ABSTRACT: **Purpose:** A survey was conducted to examine recognition by individuals from different cultures and age groups of proverbs drawn from African American culture. **Method:** A survey containing a list of 39 proverbs was distributed in three venues. A total of 361 responses were received, for a response rate of 28%. Respondents were asked to put a check next to the proverbs they recognized. The survey also asked respondents to provide the following demographic information: age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of education, occupation, place of birth, and whether they were native English speakers. **Results:** Analysis revealed that the total number of proverbs recognized by African Americans was significantly greater than the total recognized by White Americans. Another relevant variable proved to be age: The youngest cohort (ages 19–32) of both African Americans and White Americans recognized significantly fewer proverbs than the older individuals in their racial/ethnic groups. **Conclusion:** Other studies have shown that the familiarity of a specific proverb may influence an individual's ability to provide an accurate interpretation. This survey demonstrated that the familiarity of specific proverbs varies according to an individual's cultural background and age. These findings suggest that cultural background and age may be factors leading to bias in scoring standardized tests for language or cognition that include proverb interpretation. **KEY WORDS:** African Americans, bias, culture, proverbs

Cultural and Generational Factors Influencing Proverb Recognition

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Proverbs have been described as “short statements that seem to express ageless wisdom or truths and that contain some element of English poetry—for example, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, parallelism, imagery, and metaphor” (Prahlad, 1996, p. 33). Proverbs have long been a subject of interest to many disciplines, including anthropologists, psychiatrists, neuropsychologists, and psycholinguists (Gibbs & Beitel, 1995). They have been used to test people’s intelligence and personality and to provide differential diagnoses, but in the field of speech-language pathology, their use (and that of other types of figurative language) has been as a measure of abstract thinking, and therefore an indicator of cognitive ability. Although a great deal of work has been done in various disciplines to analyze both the performance of individuals with disorders and that of the general population on tests involving proverbs, many researchers agree that methods for selecting proverbs and analyzing the results have not yet been empirically defined (Gibbs & Beitel, 1995; Van Lancker, 1990).

Cultural or world knowledge, as well as abstract reasoning, language competence, and general intelligence, are considered to be underlying abilities for comprehending figurative language (Nippold, Uhden, & Schwarz, 1997; Qualls & Harris, 2003). However, familiarity with specific expressions is more culturally dependent than other aspects of language. Proverbs are vehicles of culture in that they express “well-known truths, social norms, or moral concerns” (Gibbs & Beitel, 1995, p. 134) or “shared beliefs, values, and wisdom of a society” (Nippold & Haq, 1996, p. 166). In the African American community, for example, proverbs are part of an oral tradition arising from African cultural–linguistic patterns and are used to educate the younger generation (Smitherman, 1977).

The past few decades have witnessed a growing acknowledgment that ethnocultural differences have an impact on the interpretation of standardized tests. Molrine and Pierce (2002) discussed studies that suggested that “cultural appropriateness of test items, language of choice for test
stimuli presentation, and scoring practices that take into account the patient’s language or dialect will all affect the patient’s performance profile of deficits and strengths” (p. 141). Molrine and Pierce administered three widely used tests of aphasia to groups of non-brain–injured African Americans and White Americans and noted significant differences between the groups on three expressive language subtests due to differences in discourse style. Differences in African Americans’ discourse style have been characterized by Smitherman (1993) as “cultural vocabulary/influence and conversational tone” (p. 9). Most recently, Ellis (2009) noted that fewer than 15% of 116 articles published in two American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) journals from 1997 to 2007 reported the race/ethnicity of participants involved in research in adult neurogenics.

Administration and interpretation of standardized testing of second language (L2) learners of English is a well-documented concern for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) working with children in schools (ASHA, 2004; Roseberry-McKibbin, Brice, & O’Hanlon, 2005). However, it is less commonly addressed in the adult neurogenics literature despite similar challenges in test interpretation. Lack of familiarity with idioms and other types of figurative language in English, and the impossibility of understanding them by translating them into one’s native language, led Cooper (1999) to conclude that “L2 learners are at a distinct disadvantage in understanding L2 figurative expressions” (p. 234). Van Lancker (1990) went even further, reporting that study participants agreed on the non-literal meaning of proverbs only for familiar items in their native language.

