

Moralism and Compensation in Shelby Steele's White Guilt Theory: African American Economic and Academic Performance under Preferential Policies

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This paper revisits Steele's claims about the politics of social equality and justice by interrogating some of his postulates about the allegedly ineluctable effects of preferential policies on African American social mobility. Although his arguments about the psychological and cultural effects of preferential treatment on this community's academic and economic performance might be relatively sound, he fails to provide solutions to go about the persistence of anti-black racism. The discussion of the potential impacts of preferential policies on career building among African Americans shall in this paper draw on the wider debate on the "moral politics" involved in the practices of victimization and compensation. The paper also demonstrates that preferential treatment is currently the only effective assistance that the government could provide for students from this disadvantaged community in the absence of concrete political solutions to the problem of unequal educational preparation by which it seems to be most affected.

Keywords: African Americans, preferential policies, academic gap, economic performance, ethnic studies.

Introduction

The liberal drive toward a more egalitarian society during the mid-twentieth century produced two of the most dramatic effects on American democracy: the repudiation of individualist ideology and the expansion of central government authority. Seemingly seeking to reinvigorate the old Universalist values of freedom and social justice, the liberal trend of the late 1950s and 1960s encouraged the growth of interest-group politics and supported the national government's involvement in education and the economy.

An ideological standoff then took shape, as it were, between an old conservative liberalism with its promises of liberty and individualism on the one hand, and a rebellious one that equated individual fulfillment with group assertion and self-actualization with community development on the other, projecting a penumbra of unmitigated tension on the national conversation on race and ethnicity. The civil rights legislation of the sixties as well as the preferential programs that were to be designed in the following decade were, in effect, in no small measure the product of this growing liberal trend that proclaimed to be building a new nation of free, equal and responsible citizens (Fetter, 2017, p.66). With the Supreme Court growing more committed to the racial issue as never before, ruling on behalf of minorities for further representation in the job market and educational institutions (Oppenheimer, 2016; Minowitz, 2016, p.148), the racial and ethnic groups which were formerly at a disadvantage began to take better advantage of genuine opportunities (Carothers, 2018).

Suspicious about this new direction that the Civil Rights Movement was taking and concerned with the future of democracy, several American public intellectuals and political theorists began to stress the threat that the emerging racial policies represented for social cohesion and for the very values of liberty and equality. Pointing out the threat that racial preferences posed for American society, sociologist Nathan Glazer (1992), for example, declared that:

The egalitarian drive threatens individualism because it is directed toward the great American problem, the race issue, and in doing so it is erecting official racial and ethnic categories on the basis of which rights, privileges, and duties are distributed by government, and by private employers and institutions under government pressure. (p. 236)

A typical representative figure of the conservative tradition, and one of the most assertive critics of U.S. racial policy, Shelby Steele has been relentlessly critical of what he considers to be the American "egalitarian myth." While several other classical liberals such as Arthur M. Schlesinger (1992), David Hollinger (2000), and Nathan Glazer (1992) have shown some appreciation for certain results reached under contemporary

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preferential policies (such as achieving a higher representation for minorities in the market) (Jones, 2015, p.63; Kurtulus 2016), Steele maintains these policies have caused more harm to society in general and to African Americans in particular than would-be benefits, however substantial they might appear.

Because they are implemented by federal agencies and commissions whose executives often lack reliable feedback, preferential policies, Steele argues, have rarely gained insight into the kind of incentives they have created for minorities not to improve their achievements. Whether in education or in the job market, African Americans have eventually done much less than expected, and their integration has therefore been seriously impeded (Steele 1990a). A strong proponent of the free market economy, Steele has advocated for endurance and self-perfection as the only possible conditions for the community's advancement and integration. Equality or abundance, he argues, have never existed in human society. American democracy has, therefore, offered more than enough chances and opportunities for all racial and ethnic groups to achieve higher standards of living.

