Department of Applied Psychology

Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development

New York University

APSY-GE 2345

Academic Achievement Gaps

Psychological Dimensions

Fall 2015

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## Catalog Description

Focuses on a psychological understanding the central issues leading to academic achievement gaps between different social groups in America. Topics include: biological, structural, cultural, and psychological factors in gaps between African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Caucasians in terms of test and school performance; gender differences in math and science achievement; and policy and educational interventions shown to reduce achievement gaps. There will be an emphasis on African Americans and to some extent Latinos because there’s been more written on this topic, and because the gap for these populations is so consequential. There will also be an emphasis on psychological processes and intervention.

## Objectives

Students should be able to: (a) describe important facts and debates about the various achievement gaps in American education; (b) demonstrate knowledge of the proposed causes and social implications of the gaps, including psychological, social, and cultural factors; (c) contrast the different explanations for gender and ethnic gaps in performance; (d) demonstrate the ability to critically evaluate proposals that address the gaps; and (e) produce a genuine piece of work valuable to the larger community with relevance for closing gaps.

## Course Structure

This is a seminar/lecture/field experiential course designed not only to help you understanding achievement gaps, but also to develop your skills at conducting and evaluating research, thinking, writing, speaking, and researching in an arena central to human achievement. Each week, class time will be devoted to focused discussion of the week’s readings, professor lecture, and oral reports by students.

**Resident Expert**

Your role in this course is to become conversant in the general area of achievement gaps, particularly from the psychological perspective. But you will also be required to become the resident expert on one sub-area that is interesting to you. For example, my sub-area is the social psychology of achievement and how it relates to the gap—things like stereotypes, expectations, and group norms. That means I will be a resident expert on that topic. Your job is to decide early on the area of psychology (related to achievement gaps) in which you want to develop expertise. The achievement gap is such a broad and multifaceted phenomenon that the possibilities are pretty endless. Let me give you a few examples:

1. Expert on psychological interventions that reduce gaps
2. Expert on gender gaps—why girls seem to be less interested and confident in math and science than boys and what we can do about this
3. Expert on early childhood education
4. Expert on Teacher Effectiveness (what makes some teachers so good; and what can we learn from them)
5. Expert on the effect of teacher and expectations on performance and achievement
6. Expert on the educational experiences of LGBTQ individuals and the academic challenges they face
7. Expert on stress
8. Expert on noncognitive skills, social intelligence, self-discipline
9. Expert on Positive Psychology and Learning
10. Expert on psychological barriers to literacy
11. Expert on self esteem and self concept and relation to achievement
12. Expert on the effects of poverty on school outcomes
13. Expert on health, nutrition and fitness and academic achievement
14. Expert on the school to prison pipeline
15. Expert on Alternative schools (Montessori, free schools, Charter schools)
16. Expert on Culture (e.g. African American; Latino, Asian, American) and Schooling
17. Expert on relevant topic of your choice (must have a psychological component and be approved by me)

Although we will read the same readings, each of you will do much independent reading on this narrower specialty topic, and create a bibliography with my help. In this way, each of you becomes a very important collaborator in creating a more vibrant, well-informed collective, than if we all read the same reading list. The key will be for you to find something that draws on your interests and talents and that can sustain your interests over time. **You should establish your specialty by the third week of class.**

## Weekly Assignments

I will assign about 5 brief papers addressing a “burning question of the week” around which I will frame the lecture and discussion. Other weeks we will have a field trip to schools that are successfully closing the gap and have a meeting with the teachers/administration and therefore won’t have a question. We will also have guest speakers.

**Field Project:**

Early in the semester, you will find a school or setting on a front line of an important achievement gap. On Thursday September 15, we will have several representatives from the field who are doing amazing work. They will give a brief presentation. They have agreed to give you opportunities in their schools or programs, working with kids. You can also find your own placement, but it must be approved by me. I can also connect you with others who cannot come to class. You should try to visit the setting for a minimum of 10 hours.

