Volume 13 | Issue 1   Article 6

2020

The Author's Reflections on *No B.S. (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear about Black People*

Ivory A. Toldson
Howard University, itoldson@howard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/numeracy

Part of the Applied Behavior Analysis Commons, Applied Statistics Commons, and the Social Policy Commons

Recommended Citation

The Author's Reflections on *No B.S. (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear about Black People*

Abstract

Toldson, Ivory. A. 2019. *No BS (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear About Black People* (Boston, MA: Brill-Sense) 194 pp. ISBN 978-9004397026.

This essay provides an introduction to *No BS (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear About Black People*. In the essay, the author discusses how cynical views about the educational potential of Black children motivated him to write a book that challenges negative statistics. The essay also outlines the harmful consequences of using bad stats, or BS, and offers suggestion for how to use data in a more prudent and effective manner. The piece concludes with an excerpt from the book.

Keywords

statistics, statistical literacy, race

Creative Commons License

Cover Page Footnote

Ivory A. Toldson is a professor of Counseling Psychology at Howard University, the president of Quality Education for Minorities, the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Negro Education*, and executive editor of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Research*, published by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc. Previously, he was appointed by President Barack Obama to be the executive director of the *White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities*.

In 2008, I published "Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-age African-American Males" for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Using data from *Health Behavior in School-age Children* (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services et al. 2001), *National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement* (U.S. Dept. of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006), *National Survey of America's Families* (Urban Institute and Child Trends 2007), and *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services et al. 2007), I conducted research on how to spur academic success among African-American males.

Using multiple linear regression, multivariate analysis of variance, structural equation modeling, and a series of other statistical approaches, I derived solution-driven findings that had implications for educational policy and practice. I assembled a panel of peer-reviewers to provide feedback and uphold the integrity of findings. I was excited about the results, because they provided practical solutions for schools, family, and communities.

However, I quickly learned that many educators could not appreciate the solutions because they bought into a hopeless narrative. And, their lost hope was rooted in negative statistics—sharp data points that I began to call "BS" or bad stats. Examples include: "Black boys are a dying breed," "There are more Black men in prison than college," "Black children fail because single mothers raise them," and "Black students don't read."

As I began to conduct research on these points, I found that most of these negative statistics were incorrect, poorly contextualized, or incomplete. It also seemed like many scholars and think tanks that published these statistics were attempting to sell problems rather than find solutions. The dialogue that I had with many about BS motivated me to write *No BS (Bad Stats)*.

The Problem with BS

Educators and policymakers need to know the pitfalls of education statistics and data because bad stats engender implicit biases and explicit racism. Earlier this year, a study found that White teachers were three times more negative with Black students (Battey et al. 2018). A lot of teachers have negative perceptions of Black students because we continue to use the BS to shape the narrative and, ultimately, the fate of Black children who just need a good education.

Even the well-intended stats we repeat, without context, to support "at-risk students," address the "achievement gap" and combat the "school to prison pipeline" rob Black children of their humanity by placing "others" as a standard for their success and reducing their lived experiences to an ominous number.

Educators with negative perceptions of Black students believe the BS about them, and therefore, they are incapable of seeing the beauty inside of a Black child. All they see is a number.

Behind every number, there's a person; behind every person, there's a story; and behind every story, there's a solution.

About a decade ago, at an academic conference, I watched a White researcher demonstrate a new technique to visualize data. He collected longitudinal data from poor people in Baltimore, MD. The interactive chart he presented expanded like a balloon to represent the correlation between age and exposure to violence.

After demonstrating the effect, in jest, he said "That was pretty cool, let's do it again."

The mostly White audience laughed.

Callously, albeit unwittingly, these educated men and women were laughing at Black pain. Black lives were converted to numbers and manipulated, enabling a disturbing and dangerous measure of aloofness to their experience.

Within the proper context, numbers can help us understand complex situations. However, in education and human sciences, numbers are routinely misused.

Too often, people use numbers to gain power over others. Numbers are used to classify, create social hierarchies, and penalize, when they should be used to plot a path for those that need help.

In *No BS*, I talk about the importance of using good data, thoughtful analysis, and a compassionate understanding to uplift Black students.