It is therefore not surprising that the ability to recognize and accurately interpret the meaning of proverbs and other figurative language varies throughout the United States depending on a number of factors. The purpose of this investigation was to compare differences in the recognition-ability of a core group of proverbs by adults of different ethnocultural backgrounds and ages.

A person’s age, from childhood to the declining stages of life, has been shown to affect his or her ability to interpret figurative language. Studies have demonstrated the progression and decline of performance in comprehending figurative language throughout the life span in relation to such factors as executive function, working memory, reading level, and years of formal education (Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold et al., 1997; Qualls & Harris, 2003; Ulatowska, Chapman, & Johnson, 1995). Uekermann, Thoma, and Daum (2008) found that even though the older group in their study had greater recognition of proverbs, their comprehension was more concrete than middle-aged and younger groups.

Researchers have also examined how variations of the figurative language stimulus (i.e., familiarity, concreteness, syntactic complexity, figurative language type) affect comprehension or interpretation of figurative language among groups of individuals with language or cognitive disorders such as aphasia, right-hemisphere damage, and Alzheimer’s disease (Brundage, 1996; Brundage & Brookshire, 1995; Chapman et al., 1997; Qualls & Harris, 2003; Tompkins, Boada, & McGarry, 1992; Ulatowska et al., 1995).

Of the variables listed above, familiarity with proverbs or other forms of figurative language has frequently proven to be a factor in differentiating performance in studies of proverb interpretation. Van Lancker (1990) believed that lack of attention to an individual’s familiarity with the proverbs in widely used proverb tests used to assess cognition is a major weakness.

In a study of reading proverbs, Katz and Ferretti (2001) demonstrated the impact of familiarity on the speed of processing. Using a self-paced window, normal study participants (i.e., native English-speaking psychology undergraduates) began to process familiar proverbs by the second word, whereas they could not resolve unfamiliar proverbs until the reading of the next sentence.

Chapman et al. (1997) investigated the hypothesis that familiar proverbs are processed automatically as a single unit, using semantic memory, whereas unfamiliar proverbs require working memory and analysis. In their study comparing the performance of normal individuals to that of individuals with left-hemisphere damage and with Alzheimer’s disease, they found a significant effect of familiar versus unfamiliar proverbs across all three groups. In a previous study, Ulatowska et al. (1995) employed a similar design examining familiarity in a spontaneous interpretation and multiple-choice task with normal individuals and individuals with left-hemisphere damage in various age categories, including the old-elderly. Their results demonstrated differences in mean score for familiar versus unfamiliar proverbs in both response types, although significance was not reported. The researchers focused primarily on differences in performance based on task type, with patients with left-hemisphere damage having difficulty with a spontaneous production task and the old-elderly having greater difficulty with multiple-choice selection.

Nippold and colleagues (Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold et al., 1997) examined developmental aspects of language and cognition as reflected by proverb interpretation from childhood throughout the life span. They coined the expression “metasemantic hypothesis” to characterize the language processing difference between unfamiliar expressions that require active analysis and familiar expressions that may be encoded “as a giant lexical unit to be learned holistically” (Nippold & Haq, 1996, p. 167). Nippold and Haq (1996) carefully controlled the selection of proverbs for syntax, length, familiarity, and concreteness. Interestingly, the authors found no significant difference between adolescents’ and adults’ ratings of familiarity or abstraction. However, in examining the performance of different age groups, the authors found that both familiarity and concreteness were significant factors affecting the performance of 5th and 8th graders compared to that of the older group of 11th graders. Nippold and Haq found that groups of 5th, 8th, and 11th graders were significantly different in their comprehension of 32 proverbs and that familiarity was a significant factor for 5th and 8th graders but not 11th graders. They concluded that stronger performance in proverb comprehension results from the development of analogical reasoning that continues from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. The authors attributed the higher scores on familiar proverbs as support for the hypothesis...
that greater language experience increases the comprehension of proverbs.