This paper revisits Steele's claims about the politics of social equality and justice by interrogating some of his postulates about the assumedly ineluctable effects of preferential policies on African American socioeconomic ascension. The discussion in this paper of the potential impacts of preferential policies on career building among African Americans shall draw on the wider debate on the "moral politics" (to use G. Lakoff, 2002)² involved in the practices of victimization and compensation.

As academic achievement levels determine to a large extent the quality of economic achievement reached by any group (Akpan, 2018; Bittman, Davies, Russell, & Goussakova, 2017; Reardon, 2013; Hanushek, Ruhose, & Woessmann, 2016), and given the increased importance of skill and talent in the hiring and admissions processes (The State of American Jobs, 2016), a special interest in how preferential admissions to colleges affect socioeconomic status shall refer us again to the seemingly paradoxical situation where, instead of stimulating advancement, current racial policies have negatively affected African American competitiveness. For Steele, lowering admissions standards, "affirmative grading" and such forms of preferential treatment have negatively affected African American student performance levels, graduation rates and specialization. My interest is to demonstrate that, although this might in part be true, preferential treatment is currently the only effective support that the government could provide for this disadvantaged community of students in the absence of concrete political solutions to the problem of unequal educational preparation by which it seems to be most affected.

Morality, Justice, and White Guilt: A Review of Steele's Critique of Preferential Policies

Compensation for past injustice against African Americans may be tolerated "meta-ethically" as a core Universalist obligation. According to Steele (2015), however, the racialization of the public space has all but exacerbated racial and ethnic hostility (as in the case of competition for quotas). That preferential policies have brought substantial gains to African Americans, he argues, remains a highly dubious claim. Moreover, compensation for the historic wrongs undergone by groups such as African Americans is not cost-free for society as a whole.

Underlying the political vision of preferential policy advocates, Steele opines, is a moral approach to social history. If political power was used in the past to subjugate racial and ethnic minorities and to deprive them of educational and economic opportunities, it could be now used to compensate that long history of societal wrongs. The theme of the wronged man of color has become a recurrent obsession punctuated by a sense of moral urgency to make up for the original disadvantages he suffered under white cultural hegemony. For Steele, however, the dogma of compensation correlates with deeper moral assumptions that are theoretically indefensible. As he puts it:

Past oppression cannot be conflated into present-day oppression. It is likely, for example, that today's racial disparities are due more to dysfunctions within the black community, and – I would argue – to liberal social policies that have encouraged us to trade more on our past victimization than to overcome the damage done by that victimization through dint of our own pride and will ... Only by supporting what was not true – that racism was still the greatest barrier to black advancement – could they prove themselves innocent of racism. Poetic truth – this assertion of a broad characteristic "truth" that invalidates actual truth – is contemporary liberalism's greatest source of power. It is also liberalism's most fundamental corruption. (Cited in Zeller 2016, par. 6)

² See *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002) especially page 162 for an insightful discussion of the relationship between morality and politics.

In Steele's view, then, an unrestricted application of moral principles, no matter how attractive they might seem, and beyond a certain point are socially counterproductive while the principles themselves may prove illusory.

But the different forms of social transfer of resources, such as the allocation of special professional careers and educational opportunities to African Americans, to begin with, are prospective costs to society at large and to other disadvantaged minorities in particular. This new redistribution of resources, powers and roles, however, implies more than a simplistic progressive vision applied in pursuit of a more egalitarian society. For Steele (1990a), the redistribution of resources and powers is not a cost-free process to the African American community because, in principle, "racial representation is not the same thing as racial development" as it is "manufactured [while] development is always hard earned" (n. p.).

Diversity in the Steelian terminology is an ideology that mediates deeper moral convictions while it invokes history as a tool for identity-reinvention. It is a "democracy of colors rather than of people" (Steele, 1990a). Liberals, he argues, constantly create myths about a constructed inferiority that was imposed on African Americans, a prosperity that was suppressed by an arrogant white culture, and use this underdog or compensatory history (to use Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr)³ to validate their hubristic egalitarian social program (Steele, 2015). They stress the inevitability of injustice committed against African American community in the process of social and economic ascension of the white majority, allowing for a sense of *historical guilt* that should be politically redeemed.

