

The Color of News

The Racial Dimension in Media Coverage of Selected Issues

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OVERVIEW

The goal of this study was to explore the nexus of race and several selected issues relevant to the FrameWorks collaborators. The areas of interest were education, jobs and employment, health care, and juvenile justice. We examined separately all news items (stories and opinion pieces) related to the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Stories about the legacy of the decision frequently focused on education but also featured several other areas.

Within each of the areas, the central question for this study was how the news stories explained or addressed disparities among the races. Stories or columns had to deal with one of the relevant areas and specifically mention race or ethnicity in connection with it. This included general references to "minorities," "people of color" or "non-white minorities." We also used pictures that accompanied print or television stories for indications that the story addressed race or people of color. The sample period began on May 1st 2004, approximately two weeks before the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education*, and ran through June 19th.

Outlets

The news outlets were chosen to provide a broad view of how local and national media address race. For the national portion of the sample, we examined ABC "World News Tonight," CBS "Evening News," and NBC "Nightly News," *Newsweek*, *Time* and *US News and World Report*; and the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The local sample included newspapers selected from around the country, including the *Miami Herald*, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *San Antonio Express-News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times* and *Detroit Free Press*.

These papers were selected for geographic diversity as well as the different minority groups and issues likely to surface in each city. For example, Miami has a large Cuban American population with significant clout in both the public and private sector. New Orleans

contains a historically multiethnic population with African Americans in many positions of power in city government. San Antonio has a well-established Latino community with roots going back generations. It now faces an influx of new Latino immigrants with a perspective that is often distinct from other groups.

Los Angeles is one of the most rapidly diversifying cities in the nation in a state where whites are no longer the majority in the state. Seattle also has a diverse community with a large Asian population. In addition, Seattle was the only city with substantial coverage of Native American affairs. Detroit has long been a focal point of tensions in black-white relations, but the influx of other groups has made the city more diverse. Detroit also has the largest population of Muslim-Americans in the country.

The rationales for including specific papers in the local sample were not always borne out by the data, because of the issues under investigation. For example, the Detroit *Free Press* did offer many stories about Arab Americans and Muslims in and around the city, but relatively few addressed issues of interest to this study. It also seems likely that the anniversary of the Brown decision overshadowed other racial discussions.

As can be seen in Table 1, coverage varied widely across the outlets, and newspapers offered by far the most discussion of race in connection with the selected issues. The *Washington Post* offered the most coverage (112 stories) as a result of heavy coverage of the Brown anniversary combined with reporting on local gang activity, the outlook for Hispanic businesses in the region and various school performance issues.

The *Miami Herald* placed second with 70 stories, followed by the *Seattle Times* with 67 stories and the *San Antonio Express-News* with 60. All three covered many of the same national stories, then filled out their coverage with issues of local concern. The *New York Times* (56), *Los Angeles Times* (53), *Detroit Free Press* (44) and *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (44) round out the newspaper coverage.

Table 1				
Amount of Coverage				
<i>Outlet</i>	<i>Total Stories</i>	<i>News</i>	<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Total Length</i>
<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	44	30	14	985 in.
<i>Miami Herald</i>	70	52	18	1593 in.
<i>New Orleans Times-Picayune</i>	44	31	13	1049 in.
<i>San Antonio Express-News</i>	60	40	20	1092 in.
<i>Seattle Times</i>	67	47	20	1472 in.
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	53	42	11	1445 in.
<i>New York Times</i>	56	41	15	1133 in.
<i>Washington Post</i>	112	84	28	2731 in.
ABC	5	5		6 min. 19 sec.
CBS	5	5		8 min. 10 sec.
NBC	7	7		16 min. 13 sec.
<i>Newsweek</i>	8	7	1	192 in.
<i>Time</i>	8	8		171 in.
<i>US News</i>	8	8		116 in.
	547	407	140	

By contract, television offered little coverage beyond marking the anniversary of the Brown decision. Newsmagazine coverage was also light, with passing coverage of the Brown anniversary. Beyond the Brown anniversary, both television and newsmagazines offered slight coverage of the job outlook and health issues. For both television and newsmagazines, news about the war in Iraq and the presidential campaign drowned out many other issues.