Nippold et al. (1997) conducted a subsequent study examining proverb interpretation (rather than comprehension) in eight age groups: 13- and 16-year-olds and adults representing ages in each decade through the 70s. They scored written interpretations on a 1–3 rating scale for 24 proverbs embedded in a written story context. After minimizing familiarity as a variable through a preliminary rating process, their results revealed that only the 13-, 16-, and 20-year-olds were affected by concreteness, performing better on concrete proverbs than abstract ones. A downward trend in performance was noted in adults in their 60s, which became significant in adults in their 70s. The authors noted that greater formal education was correlated with higher performance in all but one of the age groups.

Brundage (1996) examined proverb interpretation by individuals with probable Alzheimer’s disease, left-hemisphere damage, and right-hemisphere damage and found that familiarity of the proverbs resulted in a significant effect across all groups. An independent group of SLPs rated familiarity, as well as abstractness and syntactic complexity, of the stimulus items. No information about the age, geographic, or cultural diversity of the SLPs was provided. Brundage compared familiarity ratings by the SLPs with two of the groups and found 80% agreement on 23 of 24 proverbs by the group with right-hemisphere damage and 80% agreement on 17 of 24 proverbs by the group with probable Alzheimer’s disease. Thus, proverbs used in the familiar stimulus category were not necessarily familiar to all participants in the groups.

Although familiarity has been demonstrated to be an important factor in participants’ performance on proverb interpretation, the methodology for determining familiarity frequently has been based on the judgments of the researchers or of an independent group of raters rather than the participants themselves. Such judgments of familiarity do not appear to take into account potential differences in recognition of proverbs based on an individual’s cultural background (including race/ethnicity or geographic origin). The impact of cultural differences on proverb familiarity has received limited attention in the speech-language pathology literature, although researchers have called for greater cultural and linguistic diversity in the participants of studies involving figurative language (Nippold et al., 1997).

To date, only two studies have specifically examined the performance of African Americans with respect to figurative language. Citing literature on the cultural preference of African Americans to use metaphorical language, analogy, and inferential strategies, Ulatowska et al. (2001) developed tasks involving fables and proverbs in addition to administering standardized tests of aphasia to two groups: 36 African Americans with aphasia and 36 neurologically normal African Americans. The discourse tasks involved two methods of conveying a fable: One involved retelling a fable that was read aloud, and the other asked participants to describe the lesson from a fable that was represented in a picture sequence. The proverb task stimuli consisted of five proverbs that had been pilot tested with a group of African Americans for familiarity. The participants first provided a spontaneous narrative interpretation of each proverb; in a second task, they were asked to pick the best interpretation from a written list of choices. Fable and proverb interpretations were judged by five raters on abstractness/concreteness (i.e., generalized vs. textual). Proverbs were also scored for accuracy and completeness; the multiple-choice proverb task was scored differentially according to whether the participant selected the abstract or concrete meaning. Finally, a qualitative analysis was conducted to examine pragmatics and the presence of African American dialect.

Results of Ulatowska et al.’s (2001) analysis were based on t tests for differences between groups and on Pearson product–moment correlations for relationships among the different types of assessments (Western Aphasia Battery [Kertesz, 1982], ASHA Functional Assessment of Communication Skills for Adults [Frattali, Thompson, Holland, Wohl, & Ferketic, 1995], and discourse analysis). Although the scores for the group of neurologically normal African Americans were significantly higher than those for the group with aphasia, Ulatowska et al. found that sensitivity and specificity of the Western Aphasia Battery as a test of language impairment for African Americans may be problematic due to some participants with aphasia scoring at the normal range and some normal participants scoring below the cutoff for aphasia. The ASHA Functional Assessment of Communication Skills for Adults, a functional communication measure, also did not differentiate 29% of individuals with aphasia from the neurologically normal group. Ulatowska et al. noted that sensitivity and specificity issues may be attributed in part to the mild to moderate severity range of their sample of individuals with aphasia. In particular, ceiling effects may have limited analysis of the relationships.

