

Researchers find places, not just people, are targets of racial bias

November 3 2016, by Taylor Kubota



Jennifer Eberhardt, professor of psychology at Stanford and co-author of research on race-based stereotyping of physical spaces. Credit: Nana Kofi Nti

New research shows that racial biases affect more than how we treat individual black people. Biases also lead us to devalue black homes and neighborhoods, and to subject them to potential health hazards. The studies further demonstrate that people who have positive attitudes

toward black people may still undervalue black spaces.

Researchers at Stanford University, the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Waterloo recently published these findings in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

"Many studies document that Americans harbor biases against [black people](#)," said Jennifer Eberhardt, a professor of psychology at Stanford. "Ours are the first experiments to show that these biases extend to the physical spaces black Americans inhabit. In other words, stereotypes drive not only how we treat people, but also how we treat places."

These findings, she continues, may help explain why policies and plans often neglect black [neighborhoods](#). They also suggest why communities so often locate freeways, chemical plants, and other polluters near black homes.

Assumptions about black spaces

In one study, the researchers asked U.S.-based study [participants](#) first to list characteristics associated with black areas, and then to estimate what percent of Americans would agree with each characterization.

Participants described black places as physically degraded, unpleasant, unsafe and lacking in resources. They also estimated that the more negative the characteristic, the higher the percent of Americans who would agree with it.

To test how these negative stereotypes about black spaces affect people's actions towards them, the researchers next conducted two experiments. In the first experiment they asked a racially diverse sample of U.S. citizens to evaluate a house for sale. The house profile included photos and descriptions that pretesting had shown depicted a place where white or black families were equally likely to live.

Also in the profile was a photo of the family currently living in the house. The researchers randomly assigned participants to see a photo of either a white family or a black family. Previously the researchers had tested the photos to ensure the families were equally well-dressed, attractive and middle-class.

The researchers discovered that participants who viewed the allegedly black-owned home, compared with participants who viewed the allegedly white-owned home, assumed the surrounding neighborhood had worse-maintained property, lower-quality schools and municipal services, less access to shopping and financial institutions and lower safety. Participants who viewed the black-owned home also reported feeling less eager to move into the neighborhood.

In a second experiment using a similar home profile, the researchers added information about the largest ethnic population in the neighborhood. Half of participants read that the neighborhood was mostly black, while the other half read that the neighborhood was mostly white. Once again, participants assumed that the predominantly black neighborhood was less desirable than the predominantly white neighborhood. In addition, participants estimated the home to be worth \$20,000 less when the surrounding neighborhood was majority black versus majority white.

Subjecting black areas to possible harm

A final experiment showed that space-focused stereotypes can make people more willing to expose [black neighborhoods](#) to pollution.

The researchers asked participants (all white) to take the perspective of a chemical company employee and decide whether to build a potentially hazardous plant near a neighborhood. Text describing this scenario presented the decision as a difficult one. Half the participants read that

the neighborhood was predominantly black, while half read that the neighborhood was majority white. In addition, half the participants learned that the neighborhood was low-income, while the other half learned that the neighborhood was middle-income. Participants also completed measures of their personal attitudes toward white and black Americans.

Overall, participants were less opposed to building the chemical plant when the nearby neighborhood was majority black versus majority white. This was true regardless of the income level of the neighborhood or the personal prejudices of the participants.

"These findings show how racial discrimination can occur even in the absence of harmful intent or negative attitudes toward black people," said lead author Courtney Bonam, who conducted part of this research at Stanford as a doctoral student with Eberhardt and part at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she is an assistant professor of psychology. "Space-focused stereotyping is an insidious form of bias that can perpetuate racial inequalities."

The legacy of space-focused stereotypes

When designing these studies, said Bonam, the researchers recalled how Jim Crow-era Americans labeled public spaces like drinking fountains and public swimming pools as "white" or "colored." They also discussed how federal laws and housing policies intentionally constructed black ghettos. They then created experiments to test whether these historical divides continue to influence Americans' beliefs about and actions toward black neighborhoods.

Bonam and colleagues' studies confirm that, even in the absence of bias against black people, many Americans continue to consider black places to be of lower quality, less desirable and less valuable. Many Americans

are also more willing to potentially pollute black neighborhoods than white neighborhoods.

"Together, these studies tell us that space-focused stereotypes may contribute to wide-ranging social problems, from racial disparities in wealth to the overexposure of black people to environmental pollution," said Bonam.

More information: Courtney M. Bonam et al. Polluting Black space., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000226](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000226)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Researchers find places, not just people, are targets of racial bias (2016, November 3) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-people-racial-bias.html>

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