As a result of this glancing coverage, this sample relied heavily on opinion pieces about Brown. One quarter of the articles coded were columns by journalists, unsigned editorials or

opinion pieces by non-journalists. These opinion pieces focused mainly on the Brown decision and its legacy, so they have the greatest impact on the education debate.

ISSUES IN THE NEWS

Among the five issue areas addressed in this study, education dominated the news agenda. There were 214 discussions of education issues in the sample (see Table 2). The anniversary of Brown v. Board (and Bill Cosby’s remarks) was discussed 168 times. There was significant overlap between these two areas, since most Brown stories included discussions of current education issues. Discussions of jobs placed third with 106 discussions. Juvenile justice issues were discussed 95 times, and health care issues appeared 63 times.

Table 2	
Issue Areas in the News	
	<i>Number of Discussions</i>
Education	214
Brown v Board of Education anniversary	168
Jobs/Employment trends	106
Juvenile Justice	95
Health Care	63

While there were many commonalities across media outlets, they gave proportionally different weight to the issue areas. For example, the *Seattle Times* gave the heaviest proportional coverage to education issues but the lowest levels of coverage to health care issues (see Table 3).

The heaviest proportional coverage of the Brown anniversary was found in the *Times-Picayune* (32%), but in absolute terms the *Washington Post* ran almost twice the number of stories (31 vs. 16). The *Washington Post* offered the most coverage of juvenile justice issues in

both absolute and proportional terms (25 discussions or 21% of all issue discussions). Meanwhile the *Miami Herald* offered the most coverage of health care issues (14 discussions).

Table 3

Distribution of Issue Areas Across Outlets

<i>Outlet</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Brown Anniversary</i>	<i>Jobs</i>	<i>Juvenile Justice</i>	<i>Health Care</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	15 (28%)	16 (30%)	13 (25%)	3 (6%)	6 (11%)	100%
<i>Miami Herald</i>	21 (25%)	18 (21%)	20 (24%)	11 (13%)	14 (17%)	100%
<i>New Orleans Times-Picayune</i>	20 (40%)	16 (32%)	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	3 (6%)	100%
<i>San Antonio Express-News</i>	25 (35%)	17 (24%)	14 (20%)	4 (6%)	11 (16%)	100%
<i>Seattle Times</i>	44 (46%)	27 (28%)	10 (11%)	10 (11%)	4 (4%)	100%
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	16 (29%)	12 (21%)	10 (18%)	12 (21%)	6 (11%)	100%
<i>New York Times</i>	18 (27%)	17 (26%)	14 (21%)	13 (20%)	4 (6%)	100%
<i>Washington Post</i>	43 (35%)	31 (24%)	13 (11%)	25 (21%)	10 (8%)	100%
All Television	7 (30%)	10 (34%)	3 (13%)	4 (17%)	1 (4%)	100%
All Newsmagazines	5 (21%)	4 (17%)	8 (33%)	3 (13%)	4 (17%)	100%
Total	214	168	106	95	63	

Each of these broad areas was a composite of more narrowly defined issues that provide better insight into the news agenda (see Table 4). Within the broader area of education, the most common point of discussion was the continuing problem of integration (43). Efforts to desegregate schools accounted for three out of five of these discussions (27 stories), while observations about residential re-segregation made up the remainder.

Achievement in schools or grade gaps between white and minority students accounted for another 32 stories. These discussions covered everything from disparities within a single school system to differences on standardized test performance to broader national trends.

School budgets and school funding issues were found in another 27 stories. Some of these stories were the result of local or statewide funding issues, while others dealt with more national efforts to obtain adequate funding for the education of all children. Affirmative action or active minority recruiting in college admissions was the subject of 16 stories. Most of these stories were spurred by reports of declining minority enrollments at several major colleges including UCLA and Berkeley. The last major aspect of education was a group of items related to public school quality (11 discussions). This included teacher qualifications (5), the quality and currency of educational materials (4) and the maintenance of the actual school buildings.