The neurologically normal group performed better than the group with aphasia on one of the fables and on the spontaneous interpretation of proverbs (p < .001), but not on the second fable or the multiple-choice task. Ulatowska et al. (2001) attributed the lack of significance on the two tasks to the stimulus modality (multiple choice vs. auditory input and verbal response) and explicitness of one of the fables. In their discussion, the authors noted that tasks such as spontaneous interpretation involve cognitive skills, such as inferential strategies, as well as linguistic skills involving a complex vocabulary and syntax. They also observed that “the natural language from their socio-ethnic background was reflected in the production of rich contextual scenarios and biblically derived responses to convey the didactic meaning” (p. 47).

Noting that proverbs are considered to be highly diagnostic among groups with different types of neurogenic disorders, Ulatowska et al. (2001) called for culturally appropriate discourse tasks for African Americans with aphasia. The authors’ conclusion was that “stimuli, when carefully selected to represent familiar texts in the culture, may provide valuable supplemental measures for characterizing communicative competence in African Americans” (p. 47).

Qualls and Harris (2003) examined the impact of cognitive and linguistic variables such as reading ability, working memory, age, and figurative language type on the comprehension of figurative language by younger and older normal African American participants. Participants...
We developed a survey consisting of 39 proverbs drawn from African American culture. The primary resource for generating disability or neuroleptic drug use. Using a sample of 40 younger African Americans (M_age = 22) and 40 older African Americans (M_age = 63), the authors tested working memory and reading comprehension. In developing an experimental figurative language comprehension test containing 20 idioms, metaphors, and metonyms, Qualls and Harris employed a 3-point familiarity rating scale to have participants rate how often they had heard each figure of speech. Items that were rated as having low familiarity were eliminated from their analyses. Qualls and Harris then performed an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on comprehension of figurative language with measures for working memory and reading comprehension by age group. Although younger adults’ mean accuracy was higher than that of older adults, the older adults performed better than the younger adults on idioms and metonyms, and comparably on metaphors, when working memory and reading comprehension were controlled. Because Qualls and Harris excluded low-familiarity items from their analysis, they concluded that “these findings provide adult data supporting the notion that familiarity with specific figures of speech may influence performance on figurative language tests” (p. 98). However, they also noted that using a forced-choice task may have yielded different results than one involving spontaneous verbal production and reiterated that figurative language is culturally based; therefore, the selection of items may not reflect an individual participant’s figurative competence.

The studies by Ulatowska et al. (2001) and Qualls and Harris (2003) represent a preliminary examination of proverb familiarity in African Americans across a number of parameters, including participant groups, types of figurative language, and response modalities. However, few studies on proverb interpretation provide details about how stimulus items were selected or how judgments of familiar versus unfamiliar stimuli were reached. Another neglected aspect of investigation is the relationship of cultural background to the familiarity of proverbs. The paucity of information relative to different cultural groups’ recognition of proverbs led to the development and fielding of the present survey. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether there are differences between African Americans and White Americans as ethnocultural groups in their ability to recognize a set of proverbs. We wanted to answer the following research questions:

- Do African Americans and White Americans differ significantly in their recognition of proverbs drawn from African American culture?
- What demographic variables are significant factors in recognizing proverbs drawn from African American culture?

**METHOD**

**Instrument**

We developed a survey consisting of 39 proverbs drawn from African American culture. The primary resource for African American proverbs was an analysis of African American proverbs and their contexts by Prahlad (1996), who reported the function and meaning of proverbs he collected from informants spanning multiple generations. Many of the proverbs selected were also used by Brown (2003) as stimulus items for analyzing discourse in African Americans following stroke. We, a White American and an African American, selected the group of proverbs to represent a range of familiarity, from those considered to be widely recognized in African culture to those more likely to be recognized only by African Americans. Several other proverbs were added to include proverbs with religious content used by African Americans (e.g., “God doesn’t come when you need him, but he’s always right on time”).