But instead of attempting to correct past injustice, the judicial system in Steele's sense should instead fend off future transgressions of the true liberal spirit, that is improving the behavior and attitudes of individuals and communities toward the republican ethos. Accordingly, the current judicial and political systems, while favoring certain racial and ethnic groups over others, perpetuate a rather totally retrospective view of justice, founded as they are on the rhetoric of *past sins*.⁴ To assume that the formerly oppressed groups should be compensated is, for Steele, an unwarranted injustice committed against the larger society. For him, the theory that past social injustice should be compensated today, regardless of the historical circumstances that may have induced it, is eventually what has made preferential policies a dubious exercise in virtuosity (Steele, 2015). Morality is as such made subservient to ideology, but that is not without costs to society at large for excessive morality amounts to negative returns.

Steele's major reservation against racial compensation can be briefly described as a warning against its potentially strong distractive impact on policy-making, as reflected in what he considers as a serious polarization of the public opinion (Mazumber, 2014; Steele, 2015; Jones, 2019). The more decisions are made by liberal "do-gooders" in disregard of the implied costs to the African American community, he claims, the more unpredicted incentives that go counter to the original objectives prevail. Not only have the goals of racial justice and equal opportunity failed to take shape, the policy pursued in their implementation has itself occasioned useless costs to the very community it aims to help (Steele, 2006).

Economic Performance: The Culture and Psychology of Ethnic Diversity

In Steele's view (1990b), statistics often fail to articulate the full relevance of such systemic variables as corporate relocations and automation to explain African American underachievement, and that they also tend to downplay the systemic impacts of group-specific behavioral patterns on the community's performance quality. One of the most ignored facts in racial policy-making processes, according to Steele, is that group achievement depends largely on the individual's predisposition to acquire a specific set of skills, meet specific role models, and react to a myriad of socioeconomic determinants. The view that treats disproportional representation (or lack of ethnic diversity) as the outcome of discrimination seldom admits intergroup differences in performance levels, assuming that talent and skill are equally distributed among all racial and ethnic groups (Steele, 1990b). Ignoring the effects of historic disadvantage upon certain racial and ethnic groups, Steele argues, it advocates a model of social mobility that can hardly be associated with the real potentials of these groups.

In light of Steele's account of inter-group socioeconomic disparities, skill, talent and occupational styles have been specially decisive for integration into the mainstream. In a free-market economy, socioeconomic advancement is inevitable. It could only be impeded by a misguided liberal faith in the ability of politics to induce change. Criticizing affirmative action for causing much of African American underperformance, Steele (2009a) observes that liberal decision-makers completely fail to

³ See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr's *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (NY: W. W. Norton & Co. 1992), especially page 80 for a discussion of underdog history in African American separatist rhetoric.

⁴ This is Steele's guiding argument in *Shame*, his latest work.

show that affirmative action ever closes the academic gap between minorities and whites. And failing in this, affirmative action also fails to help blacks achieve true equality with whites -- the ultimate measure of which is parity in skills and individual competence. Without this underlying parity there can never be true equality in employment, income levels, rates of home ownership, educational achievement and the rest. (par.6)

What may be essential for a better grasp of Steele's account of African American underachievement despite the government's effort to uplift the community is that (a) ethnic groups in general may sensibly differ in skills, interests, and performance styles and that (b) these differences determine to a large extent the set of socioeconomic disparities *within* and *between* them. In a 2009 *Washington Post* article, for example, Steele claims that credible inquiries into the causes behind the lingering African American socioeconomic lag should take account of the immense group-specific cultural impediments that the community has yet to address. He observes that

Today's "black" problem is underdevelopment, not discrimination. Success in modernity will demand profound cultural changes -- changes in child-rearing, a restoration of marriage and family, a focus on academic rigor, a greater appreciation of entrepreneurialism and an embrace of individual development as the best road to group development. (par.16)

By seeking to increase ethnic diversity, Steele argues, liberal policymakers tend to ignore the cultural dimension involved in representation. So instead of implementing policies aimed at encouraging access to quality education and equal opportunity, they design standards aimed to force unskilled and low-performing groups into mainstream institutions, "calcif[y]ing their liberal passion into mere propriety and iconography" (Steele, 1999, p. 42).