Table 4		
Major Education Topics in the News		
<i>Issue</i>	<i>Number of Discussions</i>	
Integration		43
<i>Desegregation efforts</i>	27	
<i>Re-segregation trends</i>	16	
Achievement or grade gaps with whites		32
School budgets and funding		27
Affirmative action in college admissions		16
Public school quality issues		11
<i>Teacher quality</i>	5	
<i>Quality educational materials</i>	4	
<i>Quality of school physical plant</i>	2	
Minority drop-out rates		6
Minority college entrance rates		6
Digital Divide		4
All other education issues		69

The Brown anniversary focused on the history of school desegregation (95 stories), with less attention given to the broader impact the decision had on integration in society (44 stories).

(The discussions of integration or desegregation in Table 4 do not include the specific historical discussions coded under the Brown anniversary.) Remarks Bill Cosby made at a Washington event marking the anniversary were the subject of 29 stories.

The 106 discussions of jobs and employment were divided among several diverse issues (see Table 5). Foremost were a group of issues relating to fairness in the workplace (20 discussions). This included discrimination in hiring and firing (7), affirmative action programs in hiring (5), minority job training programs (4), tokenism (3) and reverse discrimination (1).

Table 5		
Major Employment Issues in the News		
<i>Issue</i>	<i>Number of Discussions</i>	
Workplace fairness		20
<i>Discrimination in hiring/firing</i>	7	
<i>Affirmative action in hiring/firing</i>	5	
<i>Minority job training</i>	4	
<i>Tokenism in the workplace</i>	3	
<i>Reverse discrimination</i>	1	
Immigration impact on employment		13
Minority employment situation		13
<i>Minority employment rate</i>	7	
<i>Minority jobs with benefits</i>	6	
Minority business ownership		11
<i>Entrepreneurship</i>	8	
<i>Access to capital</i>	3	
Other employment issues		49

Spurred on by a study of the economic effects of immigration on the labor market, as well as competing immigration law reform proposals from the President and Congressional Democrats, the effects of immigration on employment were discussed 13 times. The minority

employment situation was discussed 13 times as well. This included seven discussions of the minority employment rate and six of the need for jobs with benefits. Minority business ownership was discussed 11 times, with entrepreneurship leading the way (8) followed by access to capital (3).

Reporting on juvenile justice issues raised very few policy questions. The foremost issue in juvenile justice discussions was violent crime (63 stories). This included a triple homicide in Baltimore that was widely covered, several gang-related assaults in the Washington DC region that received attention elsewhere, and a forcible gang rape allegedly committed by three high school students in California. All other juvenile offenses were discussed 15 times. Racial discrimination or profiling of juveniles was discussed four times. All other juvenile justice issues were the subject of 13 discussions.

Health care was the least discussed issue area, with 63 appearances. Thirty percent of those discussions focused on health care access for the uninsured (19 discussions). Due to “Cover the Uninsured Week” and the high profile of this issue in the Presidential campaign, it became more salient. The prevalence and mortality of cancer in minority communities was the subject of 10 discussions, stemming from the release of an American Cancer Society study showing that the prevalence and morbidity of some forms of cancer remained higher for minorities than whites. Minority access to health care, apart from insurance, was discussed nine times. The impact of other chronic diseases (i.e. diabetes, obesity, hypertension) on minority communities was discussed eight times. All other health care issues were the subject of 17 discussions.

Throughout the discussions that follow our analysis looks across all media outlets in our sample to provide the most complete picture of media coverage. As we have already noted, there were differences in the amount of attention various media outlets gave the issue areas, but there were no significant differences in the discussions presented. Additionally, some outlets provided so little coverage of certain aspects that no meaningful comparisons can be made.

EDUCATION

Partly because of the Brown anniversary, this was the area most frequently discussed in our study. Many stories about the Brown decisions noted how *de jure* segregation limited the education of African Americans. A few stories and columns pointed out that both informal and formal segregation had a similar impact on Latinos in the Southwest. A few columnists even pointed out how the Hernandez case (decided just a few weeks before Brown) really paved the way and, for some, provided a better rationale for striking down segregation.

The other reason for the heavy focus on education has to do with the timing of our sample. May and June represent the end of the school year marked by graduations, advanced placement exams, the release of standardized test scores, and the first statistical profiles of incoming college freshmen at many colleges. All these events served as newspegs for stories about education trends and problems.

