

Study: News reports of education 'achievement gaps' may perpetuate stereotypes of Black Americans

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Scholars have warned that the framing of racial "achievement gaps" in tests scores, grades, and other education outcomes may perpetuate racial stereotypes and encourage people to explain the gaps as the failure of students and their families rather than as resulting from structural racism. A new study finds that TV news reporting about racial achievement gaps led viewers to report exaggerated stereotypes of Black Americans as lacking education and may have increased implicit stereotyping of Black students as less competent than White students.

However, news reporting did not affect the explanations people gave for achievement gaps or the extent to which people ranked closing the gap as a national priority. The results were published on June 8 in *Educational Researcher*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

Study author David M. Quinn, an assistant professor of education at the University of Southern California, conducted three randomized experiments between May 2018 and May 2019 to examine the impact of "achievement gap discourse" (AGD) in news reporting on viewers' racial stereotypes, explanations for inequality, and prioritization of inequality as a national issue.

Prior scholarship argued that AGD feeds into stereotypes of Black students as less academically capable than White and Asian students, and

may cause people to attribute outcome disparities to the abilities of individuals rather than to broader structural inequities.

According to Quinn, his study is the first that aims to provide experimental evidence of the impacts of AGD.

"Past U.S. presidents and education secretaries have framed the racial achievement gap as 'the civil rights issue of our time, and publicizing between-group achievement inequalities is often part of a strategy to make educational equity a national priority.'" said Quinn. "However, researchers have expressed concern that by focusing on [student](#) outcomes, rather than on structural inequities that lead to the outcome disparities, this framing assumes a deficit orientation that reinforces stereotypes and has a [detrimental effect](#) on public support for policies aiming to end structural inequities."

"Experimental evidence on the effects of AGD is scare," said Quinn. "As a field, we must understand these effects to conduct a collective conversation that most effectively advances equity and excellence in education. This study aimed to bring evidence to bear on these issues."

For his first experiment, conducted online, Quinn recruited 565 U.S. participants via Qualtrics Survey panels to watch either an AGD video or a counter-stereotypical video. The AGD video was a 129-second TV news story from a CBS affiliate that emphasized the White-Black test score gap; the counter-stereotypical video was a promotional piece from the Promise Academy of Harlem Children's Zone that presented Black students as studious, academically ambitious, and engaged with a positive school environment. Participants then were asked to guess the national high school graduation rate for Black students, after being told the graduation rate for White students (86 percent, as estimated by Harvard University economist Richard Murnane in 2013).

Although both groups exhibited stereotyping by underestimating the actual performance of Black students, those who watched the AGD video exhibited more exaggerated stereotyping, on average. Specifically, the AGD viewers guessed the graduation rate of Black high school students to be 49.4 percent, or 6.3 percentage points lower than the 55.7 percent rate guessed by those who watched the counter-stereotypical video. The actual high school graduation rate of Black students is 78 percent, according to Murnane's 2013 estimate.

Participants from the first experiment who viewed the AGD video showed increased implicit stereotypes of Black students as being less academically capable than White students, as measured by an adapted version of the implicit association test from Harvard University's Project Implicit.

Finally, participants were asked to rate the extent to which closing the Black-White achievement gap should be a national priority and the extent to which the following factors were responsible for [achievement gaps](#): school quality, student motivation, parenting, discrimination and racism, genetics, neighborhood environments, home environments, and income levels.

The experiment did not find evidence that watching the AGD video, versus the counter-stereotypical video, affected viewers' prioritization of ending achievement inequalities or their beliefs about the sources of achievement inequalities.

"Given that AGDs may, in theory, cause people to deprioritize achievement inequality, it is somewhat reassuring that the AGD video did not have that affect," said Quinn. "At the same time, it is disappointing that informing participants about educational inequalities did not lead them to place a higher priority on them."

In the second experiment, Quinn tested whether watching an achievement gap news story or counter-stereotypical video affects people's stereotypes, as compared to a third control video. A total of 723 respondents were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a website for businesses to hire remote workers to perform specific on-demand tasks. Each respondent was randomly assigned to watch one of the three videos: the two videos from the first experiment and a third control video which made no reference to race or [achievement](#).

Even though the control group underestimated the Black graduation rate, with an average guess of 62 percent, people who watched the AGD video guessed 55 percent, or 7 percentage points lower. This finding, combined with the first experiment's result, suggests that exposure to the AGD video heightened viewers' implicit stereotypes of Black students.

In the third experiment, involving 600 people recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, Quinn tested whether the AGD [video](#) affected respondents' general explicit [racial stereotypes](#) concerning intelligence and competence. The author did not find evidence that the AGD had an impact on explicit bias.

"This finding suggests that AGD's effect on viewers' guesses regarding graduation rate was not due to a change in viewers' explicit beliefs about Black Americans' capabilities," said Quinn.

Nonetheless, Quinn said, the study's overall findings on the negative effects of AGD on exaggerated stereotypes of Black Americans and potentially on implicit bias against them are very concerning.

"These findings do not mean that we should cease all measuring or reporting on between-group differences in outcomes," Quinn said. "Rather, what we need is a better understanding of how certain ways of framing inequalities may be more or less impactful on people's racial

attitudes and how we can most productively conduct a public conversation about advancing equitable policy without also perpetuating harmful stereotypes."

Quinn noted that the groups of respondents in his three experiments were not nationally representative, so further research would be needed to test replication of his findings with the larger population. He also recommended that future research test the effects of AGD among other racial and ethnic groups and along other social dimensions, such as class and gender.

More information: David M. Quinn, Experimental Effects of "Achievement Gap" News Reporting on Viewers' Racial Stereotypes, Inequality Explanations, and Inequality Prioritization, *Educational Researcher* (2020). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X20932469](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20932469)

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