In Steele's opinion, post-WWII African American socioeconomic gains were short-lived, despite this community's achievement of higher academic and economic performance levels (1990a, par.10). Becoming more persistent since the mid-1970s, black-white disparities in income and employment have, according to Steele, been coextensive with a double impact of preferential policies on the economic performance of black Americans: career assistance did not benefit the majority of blacks who were more in need of it, while those receiving assistance were encouraged *not* to improve their skills and achievement levels. African Americans are therefore discouraged from competition as when, Steele writes, "double standards, preferential treatment, provisions for 'cultural difference,' and various kinds of entitlement all ... keep [them] down by tolerating weakness at every juncture where strength is expected of others" (cited in Anderson 1998, par. 6).

In Steele's opinion, a group's cultural and economic characteristics are inextricably concomitant with their economic performance. Under preferential policies, he insists, black career development has been severely compromised as government assistance in the hiring of substandardly qualified blacks averted focus away from the actual need of black professionals and college graduates to overcome their skill deficiencies. A "concession of defeat" by black recruits and trainees - their acknowledgment that they are less skilled, unqualified for the positions they get - has in line with this account led to a lack of interest in refining the skills that they already possess (Steele, 1990b, p. 46).

Because black employees are frequently expected to perform far less effectively than their white or Asian colleagues, Steele argues (1990b, p. 89), they are assigned occupational roles and duties requiring comparatively less skills and fewer qualifications. Black applicants are hired for positions they will abandon a short while after their first admission precisely because they will feel inferior to their white colleagues. These "self-fulfilling prophecies," in Steele's opinion, apply to both the educational and economic spheres as well as in the private and public sectors. Even when black employees manage to keep their jobs, he asserts, they often miss promotions because first, they don't possess the suitable qualifications, and because they don't feel competent enough to perform better and be more motivated (1999, pp. 125-126).

Steele concludes that, although the rationale behind preferential treatment in the workplace is to promote equality, the final outcome is a sense of "inferiority" crippling African American employees who will ultimately see in the whole process an exchange between unequals (2015, p. 103). A related reaction that may be triggered by preferential treatment at the workplace is the tendency among affirmative action recruits in general to quit jobs requiring skills. De-emphasizing deficiencies in work performance will thus hinder their consciousness of their own weaknesses and prevent them from refining their skills (Steele, 1999, pp. 125-126). Based on Steele's analysis of the psychological processes determining African American employees' lack of motivation, the decline in black median income over the past three decades attests to the fact that it was not "because blacks' skills have deteriorated," it was rather due to the increased importance of skill in the labor market while blacks have made so little to catch up. How far could this thesis about self-fulfilling prophecies be credited to explain the persistent economic underperformance among African Americans?

The economic stagnation of a sizeable black underclass under current preferential policies (Robinson,

2001, n.p.) has been accompanied by a visible reluctance of a substantial mass of black Americans to adopt the prevalent, “imposed” avenues to social ascension. On the economic level, these trends have had deeper and more decisive repercussions. The rejection of education as acting white and the disdain for the established curricula have implied that education is no longer to be perceived as the only route to career development. Rejecting career improvement through the traditional academic channels has, in fact, meant less academic attainment, thus fewer opportunities for better careers. These trends have, according to Steele, greatly increased the dependence of large black masses on welfare (1999, p. 26).