We sought to differentiate between explanations of racial disparities that focused on individual characteristics or attributes and those that focused on more systemic factors. This is the most parsimonious and easily understandable way to present each of the issue debates. Once we have sketched out this broad division of causes, we will cite more specific causes to illustrate our points.

In general, causes or explanations focused on the particular factors addressed individual or family strengths and weaknesses, moral standing, assimilation of American values, or individual misjudgments. In the education realm, these included attitude toward school, level of family support, income level, parents' marital status and educational expectations. Systemic discussions focused on elements beyond the control of a single individual or family. These included such items as the quality of school physical plant, teaching materials and teachers, the degree of segregation, availability of advanced classes, and the impact of undocumented immigrants on school systems.

For both individual and systemic explanations, we divided claims between those that affected a positive outcome or academic success and those that were linked with negative outcomes. This allowed us to see how certain explanations related to educational outcomes for various racial groups. Because of the Brown anniversary, it was necessary to separate explanations of current academic achievement from portraits of the past. In discussing the past, all eyes turned toward the systemic evils of segregation (see Table 6).

Table 6						
Historical Explanations of Academic Achievement by Racial Group						
	<i>African American</i>		<i>Latino</i>		<i>Unspecified minority</i>	
Individual Locus NEGATIVE	10	(9%)	0		4	(17%)
Individual LOCUS POSITIVE	8	(7%)	0		0	
Systemic Locus NEGATIVE	78	(72%)	5	(100%)	19	(83%)
Systemic Locus POSITIVE	12	(11%)	0		0	
TOTAL	108	(100%)	5	(100%)	23	(100%)

In the historical context, there was no effort to explain white achievement, only discussions of how segregation (or the unequal facilities it encouraged) worked to the detriment of African Americans and minorities in general. In the contemporary context as well, we found only a limited effort to explain white or Asian student academic success. As in historical discussions, attention focused on why African American and Latino students lag behind their white counterparts (see Table 7).

Contemporary arguments were more broadly distributed than historical discussions. For whites and Asians, media attention focused heavily on the factors that led to their success. All discussions of Asian performance focused on the reasons for their success, as did four out of five (83%) discussions of whites. In contrast, less than half (42%) of Latino discussions and only one quarter (26%) of discussions of African Americans focused on the positive.

	White	African American	Latino	Asian	Muslim	Unspecified Minority
Individual Locus NEGATIVE	1 (3%)	88 (34%)	8 (8%)	0	0	44 (14%)
Individual Locus POSITIVE	14 (47%)	20 (8%)	36 (36%)	15 (88%)	2 (100%)	45 (14%)
Systemic Locus NEGATIVE	4 (13%)	106 (40%)	50 (50%)	0	0	194 (62%)
Systemic Locus POSITIVE	11 (37%)	47 (18%)	6 (6%)	2 (12%)	0	31 (10%)
TOTAL	30	261	100	17	2	314

The most common explanation of white academic success was individual hard work and diligence (33%) followed by high quality teachers (17%) and desegregation (13%). No other item accounted for more than ten percent of explanations. For Asian students the explanations were even more limited. Individual hard work and diligence accounted for 77 percent of discussions while a positive attitude about school accounted for another 12 percent. No other factor accounted for more than six percent of discussions of Asian students.

Explanations of lagging performance of African Americans touched upon an entirely different group of factors. Systemic factors were most often cited, with continued segregation leading the way (12 percent of discussions). This was followed by a lack of community role models (5%), low per-student spending (5%) and a lack of college recruitment (5%).

Contemporary segregation discussions most often focused on how residential segregation and the drive for neighborhood schools resulted in ever more segregated schools. It did not go unnoticed that it was often African American and Latino parents who led neighborhood school efforts that resulted in more segregated schools. The lack of community role models entered into discussions in complex ways. In some cases it was part of a lament that desegregation had divided the black community, so that the very poor no longer had contact with the successful

middle class. In other cases it came in the form of an admonition to successful African Americans who failed to help the less fortunate. For these critics, the lagging academic performance of African Americans was attributable as much to a growing class divide as to racism.