**Oral Report**

Due Last Day of Class. 10 minute “TED TALK” should reflect the wisdom you have gained from the semester, incorporating wisdom learned from your fieldwork project, class and individual readings, lectures and discussions. We will present orally on this project during finals week.

## Final Project

1. A 10- to 15-page research proposal testing a hypothesis of interest to you about the achievement gap. This should be a highly refined distillation of your weekly writings over the semester modeled after a grant proposal, with background literature, description of your proposed methods, sampling considerations, and so on. This proposal should be real, suitable for submission for funding.

2. Conduct in depth analysis of your field visit—an actual school, classroom teacher, or principal who is having success in addressing the achievement gap: write your voluminous notes into a magazine article to be submitted to Education Leadership or Ed Week

3. Track down and interview or do study of someone discussed in the Thernstrom Book that deserves a second look/e.g., Gregory Hodge/Raif Esquith/ David Levin. Also, Track down someone from Union City (Improbable Scholars).

4.  Write an Op Ed to be submitted to the New York Times on the Achievement Gap and an important consideration the next President must be aware of  (Note: to receive a grade the Op Ed must be ready for submission and hopefully submitted).

5. Design an intervention in a school and propose it in an actual proposal to Spencer or National Science Foundation  (Note: to receive a grade the Proposal must be suitable for submission though not necessarily submitted).

6. Participate in conducting school based research.  I can help you find a project--there are many available and describe in a brief paper the methods and results of the study (the study must be real)

7. Write a detailed letter, with references, to your representative on a policy that your research reveals is psychologically problematic and suggest an improvement.

8. Write a book quality chapter (20 pages) describing an intervention (e.g, cooperative learning) its success rate for closing gaps along with instructions for teachers on how to implement it.

9. The Miss A Project: Interview/observe the best first grade teacher you can find. Gather questions from a beginning first grade teacher, and create a “mentoring chain”

Connecting the novice with the expert, distill Q&A into a publishable book chapter that connects expert advice to psychological concepts.

**Required Books:**

1. Alexander, M. (2010) *The New Jim Crow*

2. Thernstrom, A. & Thernstrom, S (2003). *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Learning Gap.*

3. Kirp, D. (2013). *Improbable Scholars.* Oxford.

5. Other Readings/Articles Distributed by Professor

**Recommended Books for Background Reading and Consultation**

1. Ceci, S. & Williams, W. (2007). *Why are There So Few Women in Science?* APA.
2. Jencks, C. & Phillips, M. (1998). *The Black White Test Score Gap.* Brookings.
3. *Noguera, P. (2003) City Schools and The American Dream*
4. *Steele, C. M. (2010). Whistling Vivaldi and other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect us*
5. *Tough, Paul (2012). How Children Succeed*
6. *Rothstein R. (2004). Class and Schools*
7. Sharkey, P. (2013)  *Stuck in Place*
8. Ripley, A. (2013). *The Smartest Kids in the World*

**Movies to Watch:**

*Waiting for Superman*

*American Promise*

*Schools that Change Communities*

*The Marva Collins Story*

*Freedom Writers*

**Grading:**

Class attendance and active participation = 25%

Discussion Papers and questions for speakers = 25%

Final TED talk Report of course work = 25%

Final project write-up = 25%

***Class Schedule/Reading Assignments to be done before class (Schedule subject to change)***

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Day Date | Topic | Read | What’s Due?  & point value |
| All non-book readings will be distributed by email one week prior to class. |  |  |  |