Academic Performance: Preferential Treatment and the Black-White Achievement Gap

Studies show that, as of 2018, African Americans with lower scores are still admitted to prestigious colleges in decent numbers (Gaille, 2017). For Shelby Steele, this does not mean that this larger representation of African Americans in such colleges is actually a sign that their overall academic performance is improving, or that they are having more brilliant future careers. Visions of equality and justice, he argues, may veer into an impeding force that is likely to undermine the already modest minority achievements. For Steele, diversity does not necessarily mean improved academic performance, nor could it be equated with equal opportunities for the truly disadvantaged minorities. He observes that:

Diversity is a term that applies democratic principles to races and cultures rather than to citizens, despite the fact that there is nothing to indicate that real diversity is the same thing as proportionate representation. [This is rather] an artificial diversity that gives the appearance of an educational parity between black and white students that has not yet been achieved in reality. Here again, racial preferences allow society to leapfrog over the difficult problem of developing blacks to parity with whites and into a *cosmetic diversity* that covers the blemish of disparity - a full six years after admission, only 26 to 28 percent of blacks graduate from college. (1990a, par.12)

Steele comments that although arguments in favor of higher minority representation have used both moral and empirical perspectives, the perspectives upon which these arguments are based belong to the same framework of egalitarian thought which, he insists, has often had dramatic consequences each time it was pitted against reality. Some of the arguments used in defense of racial preferences in the job market have, therefore, been used to enhance the representation of minority students in colleges and universities. Achieving a “racially balanced” representation of minority students and higher minority graduation rates being the foremost educational objectives of preferential policies, the rationale has, in effect, revolved around the related concepts of historical wrong and compensation. The moral tone of such arguments has already been noted earlier in the discussion of the moral and ideological aspects of liberal compensatory policies.

Yet, in Steele’s opinion, these arguments, alongside more systematic criticisms of the cultural bias of college admissions tests and their limits to predict the future academic achievement of minority students, have encouraged specific patterns that ultimately go counter to the professed goals of inclusion and equal opportunity. These patterns have ranged from a lowering of college admissions standards, to double grading, and the tendency among faculty teachers to de-emphasize the deficiencies in minority student the performance. Describing the impact on motivation of race-norming in national admissions examinations, Steele notes that:

Because we have sent a message to young black Americans that you simply do not have to compete, American universities are profoundly guilty in this regard. We’ve sent the message for more than 30 years now that your SAT scores will be evaluated on a standard that is far lower—in many cases, 200 or 300 points lower—than the SAT scores of white students. In other words, we’ve put in place a disincentive to excellence, a disincentive to performance. I think it’s probably 80 percent of the reason that white and Asian scores have increased while black scores have stagnated. (Cited in Robinson 2001, n.p.)

Hence, superior academic performance has, in Steele’s opinion, come to be associated with Anglo-American white culture, and refusing to perform better is a form of rejection of that culture. He maintains that white protective (or patronizing) attitude towards black students is among the major causes behind some of the negative behavioral patterns that pertain to black students today. Blacks have accordingly shown very little “sense of urgency” for their prospective academic careers, even those planning post-graduate studies. The reason is that they know beforehand that quotas would be left for them anyway.

In Steele’s opinion, admitting students with poor skills on the grounds that admissions tests are “irrelevant” and “invalid” has encouraged these students to grow less competitive, since they know, for example, that they would be systematically assisted even to pass from one level to the next. The final outcome is to have a poorly qualified student body lagging far behind in terms of achievement in the more sophisticated and demanding subjects. Additionally, preferential admissions are an official prompt for further racism to strike deeper roots into American society (Steele, 2006). But the victims of the new “official racism,” Steele observes,

are not only the white and Asian students but the very recipients of preferential treatment (2006, pp. 37-38). In the context of highly selective admissions standards, group favoritism has, in Steele's view, perpetuated among African Americans a passive (if not negative) attitude toward self-improvement and instruction. His point is that not only has undeserved admissions prevented African American students from developing higher competitive skills, but they have also instilled in them a sense of inferiority and the conviction that they would probably never be able to attain the performance levels of white or Asian students (2006, 35).