The survey also included a section designed to gather the following demographic information from the respondents: age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of education, occupation, place of birth, and whether they were native English speakers. The survey was approved by Howard University’s Institutional Review Board; it is reproduced in the Appendix.

**Respondents**

Respondents were required to be at least 18 years of age. The survey was distributed to three groups; advance written permission to field the survey was received from the organizational leader of each group. The first venue was the annual convention of the National Black Association of Speech-Language and Hearing (NBASLH) in Washington, DC, where 97 attendees completed the survey (35% response rate). The second group was an African American congregation at a suburban Maryland church following a Sunday service; 114 attendees completed the survey (15% response rate, although some attendees were ineligible to participate in the survey because they were younger than 18 years). A third group was a professional organization in Washington, DC, where staff could access the survey through a link to Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) that was posted on the organization’s electronic announcement board; 150 staff members (60%) responded. In each case, the entire population of potential respondents was informed about the purpose of the study and was asked to complete the survey, but participation was optional. The participation rate of 28% may underestimate the actual percentage of eligible respondents because the number of eligible participants attending the church service (by excluding the children in attendance) was not available.

**Analysis**

We ran frequencies for the demographic variables of ethnocultural background, age, education, socioeconomic status, and geographic location as well as for recognition of each proverb. Participants who reported that English was not their primary language or who were not born in the United States were excluded from the sample due to the difficulties discussed earlier regarding nonnative English speakers interpreting figurative language. To examine differences in participants’ recognition of proverbs, the parametric $t$ test
was run. In addition, the nonparametric Mann Whitney U
ranked means test was run because of the possibility that
the distribution of the groups was not normal due to the
percentage difference in African American (70%) and White
American (30%) participants.

We divided age into quartiles for analysis and analyzed
differences between groups using a one-way analysis of
variance (ANOVA). States where respondents grew up were
aggregated into four geographic regions but were not ana-
yzed further due to lack of representation in the Western
region. Occupational status was not analyzed for several
reasons. Many of the categories had minimal representa-
tion, and they could not be aggregated in ways that would
result in a meaningful interpretation of results. Chi-squares
were performed on each proverb to determine whether there
was a significant difference between the number of African
Americans and the number of White Americans who recog-
nized the proverb.

**Demographic Information**

A total of 361 surveys were returned. Table 1 provides
a description of the respondents, including their gender,
race/ethnicity, whether they were born in the United States,
whether English was their primary language, and the state
in which they were raised. Table 2 provides respondents’
occupational level, and Table 3 shows their educational
level.

Respondents reported being raised in 34 states and
Puerto Rico. Because the survey was fielded in the greater
Washington DC area, the highest proportion of respondents
came from the south Atlantic and mid Atlantic regions
(e.g., Maryland, New York, Washington DC, Pennsylvania,
Virginia), with few respondents from western and mountain
region states (e.g., California, Oregon, Wyoming).

Respondents were asked to report their employment
and highest educational level. Employment was surveyed
using an 8-item scale developed by McAdoo (1997) that
was modified to be more reflective of employment in an
urban African American community (Brown, 2003). A 7-
level scale was used to report education. The survey was
fielded to groups that tended to have a high educational
level, including one group (NBASLH) where all respon-
dents had college or postgraduate education. Therefore,
the total population shown in Table 3 was skewed toward
a higher education level, with approximately 83% of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian, Alaska Native</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>94.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in the United States</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>94.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English is primary language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>State where primarily raised</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina, South Carolina</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas, Illinois, Michigan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama, Ohio</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California, Georgia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts, Missouri, Texas</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida, Wisconsin</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky, Mississippi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut, Kansas, Oregon, Tennessee</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, West Virginia, Wyoming</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Note.* Where multiple states are listed, the number indicates the number of individuals per state.
Table 2. Occupation of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not work outside home</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled worker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiskilled worker</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled worker</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical worker, sales worker,</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technician</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin worker, owner of</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small business, semiprofessional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager or owner of</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium-sized business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive or professional</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 3. Education of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 7 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed 7th, 8th, 9th grade</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of college or finished trade</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or business school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcollege graduate school</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of the t test showed a significant difference between the African American and White American groups in total proverbs recognized: \( t(220) = -7.942, p < .001 \). The mean number of proverbs recognized was 28.88 for the African Americans and 24.89 for the White Americans. The Mann Whitney U test was also significant at \( p < .001 \), with a mean rank of 190.41 for the African Americans and 102.28 for the White Americans.