Low per-student spending undergirded discussions of poor infrastructure, poor teacher quality, and the general inability of minority-dominated schools to match the resources and programs of majority white schools. Discussions of school funding were widespread, although there was some variation. For instance, in Texas a special state legislative session was called to revise school funding formulas. The *San Antonio Express-News* paid particular attention to the proposed changes to “Robin Hood” (the nickname for the existing formula where the wealthiest districts diverted some of their property tax revenues to the state for redistribution to the poorest districts). On the other hand, in the *Washington Post*, per student spending was covered as part of a broader “adequacy” campaign. Advocates of adequacy in funding have filed lawsuits in several states to compel states to determine the minimum funding level to adequately educate students and distribute funds accordingly.

Most discussions of African American academic performance focused on primary and secondary schools, but the lower rate of college attendance among African Americans did receive some attention. In the wake of last year’s Supreme Court decision on the University of Michigan’s affirmative action program, many colleges suspended or drastically curtailed recruiting efforts aimed at minorities. Several sources said this was the most obvious explanation for sharp drops in the number of African Americans on numerous college campuses.

Individual explanations of lagging African American academic performance were almost as common as systemic ones (34 vs. 40 percent). A triumvirate of individually rooted causes were used to explain African American performance. A poor attitude toward school, a lack of family support and low expectations of academic performance each accounted for ten percent of explanations. Not surprisingly, all of these points were a part of Bill Cosby’s widely reprinted

remarks, but he was not alone in expressing these views. The event, at which Mr. Cosby spoke, was closed to the general public and not recorded, so all reports on his remarks are second hand and incomplete. According to reports Mr. Cosby addressed a litany of individual failings,

“Lower economic people are not holding up their end in this deal. These people are not parenting. They are buying things for kids -- \$500 sneakers for what? And won't spend \$200 for 'Hooked on Phonics'!” ... “They're standing on the corner and they can't speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk: 'Why you ain't?' 'Where you is?' ... Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads ... You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth.” ... These people are not political criminals, these people are going around stealing Coca-Cola. People get shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake and then we run out and are outraged, saying, 'The cops shouldn't have shot him.' What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hands?”

The impact of Mr. Cosby's pointed remarks is clearly seen in education discussions. The 29 stories that included his remarks account for one third of all discussions of these three personal causes. These stories often used his remarks as a starting point for further elaboration. Thus, Mr. Cosby accounted for 45 percent of these discussions, while columnists and others accounted for the remainder.

Many observers pointed out that for many African American teens, doing well in school meant trying to be white. Even when not presented as “selling out,” observers noted that many African American teens (particularly those performing poorly) show little interest in school and rarely relate to what is taught. Discussions about the lack of family support went beyond a lack of parental education to address parental disinterest and poor parenting. These contrasted with the biographical stories of many successful African Americans whose parents lacked formal education but pushed their children to achieve.

Low expectations were frequently cited as a reason for poor achievement in both contemporary and historical discussions. Historical discussions usually mentioned how the low expectations of white teachers, administrators and the white community at large stunted the academic potential of African Americans. Contemporary discussions found these low expectations originating with minority teachers and administrators as well as whites.

Discussions of Latino academic performance in some ways mirrored African Americans, but also struck some different notes. A majority of opinions (58 percent) dealt with reasons for disparities between Latinos and whites, compared to 74 percent for African Americans. Latinos were seen as suffering from many of the same systemic problems as African Americans. Segregation was cited 19 percent of the time to explain Latino academic failings, followed by low per student spending (10%). Poor teacher quality (6%) rounded out the major points of discussion. What separated Latinos from African Americans was the substantial number of success stories.

Reasons for outstanding achievement by Latinos accounted for 42 percent of discussions versus 26 percent for African Americans. The reasons listed for Latino success were like those of whites and Asians. Strong family support ranked first (16%), followed by individual hard work and diligence (14%) and a positive attitude about school (6 %). This positive outlook stems from profile pieces done on successful Latino students, including one on a working class Los Angeles family that had sent seven children through college.