1) *Good data*: Good data is comprehensive and holistic and provides a complete picture of important issues. Many sources, most of which are publicly accessible, can help us develop a comprehensive picture. Good data is open to multiple interpretations. BS masquerade as interpretation. Good data provide the necessary pieces of information to assemble into a complete picture of the issue and lends itself to data storytelling. After gathering good data, the next step is to provide a thoughtful analysis.

2) *Thoughtful analysis*: A thoughtful analysis requires a subjective connection to the data. Several analytics strategies can lead to more meaningful conclusions about the data. Within-group, as opposed to between-group analysis, enables the research to expand and enrich the range of findings for the research population. The achievement gap, for instance, results from between-group analyses that merely measure statistical differences between two races on an indicator of achievement. This short-sighted view typically positions White achievement levels as a standard for Black students to attain and masks resilience and unexpected levels of success among Black students.

3) *Compassionate understanding*: Ignorance is a crutch. Educators who lack compassion often use declarative sentences that begin with, "I don't understand." For example, "I don't understand why he can't get to school on time." Educators use "I don't understand" statements to deflect attention away from their own deficiencies or insecurities. Compassionate educators seek to understand. More often than not, they will say, "Help me understand...," to open the dialogue necessary to find the means to help students, families, and communities.

Principally, I wrote *No BS* because I want people to believe in Black students' potential. However, poorly conceived statistics about the state of Black people are perpetuating false narratives and cultivating bias. BS is widespread in educational settings because educators want quick and easy ways to understand long-standing and complex issues. Beyond debunking the BS, I wrote this book because I want people to question negative statistics, which often present as provocative soundbites, and seek a better and more nuanced perspective of educational issues. As I state in the final chapter of the book, "Black students need us to tell them about their potential to be great, rather than warn them of their risks for failure."

Excerpt from *No BS*[1]

We don't need to close the Black-White achievement gap; we need to deconstruct it.

***

Soul food didn't come from emulating White cooks; Jazz, rock-n-roll, and hip hop didn't come from emulating White musicians; and good Black stats won't come from emulating White scholars. WARNING: I cook my research in a rusty pot, with lots of spice, and serve it ostentatiously on two turntables and a mixer. You can acquire a taste for my tone, or let it offend your sensibilities. I'mma be steadfast with my hustle until they start emulating me.

NUMBERS ARE PEOPLE:
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

My 4th grade teacher labeled me a slow learner. I frequently daydreamed and had difficulties paying attention in class. Learning mathematics was especially difficult because I would create characters and stories from the numbers.

---

[1] pp. 3–5.

I assigned every number a gender and personality. The number one was a baby girl, 2 was a young boy, 3 was a young boy, 4 was a girl, 5 was a boy, 6 was a teenage girl, 7 was a teenage girl, 8 was a man, 9 was a woman, and the number 10 was a man. All of my numbers had a story and relationships with each other, and their stories became more elaborate each day. Eventually, I learned to suppress this peculiar impulse, so I could more efficiently learn math at the pace required in traditional schools.

Today, researchers routinely separate numbers from people. We use deficits statistics, test scores, achievement gaps, graduation rates, and school ratings, without a humanistic interpretation. We also create false dichotomies between qualitative and quantitative research. However, my pattern of relating to numbers as a slow-learning elementary school student was consistent with African-centered learning. In ancient Kemet (Egypt), for example, people learned how to multiply based on one number's relationship to another, rather than by using multiplication tables (Akua 2012).

When conducting research on black communities in Philadelphia, W.E.B. Du Bois did more than introduce new research methods. He introduced a new philosophy of research as an integrative and immersive experience, and using people to represent numbers, rather than numbers to represent people. Every number is associated with human characteristics that researchers should not ignore. Behind every statistic, there is a person with dreams, aspirations, fears, and needs. Separating numbers from people allows people to impress people without conscience or consequence.

> What about to be seen as a person with a name, then POOF, a statistic and to many a shame.
> - Asa Fludd, 11th grader, from *Breaking Barriers* (Toldson 2008)

In 2008, I unwittingly conducted Duboisian-style community participatory research. Through happenstance, I was a judge for an essay contest for young Black males, called "A Mile in My Shoes" while conducting statistical analyses of large data sets for my "Breaking Barriers" research on Black males (Toldson 2008; Caldwell et al. 2009). While conducting multivariate analysis to understand the lives and experiences of Black males who were doing well in school, and those who are not, I became enamored with the writings of the young Black males who participated in the writing contest. The young Black males wrote about their experiences with parents, teachers, friends, and feelings about their communities and futures. Their perspectives helped me to contextualize my findings related to household composition, peer influences, health behaviors, and perceptions of school.