An ANOVA was performed to determine if there were differences in the number of proverbs recognized by Africans Americans and by White Americans in the four age groups (a total of eight groups). The results showed an overall significant difference in mean scores between at least two groups: \( F(df = 7,318) = 28.897, p < .001 \). The Scheffe post hoc test was run to determine which groups were significantly different. The results of the Scheffe test showed that there was a significant difference between the youngest African American age group and the three older African American age groups. A significant difference was also found between the youngest White group and the three older White groups, but not between the youngest White group and the youngest African American age group. An additional finding was that there was no significant difference between the three older African American groups.

Chi-square tests revealed that 16 of the 39 proverbs were found to have a significant difference in recognition between the two groups \( (p < .05) \). However, it was unexpected that two proverbs were recognized by Whites significantly more than by African Americans (see Table 5). Some proverbs that had a low percentage of recognition (e.g., “A snake may change his skin, but he’s still a snake” and “You have to take the fat with the lean”) were not significantly different between groups, whereas other low-recognized proverbs (e.g., “Nothing ruins a duck but its bill” and “Every crow thinks her crow is the blackest”) were found to be significantly different between groups. The proverbs with the highest percentage of recognition were not significantly different between groups (e.g., “Don’t judge a book by its cover” and “What goes around comes around”). Table 5 shows a comparison of the percentage recognized by the total sample and whether there were significant differences in recognition between the two groups.

Reliability

The intrasubject reliability for consistency in reporting recognition of proverbs was determined by repeating one of the proverbs two different times in the survey administered to one group. Ninety-seven respondents completed the intrasubject reliability measure. Of this number, 93 reported recognizing the proverb each time (95.88%). The remaining four respondents (4.12%) in the group checked the proverb when it first appeared on the survey but did not check it the second time. One possible explanation is that these respondents did not feel it was necessary to check the same proverb twice; however, it may reflect the possibility that some respondents did not read all the items carefully and that there is some possibility of error in the responses.

Table 4. Gender, race, and regional distribution of the African American/White American sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White American</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

As the earlier discussion of the literature on proverbs indicated, studies have focused on one or more variables in an effort to draw conclusions about the significance and optimal methods of using proverbs in testing. Task type and response modality, as well as the age and education of participant populations, have been varied in tests of proverbs selected for variables of concreteness, familiarity, syntax, and length. Another factor is whether the proverb was accompanied by or embedded in a story context. However, ethnicity has been largely overlooked in research on proverbs to date, although familiarity has been shown to be a variable affecting performance.

The results of this survey supported the research hypothesis that African Americans would recognize more proverbs than Whites based on the fact that the proverbs were drawn from African American culture. Of the demographic information collected, the sample lacked sufficient distribution in geographic origin, occupation, and education to lend itself to statistical analysis. The current survey of proverb recognition demonstrated that familiarity of a particular proverb cannot be predicted but must be established through normative studies with different cultural groups. The lack of significant difference between young African Americans and young Whites demonstrated that recognition of proverbs is influenced by age as well as by exposure to the cultural context from which the proverbs were drawn. The performance of the older White groups compared to the young African American and young White groups suggests that education and life experience provide exposure to expressions that may not have been part of one's culture growing up, as shown by Nippold et al. (1997). Another possible explanation is that the youngest generation was not exposed to these proverbs because proverbs are not as...
widely used in popular culture as they were in previous generations. Anecdotally, many survey respondents commented that they had heard the proverbs as children from their parents and grandparents. With the greater exposure to popular culture through various forms of media and electronic communication, and with the likelihood that generations are now separated by greater geographic distances, it may be that children have less interaction with seniors who pass on traditional expressions such as proverbs.