To sum up, the effect of preferential treatment in college admissions is, in Steele's understanding, doubly devastating for African American students:

- Receiving underserved assistance, they are encouraged to exert much less efforts to improve their achievements.
- Lagging behind in academic performance, they are crippled by a sense of inferiority and become increasingly persuaded that, after all, it is only natural to perform less than the average.
- The final outcome is a self-imposed isolation that has come to characterize these students on campus, and a reticence to compete against higher performing student groups (Tweedy, 2015).

Discussion

Reclaiming Access to Economic Opportunity

In light of several recent sociological studies on African Americans, the kind of cultural economics that Shelby Steele has used to explain what he calls "underdevelopment" (2009a, par.3) may be contested for ignoring the contingency of even more significant social inequalities if the remaining assistance programs are terminated. Describing him as a "basket case" (Guthmann, 2006, par.5) may be too offensive in contemporary parlance. Comparing him to Bull Connor and George Wallace (Guthmann, 2006, par. 5) for his seeming disregard to the economic significance of white privilege and the persistence of intergroup performance gaps may also be a dramatic exaggeration. However, many of his claims about the counterproductive effects of group favoritism on African American economic performance could be proven groundless.

Back in 1972, Glazer pointed out that affirmative action operated on two levels: a double-edged sword, it allowed better opportunities for the African American elite in a variety of fields. Better college training and a financially stable family were sufficient conditions for a young individual to qualify for any job they may choose. For young people born in poverty-stricken, crime-afflicted urban slums, the prospect was rather bleak. Lacking basic training and a fair education, they stood little chance to enroll in any government vocational program or benefit from the government-mandated quotas in the job market. Although affirmative action programs were "not intended solely to benefit the more advantaged minority individuals," as the former director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission William Taylor argued, they "provided opportunities for those individuals ... with the greatest educational and social resources" (Mills, 1994, p. 162).

Today, social ascension for thousands of African Americans seems to be as difficult to achieve as it used to be a few decades ago. There is clearly reason to believe that the need to maintain support for affirmative action has become even more pressing. Statistical data from the 2000 and 2010 censuses show a persistent substantial socioeconomic gap between African Americans and most other ethnic communities (The Decennial Census, 2016). In 1999, the household income gap between whites and African Americans was around \$14,000: while white household earned a net income of \$45,400, an average African American household earned a little over \$29,400 (Welniak & Posey, 2003). Moreover, whereas the poverty rate among white Americans was 8.1%, that of African Americans was 24.9% (Bishaw & Iceland, 2003).

By 2007, African American unemployment rate increased by 2.4% while their income by 2.9% (Bishaw & Iceland, 2003). Key aspects of the black-white socioeconomic gap, notably disparities in income and employment, have persisted. By 2013, white American employment rate was twice as high as that of African Americans (Desilver, 2013; Griffen, 2018). According to Coates (2017), the household income gap between whites and African Americans towards the middle of the current decade was so significant (the latter earned seven times less) that, as Coates comments, comparing black and white middle classes has become "meaningless."

Ironically, a college degree does not necessarily mean equal employment for African American graduates. Over the same period, the employment rate among African Americans college graduates was the same as white high school graduates. In 2013, it was around 4% (Boshara, 2017). The plain fact that college education does not guarantee equal employment opportunities leaves one guessing as to whether anti-black discrimination is not to be considered a factor, especially when this finding is persistently corroborated by official statistics. A 2014 Federal Reserve Bank study, for example, showed that the same qualifications do not necessarily amount to a black-white parity in income and employment (Boshara, 2017). This same study, which covered a period of 21 years, demonstrated that while white college graduates' average income increased by

68%, that of African American graduates decreased by 55% (Boshara, 2017).

It may be almost impossible to explain the black-white income and employment gaps without taking into consideration the quality of education received by the two communities, access to loans, and of course the role of the federal government in combatting discrimination. These variables are essentially structural and explain to a large extent the persistence of black-white income gap. This also means that these gaps are difficult to reduce when they remain the result of what Coates (2017) describes as a “pigmentocracy” (social or class discrimination based on skin color) designed and maintained by the government, “one that will continue without explicit intervention.”

