in the other three groups, but the differences are quite small. In homework, black girls have a smaller advantage over black boys, relative to Asians and whites, but a slightly greater advantage relative to Hispanics. The statistical significance of the ds is shown in Table 4.

This shows that the only difference between the four groups is that Asian, Hispanic and white boys do significantly better in science than girls, whereas among blacks this difference is not statistically significant.

Discussion. This study set out to test the hypotheses that the low earnings of black men, in relation to those of black women, and as compared to sex differences in earnings among whites and other racial and ethnic groups, might be due to a greater sex difference among blacks in educational attainment or in work motivation, such that black males are disadvantaged on one or the other, or both, of these characteristics. The results provide little support for either of these hypotheses. The only result providing some support for the hypothesis that black males may have lower educational attainment relative to black females than is present in other racial and ethnic groups lies in the sex differences in science, where the advantage of boys is significantly greater among Asians, Hispanics and whites, but is not significantly greater among blacks. Nevertheless, considered in the context of the results as a whole, and in particular the relatively high achievement of black boys on reading, the results cannot be regarded as supporting the hypothesis that black boys have any disadvantage in educational attainment, relative to blacks girls, as compared with the other racial and ethnic groups.

The results do not address directly Sowell's (1994) contention that black males have a lower average IQ than black females, and that this is not the case among whites. However, intelligence is so strongly associated with educational attainment that if Sowell's theory were correct black males should perform significantly worse than females on the tests of reading, mathematics and science reported in this study. The results show that this is not the case and therefore, provide indirect evidence against Sowell's theory. Furthermore, there is strong direct evidence against Sowell's thesis. There is no tendency for black boys to obtain lower IQs than black girls in the American standardization sample of the WISC-R (Jensen & Reynolds, 1983) or in studies of large samples in Africa (Klingelhofer, 1967; Owen, 1992). In this paper we have examined four hypotheses for the explanation of the lower earnings of black males than black females, as compared with the differential among whites. We have not found any evidence to support the hypotheses that black males have lower educational attainment or lower work motivation than black females. The evidence does not support Sowell's contention that black males have lower IQs than black females. By default we are left with the fourth hypothesis that employers tend to be reluctant to employ black men but do not have the same reluctance to employ black women as the most likely explanation of the lower earnings of black men. This appears to be a reasonable explanation because black males as a group tend to have high average levels of aggression. Black male convictions for assault are five times greater than those of white males and for homicide 11 times greater (Taylor and Whitney, 1999). Many white employers are likely to be aware of this and as a result may tend to discriminate against black men while remaining quite willing to employ black women.

Table 2. Means scores of 8th grade students' Readings, Mathematics, Science, and hours of homework by race and gender

Variables	Asian		Hispanic		Black		White		Males	Fem.
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
Reading	49.81	51.69	45.81	47.29	45.34	46.60	50.63	52.96	49.57	51.59
Math	52.99	52.77	46.67	45.55	45.07	44.96	52.04	51.71	50.78	50.30
Science	52.64	48.96	47.27	45.54	45.29	44.90	52.82	51.03	51.45	49.68
Homework	3.88	4.28	3.95	4.06	3.91	4.07	3.95	4.21	3.95	4.18

Table 3. Sex differences in raw scores and in (Effect sizes) of Reading, Math, Science, and Homework comparing among racial/ethnic groups

Variables	Asian	Hispanic	Black	White	Total
Reading	-1.88 (-.18)	-1.48 (-.17)	-1.26 (-.14)	-2.33 (-.24)	-2.01 (-.20)
Math	.22 (.21)	1.27 (.15)	.13 (.02)	.33 (.03)	.48 (.05)
Science	3.68 (.35)	1.73 (.21)	.39 (.05)	1.79 (.18)	1.77 (.18)
Homework	-.40 (-.29)	-.11 (-.08)	-.16 (-.12)	-.26 (-.18)	-.23 (.16)

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