The results of this survey may benefit researchers, clinicians, and test developers by providing normative data about those proverbs that are most commonly recognized by a population of African Americans and White Americans. The implications of the survey are that more research is needed to quantify the variability of figurative language expressions, and that the results of this research should be considered in interpreting standardized tests in order to avoid possible bias based on cultural background or age.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We wish to thank Sarah Slater and Larry Liu for their assistance.

REFERENCES


Smitherman, G. (1993, November). The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Pittsburgh, PA.


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APPENDIX (P. 1 OF 2). PROVERB RECOGNITION SURVEY

This survey is designed to see which proverbs or sayings you recognize. People know different sayings depending on where they grew up, how old they are, and many other reasons. Some people may recognize very few of the sayings below, and some may recognize many of them.

Instructions

1. Please put an X next to proverbs that you have heard before.
2. It’s okay if a word or two is different from the way you have heard the proverb. For example, if you have heard “Don’t bite more than you can chew” then you can check off “Never bite off more than you can chew.”
3. Don’t guess the meaning of sayings that are unfamiliar. Only mark proverbs you have heard before.

- Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.
- What goes around comes around.
- Never bite off more than you can chew.
- Don’t judge a book by its cover.
- What’s done in the dark will come to light.
- All that glitters is not gold.
- Two heads are better than one.
- Look before you leap.
- If the shoe fits wear it.
- You never miss your water ‘til the well runs dry.
- The early bird catches the worm.
- Never burn your bridges behind you.
- You’re known by the company you keep.
- Let sleeping dogs lie.
- Don’t bite off the hand that feeds you.
- Money talks.
- An empty wagon rattles.
- It will all come out in the wash.
- Still waters run deep.
- Can’t get blood out of a turnip.
- Nothing ruins a duck but its bill.
- God doesn’t come when you need him, but he’s always right on time.
- It’s better to have a star in your crown than a dollar in your pocket.
- A snake may change his skin, but he’s still a snake.
- You have to take the fat with the lean.
- Every tub must sit on its own bottom.
- You can’t have your cake and eat it too.
- There’s more than one way to skin a cat.
- Don’t let the cat out of the bag.
- Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.
- Too many cooks spoil the pot.
- You’ve got to crawl before you can walk.
- Every crow thinks her crow is the blackest.
- Don’t let the dog bite you twice.
- Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.
- What you sow you must reap.
- It takes a heap of licks to strike a nail in the dark.
- Study long, study wrong.
- The dog that brings a bone carries a bone.
APPENDIX (P. 2 OF 2). PROVERB RECOGNITION SURVEY

Please provide this information about yourself.

What is your age? ____________________

What is your gender?
____ female _____ male

What is your racial group?
____ American Indian or Alaska Native
____ Asian
____ Black or African American
____ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
____ White
____ Multiracial

If multiracial, indicate which races:

What is your ethnicity?
___ Hispanic or Latino _______ Non-Hispanic or Non Latino

Were you born in the United States?
____ Yes ___ No

If yes, write the name of the state where you spent most of your childhood __________________

Is English your primary language?
____ Yes ___ No

Please choose an occupation from the list that best describes your current job. If you are a student, choose your parent’s occupation. If you are retired, describe your occupation before retiring.

____ Do not work outside the home
____ Unskilled worker
____ Semi-skilled worker
____ Skilled worker
____ Owner of small business; clerical worker; sales worker; technician
____ Administrative worker in large business; owner of small business; semi-professional
____ Manager or owner of medium-sized business
____ Executive or professional of a large-sized business

Please indicate your highest level of education.
____ Less than 7 years
____ Completed 7th, 8th, or 9th grade
____ Some high school
____ High school graduate
____ Part of college or finished trade or business school
____ College graduate
____ Post-college graduate school