An experiment by Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004) supports the thesis that the persistence of black-white employment and income gaps is in part due to specific discriminatory practices in hiring. Fictitious job applicant resumes bearing African American common names and others with names common among whites were randomly sent out. The resumes were identical, but the callback rate for applications associated with “white-sounding” names was 50% higher (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004, p. 992). So very probably because of such discriminatory hiring practices, African American unemployment rate is not decreasing. For as of 2017, it was substantially higher than that of whites, amounting to 7.1% compared to the white rate which was around 3.8 % (National Employment Monthly Update, n.p.). This might sound even more surprising if we take into account the fact that, over the same period, the national unemployment rate dropped significantly (National Employment Monthly Update, n.p.).

Should Shelby Steele be unaware of the reality of anti-black discrimination as a widespread practice that is qualitatively hard to detect, solid statistics are there to interpret, and they do not lie. Government assistance may not necessarily imply a “constructed black inferiority,” or a self-fulfilling prophesy when the effects of past and current discrimination have repeatedly been proven as a fact that is hard to ignore. That is because in this case compensatory policies guarantee that African Americans receive equal treatment under law.

The Case against Terminating Preferential Treatment in Education

To the extent that “race-norming” in college admissions and evaluation requires comparatively lower performance levels from the favored student communities who might eventually be discouraged from acquiring higher competitive skills, Steele may not be the first to observe this potential problem, notably among African Americans. Research on the academic outcomes of students receiving preferential treatment demonstrated that the latter, by virtue of the stereotype with which it is associated alone, causes considerable pressure on them that might ultimately lead to a poor academic experience (Sander & Taylor, 2012; Leek, 2016). It has also been demonstrated that, in general, students admitted on affirmative action plans end up “reducing work effort,” knowing that they will be assisted anyway (Onuoha, 2018). What Steele fails to account for, however, is the impact of social and cultural problems that are associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, such as poor academic preparation and family disintegration from which sizeable numbers of African American are found to suffer most compared to other minorities.

In fact, several studies on African American academic performance in multiethnic college environments point to the vital importance of the socioeconomic background of affirmative action students in shaping the quality of their academic experience (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; West & Smiley, 2012). In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a 1987 ethnographic study on the impact of race and class on economic and academic achievement, sociologist William J. Wilson suggests that racial discrimination could not alone explain the comparatively higher poverty rates among African Americans. He argues that poor educational preparation and dysfunctional families, among several other problems affecting the African American community, are more detrimental to the community’s overall advancement.

The recent literature on the subject seems to validate Wilson’s thesis. In fact, research shows that about 78% of African Americans born in the eighties were raised in relative poverty where access to quality education was not possible for a majority of them (Sharkey, 2009). Receiving poor schooling since their early age, large numbers of African Americans continue to be deprived from access to better academic institutions throughout their young adult life. The process of academic ill-preparation will eventually affect their performance in college despite the assistance they receive under preferential plans.

Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are all the more victims to deprivation as the latter is persistently reproduced to the end of their academic journey. Academic disadvantage becomes even more perceptible when it eventually translates into a substantial achievement gap between them and students from more favorable socioeconomic backgrounds. In *Multicultural Education* (Banks & Banks, 2010), educationists James and McGee Banks explain the domino effect involved in this process of accumulation of impediments on African American students academic achievement by observing that “students in low-income [African American] communities [...] experience a less rigorous academic curriculum, have inadequate material

and intellectual resources, are sorted into lower academic tracks, and are overrepresented in special education and vocational programs” (p. 188).

The Banks, among several other eminent educationists,⁵ explain the persistent academic achievement gap between African American students and students from other ethnicities in systemic terms. They report the existence of specific discriminatory practices which continue to hinder academic achievement among them, leading to an even wider socioeconomic divide that is difficult to shore up with time given the increased backlash against preferential policies over the past few years. The latter has been the only remaining hope for the disadvantaged fringes of African Americans to succeed their integration into the academic and economic mainstream. As Banks and Banks (2010) observed, “American society has perpetuated the image of young, dark-skinned men as problem [...] or jail-bound youth [...] regardless of their socioeconomic background. These perceptions affect their academic and career paths” (p. 189).