The patterns sketched out above proved fairly consistent across outlets. This is probably due to the dominance of the Brown anniversary in coverage of education issues. There were no real differences in explanations offered, although the *San Antonio Express-News* did feature more discussion of Latinos than African Americans. In the *Los Angeles Times*, African Americans and Latinos were discussed with almost equal frequency, reflecting the composition of the city's population.

In summation, discussions of contemporary racial disparities in educational achievement were diverse. Critiques of individual failings among African-Americans, such as poor motivation and low expectations, appeared almost as frequently as criticisms of social conditions, such as continuing de facto residential segregation and a related lack of quality educational facilities. There was also considerable discussion of Latinos. But these focused not only on the systemic barriers to academic attainment but also on individual success stories meant to illustrate the effects of hard work and diligence in overcoming obstacles.

Measuring Today Against Yesterday

Another common facet of education coverage was rating America's progress on the issues of segregation and poor performing schools. Sources were overwhelming in their conviction that the nation had improved in handling segregation (87 opinions). By a margin of better than three to one (77 percent vs. 23 percent) sources saw some type of improvement. However, over half (55%), also argued that we needed to do more. Many of these opinions surrounded the Brown anniversary, when President Bush opined that we still had much to do to combat racism. Of the 23 percent who felt that things had not changed, most saw today's segregation as no less offensive than that of the past. Even if they acknowledged that contemporary segregation arises from different circumstances than in the era of Jim Crow, the lack of integration in itself and the inequalities it breeds were seen as equivalent.

School performance was the other area where sources saw improvement (23 opinions). These opinions arose from two different lines of inquiry. First were opinions that compared modern "desegregated" schools to the segregated underfunded black schools of the pre-Brown era. Second were opinions about particular schools that had undergone a significant turnaround. We did not differentiate these arguments, but 83 percent of opinions saw improvement. As with segregation, most (78 percent) sources saw the progress as an ongoing process in which we still had more work to do.

Solutions

While much of the coverage focused on what is wrong with education and why some groups seem to be falling behind, some stories did address solutions. Given the breadth of local issues involved in education, this study did not identify specific solutions discussed. Instead we identified which shortcoming should be addressed and who should take action. These two dimensions seemed most reflective of our root question of how educational disparities were explained.

In Table 8, we see the relative focus put on individuals and families vs. larger social systems and institutions to resolve these problems. Of the 152 opinions on the responsibility to solve problems, 41 percent placed the burden on individual youths, parents or other individuals. Among institutions held responsible for fixing the problem, state governments were the most common (24 percent of opinions). The high profile for state governments stems from various lawsuits and other efforts to make states supply adequate or equitable funding for all students in public schools. Following state governments were school officials, who were labeled as responsible in 11 percent of opinions. The minority community was said to be responsible in 11 percent of opinions. Society at large was viewed as responsible seven percent of the time.

We can also look at these data for an indication of how frequently the media charged minorities with solving problems of educational disparities themselves, as opposed to calling for assistance or recompense from society as a whole. Combining the “individual and family” and “minority community” categories produces a majority (52%) of all opinions on this issue. By contrast, all levels of government combined for only 30 percent of opinions. Thus, the dominant theme was self-help rather than government assistance.

Table 8		
Who Should Solve Educational Disparities?		
	<i>Number of opinions</i>	<i>Percentage of opinions</i>
Individuals and families	63	41%
State governments	36	24%
School officials	17	11%
Minority community	16	11%
Society at large	10	7%
Federal government	8	5%
Local governments	2	1%
TOTAL	152	100%

JOBS & EMPLOYMENT

Discussions of possible explanations or causes for disparities in employment were far less frequent than those of educational achievement (136 vs. 724 respectively). Table 9 shows how these arguments were distributed across different racial groups. African Americans accounted for 60 percent of discussions while Latinos account for another 24 percent. No other racial or ethnic group was the target of enough opinions for meaningful analysis.