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| 1. 1 | 9/8 | Introduction: Overview, Mechanics  Expectations, Vision  Getting Outraged about Pipeline to Prison  The “Fundamental Achievement Gap” | **READ**  New Jim Crow  Entire book | **WRITE/WATCH** |
| 1. 2 | 9/15 | Selecting a problem and Field Experience  Guests:  David penberg | New Jim Crow  Entire book | Intake paper due  5pts |
| 1. 5 | 9/22 | The Nature and Nurture of Intelligence  Aronson Demonstrates TED Talk  Discussion: Nurturing Intelligence | No Excuses  Chapters 1-6  Nisbett et al. 2013 | **Watch the movie Waiting for Superman** |
| 1. 8 | 9/29 | No Class | Finish No Excuses  KIPP College Completion Data | Paper Due: My specialty and why I chose it |
| 1. 9 | 10/6 | Teacher Quality  Can we Build Better Teachers and is that the Issue? | Review Teacher Quality in No Excuses; Pedersen; Fallon; Pianta; Ripley: Bad Teacher | Discuss your Specialty in Class a |
| 1. 11 | 10/13 | The Socioemotional Self in Educational Psychology: Review of Psychological Constructs Useful For  Understanding Achievement Gaps; The LGBTQ experience | Stephanie Jones; Cohen Self-affirmation; Aronson & Steele  TBD | **Watch movie:**  **American Promise** |
| 1. 15 | 10/20 | The predicament of social identity | Yeager; Cohen & Steele  Aronson; Walton; Dweck; Fryer: Acting White; Aronson & Inzlicht | Paper: How did Neil De Grasse Tyson overcome Stereotype Threat?  5 points |
| 1. 17 | 10/27 | The promise of social identity | Oyserman; Identity Based Motivation; Chris Bryan; Carla o’connor |  |
| 1. 18 | 11/3 | TBA | **TBA** | TBA |
|  | 11/10 | Character Development: Grit, Growth mindset, mindfulness | Paul Tough, Duckworth, Mindfulness readings; Aronson et al; |  |
| 1. 21 | 11/17 | Lessons from Alternative Schools | Peter Gray: Free Schooling from Atlantic  Science Article on Montessori | Paper outlining final project and Ted Talk due  5 points |
| 1. 23 | 11/24 | **No Class: Happy Thanksgiving** | Kirp, Improbable Scholars entire book |  |
| 1. 25 | 12/1 | Gap Closing in Public Schools  Closing the income-achievement gap: Lessons from America’s best school | You Should be reading in your own bibliography on your specialty | Watch Schools that Change Communities Work on final project and talk |
| 1. 26 | 12/8 | TED TALKS & Summing Up | How to give a “TED” talk You | Work on final project and Talk |
| 1. 28 | 12/15 | TED TALKS & Summing Up |  | Final Project Write Up  Due on 12/21 |

***Course Policies***

*You are expected to attend class and to show up on time, and participate in discussions and class activities. No laptops,* tablets, or phones are to be used during class, unless the class requires it for that day. Recent research suggests that note-taking by writing, rather than by typing, improves conceptual learning (see Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). Additionally, with laptops & tablets, some students repeatedly distract themselves and others by viewing non-course material during class. Therefore, use of laptops, tablets and phones is prohibited during class time. Put your phone away and have it either off or set to airplane mode (even simply vibrating is a distraction to you). We understand that you may have legitimate reasons for needing to take notes on your device. If you feel your note taking will suffer without such a device, you can apply to Professor Aronson for special permission. If you need to send a message to someone, please excuse yourself and leave the room to do it. The difference in engagement and learning between classes with and without this policy is striking.

2. Late work will be accepted only with a valid explanation and documentation (e.g., a note from a Doctor, etc.).

***Academic Integrity***

Cheating will not be tolerated in this course. According to Steinhardt policy (see <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/policies/academic_integrity>) cheating consists of:

* Cheat on an exam;
* Submit the same work for two different courses without prior permission from your professors;
* Receive help on a take-home examination that calls for independent work;
* Plagiarize.

Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud; in a community of scholars—whose members are teaching, learning, and discovering knowledge—plagiarism cannot be tolerated.

Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score and/or other materials, which are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following:

* Copy verbatim from a book, an article or other media;
* Download documents from the Internet;
* Purchase documents;
* Report from other's oral work;
* Paraphrase or restate someone else's facts, analysis and/or conclusions;
* Copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you

***Students with Disabilities***

As per Steinhardt policy: Any student attending NYU needing an accommodation due to a chronic, psychological, visual, hearing, mobility and/or learning disability should register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212 998-4980, 726 Broadway, Second Floor. In addition please come to me if you require special assistance or accommodations for this course.