A less commonly discussed aspect of African American experience on campus and whose impact Shelby Steele seems to have constantly ignored, and which is demonstrated to encourage African American students to “underachieve,” is the harsh (and discriminatory) treatment of this community by teaching staff and administration. For despite the dramatic demographic transformation in the student population across US universities (white students are in turn becoming a minority), racial prejudice against dark-skinned students have remained much the same on many campuses. For example, African American students report to be suffering stricter disciplinary measures for transgressions similar to those made by white students, which encourage many to drop out, or to give up effort to have higher scores. This was a major finding by Skiba et al. (2011) who argued for the existence of “empirical evidence for disproportional school discipline by race” (p. 104). They conclude that this “exclusionary discipline” seriously affects “educational success” and therefore needs to be addressed in future research (p. 87). So whether African American students are today less isolated remains a highly debatable issue of which uncompromising conservative scholars such as Shelby Steele need to be aware.

It may be safe to assume that preferential policies at this stage have failed to meet their original goals. As their critics have consistently pointed to their failure to advance the interests of those members of the African American community who are really in need of assistance, preferential programs might in fact better be reformed. However, terminating preferential programs at a time when anti-black racism and discrimination are still widespread may not be the right decision to make. Research shows that African Americans are still affected by high unemployment rates and poor academic preparation. Racial profiling has been proven to affect African American job applicants while discrimination against students from this community in terms of discipline, counseling, and curriculum quality has destined them to either drop out or perform poorly.

Conclusion

By encouraging preferential programs, the federal government and several universities across the US are not only deepening the racial divide, but are also threatening the very foundations of American liberal democracy. This was Shelby Steele’s major postulate in his latest book and a main assumption throughout his earlier works. Describing how preferential policies may be undermining America’s commitment to justice and equality, he warns against how continuing to pursue compensatory programs threatens to polarize the public even further as these programs are becoming increasingly controversial.⁶

At the heart of this ideological polarization, Steele argues, is the liberal/conservative controversy on ethnic diversity. While liberal policymakers advocate the need for American colleges and companies to sustain an ethnically diverse population as a reflection of the changing demographic reality of the country, conservatives consider this demand as a threat not only to equal opportunity and social justice, but also to the very communities that these diversification policies are meant to help.

In Steele’s view, one of the most counter-productive incentives these policies have presented for minorities is the total lack of interest to achieve higher standards of academic and economic achievement. While the value of talent and skill has in recent decades dramatically increased, many minorities (especially African Americans), Steele claims, have made very little effort to improve their competitiveness in the job market, and so they have had comparatively low-income rates. Never is the structure of incentives created under these liberal policy choices empirically considered or questioned as liberal decision-makers blindly assume that talent and skill are equally distributed among ethnic communities, which is, according to Steele, an enduring illusion.

Steele’s critics have criticized him for being “elitist, isolated, out of touch with his people” (Guthmann, 2006, n.p.). This paper, however, argues that aspects of his polarization theory has merits and address one of

⁵ See, for example, J. D. Taliaferro & J. T. DeCuir-Gunby, “African American educators’ perspectives on the advanced placement opportunity gap,” *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education* 40, n. 2 (2009): 164-185.

⁶ See, for example, Barbara A. Perry, *The Michigan Affirmative Action Cases* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

America's long-lasting policy issues, notably the compensation of African Americans for historical injustice. But although his arguments about the psychological and cultural effects of preferential treatment on these communities' academic and economic performance might be relatively sound, he fails to provide solutions for the nation to go about the persistence of anti-black racism. Most importantly, he hardly discusses the structures of white privilege, unlike other eminent scholars of race who share his ideological convictions, such as Derrick Bell and Theodore Shaw.

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