For one analysis, I used Health Behaviors in School-age Children (HBSC) to examine a wide range of factors that could directly or indirectly measure emotional well-being and self-esteem, including measures of self-worth, psychomotor

stressors, and use of psychotropic medication. Using stepwise multiple regression analysis, I found that three factors demonstrated a significant relationship with academic achievement in Black males: (a) quality-of-life, (b) tired in the morning and (c) feeling lonely. The analysis demonstrated that quality of life and academic achievement were positively correlated. The opposite was true of feeling tired in the morning. Black male students who reported being more frequently tired in the morning reported lower levels of academic performance (Toldson 2008).

Admittedly, beyond the statistical evidence, I did not initially fully comprehend the relationship between being tired in the morning and academic performance among young Black males. However, while reading an essay from "A Mile in My Shoes," I read:

> I think sometimes we don't get enough sleep and can't stay up during class, which affects how much information you get from the teacher. From that you don't take very good notes. Then, you study bad notes and have the wrong information. Now, you take a test and get a bad grade. That gives people further reason to believe that we are dumb and don't know anything. - Brian Bunkley, 8th Grade, from *Breaking Barriers* (Toldson 2008)

This insightful analysis helped me, as a researcher, to "connect the dots" beyond the x and y coordinates of a correlation plot. Mr. Bunkley helped me to understand a pattern which can originate from home and community disorganization, to a young Black male being unfairly stereotyped at the school by people who are looking for "further reason" to believe that Black students are academically inept. In other words, Mr. Bunkley spoke to the confirmation biases that people use who are hypersensitive to an "achievement gap."

"Academic achievement" is a social construct. Indicators of academic achievement are meaningless without their relationship to positive life outcomes. Thus, in theory, indicators of academic achievement (like test scores and grades) should predict positive life outcomes. However, in practice, indicators of academic achievement "determine" positive life outcomes.

This is a problem because we can never know if the academic "things" we measure have any real relationship to positive life outcomes. Educators and parents fixate more on "things," like test scores and grades, and neglect fundamental social, developmental, and educational needs that are more important than the "things" upon which we fixate.

The academic achievement "gap" is also a social construct. In theory, we use indicators of the academic achievement gap to "predict" social inequities. However, in practice, we use indicators of the academic achievement gap to help oppressors "create" social inequities. This is a problem.

Reprinted with permission.

References

Akua, Chike. *Education for Transformation: The Keys to Releasing the Genius of African American Students.* Conyers, GA: Imani Enterprises.

Battey, Dan, Luis A. Leyva, Immanuel Williams, Victoria A. Belizario, Rachel Greco, and Roshni Shah. 2018. "Racial (Mis)Match in Middle School Mathematics Classrooms: Relational Interactions as a Racialized Mechanism." *Harvard Educational Review* 88(4): 455-482. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-88.4.455

Caldwell, Leon D., Abigail A. Sewell, Nieika Parks, and Ivory A. Toldson. 2009. "Guest Editorial: Before the Bell Rings: Implementing Coordinated School Health Models to Influence the Academic Achievement of African American Males." *Journal of Negro Education* 78(3): 204-215.

Toldson, Ivory A. 2008. *Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-Age African-American Males.* Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

Toldson, Ivory A. 2019. *No BS (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear About Black People*. Boston, MA: Brill-Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004397040_010

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. 2001. "Health Behavior in School-aged Children Survey, 1997-98." [Computer file], ORC Macro (Macro International Inc.) [producer], Calverton, Maryland.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Studies. 2007. "National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2006." [Computer file]. ICPSR21240-v3, Research Triangle Institute [producer], Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2006. "National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement 2005." [Computer file] Conducted by U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. ICPSR04429 -v1, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producer and distributor], Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Urban Institute and Child Trends. 2007. "National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), 2002." [Computer file]. ICPSR04582-v1, Westat [producer], Washington, D.C.