Table 9								
Explanations of Employment Disparities by Race								
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Muslim/Arabic</i>	<i>Unspecified Minority</i>	<i>Total</i>	
							<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Individual Locus NEGATIVE	0%	27%	39%	0%	0%	7%	36	26%
Individual Locus POSITIVE	0%	15%	30%	100%	100%	20%	29	21%
Systemic Locus NEGATIVE	100%	58%	15%	0%	0%	73%	66	49%
Systemic Locus POSITIVE	0%	0%	15%	0%	0%	0%	5	4%
Total	100% 3	100% 81	100% 33	100% 1	100% 3	100% 15	136	

For African Americans, negative outcomes accounted for 85 percent of explanations. Only 15 percent focused on employment success stories. The picture for Latinos was more mixed, with 55 percent of opinions focused on negative outcomes versus 45 percent positive outcomes. The higher profile of positive news in the Latino community was linked to successful Latino businesses or business people, such as a *Washington Post* story on a company in Los Angeles that supplies urban gang extras for movies (5/26/04 p.A1). Some of the extras were in fact former gang members attempting to go straight, and everyone involved with the company comes from poor Latino neighborhoods.

A majority of opinions (58%) focused on systemic causes to explain lagging African American achievements. Virtually all these discussions (42 out of 47) cited discrimination in hiring or firing decisions. Very few were connected to concrete cases; most were general assertions that there was still discrimination and racism in many hiring decisions. When attention turned to individually-based explanations, we see further reverberations of Bill Cosby's comments. Individually-based explanations accounted for 27 percent of causes cited for African Americans. Among the factors cited most often were poor language skills (8 mentions), personal irresponsibility (6), and lack of education (5).

Explanations of the Latino employment situation were mainly focused on individual rather than systemic causes. Nearly four in ten opinions (39%) linked employment failures to individual factors. The most commonly cited were a failure to assimilate American culture (6 mentions), poor language skills (3), and lack of education and improper appearance (two each). Similarly, positive employment stories were attributed to individual factors (30%). Most often success was related to hard work (6) and a good education (3). Systemic explanations of failure and success each accounted for 15 percent of opinions. The most common negative systemic explanation was the impact of immigration on wages. This was linked to a study released during the sample period that received some attention in the news. Among positive systemic factors, good social networks (3) and minority entrepreneurship (2) were cited.

Because there were relatively few opinions on employment disparities, differences between outlets are hard to interpret. In general, the differences appear small. For example, all eight opinions on African American employment trends in the Detroit *Free Press* were negative, as were two-thirds of those about Latinos. In Miami, only African Americans received extensive discussion, which by a slight margin focused on the negative (57 vs. 43 percent). As in Detroit, the picture for African Americans in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* was entirely negative, but there were only eight opinions.

The *San Antonio Express-News* coverage focused entirely on explaining the lagging performance of African Americans (seven opinions), but a majority of opinions on Latinos dealt with reasons for their success. The *Seattle Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* reflected the overall trends. In the *New York Times*, only African Americans received enough attention to discern a pattern. Opinions were split 70 percent positive versus 30 percent negative. On television and in the news magazines, there were too few opinions to draw a conclusion.

HEALTH CARE

Health care was the most negatively valenced issue area we studied. We identified 133 opinions on the reasons for racial disparities in the amount or quality of health care. Only eight opinions (six percent) attempted to explain success stories (see Table 10). Typical of these was a *Los Angeles Times* story on storefront Hispanic clinics that were springing up in many communities to supply care to those who could not get it elsewhere (*Los Angeles Times* 5/2/04 p. B6).

Table 10							
Explanations of Health Care Disparities by Race							
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Native American</i>	<i>Unspecified Minority</i>	<i>Total N</i>	<i>%</i>
Individual Locus NEGATIVE	0%	59%	56%	33%	36%	67	50%
Individual Locus POSITIVE	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	2	1%
Systemic Locus NEGATIVE	100%	31%	44%	67%	58%	58	44%
Systemic Locus POSITIVE	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	6	5%
Total	100% 2	100% 58	100% 36	100% 6	100% 31	133	100%

Repeating patterns seen elsewhere, there was little effort to explain white successes; only two opinions were directed toward whites. African Americans were the most frequently discussed (58 opinions), followed by Latinos (36), unspecified “minorities” (31), and Native Americans (six). Most of the latter appeared in one story about the failings of the Native American health program and the challenges facing those who live off reservations in obtaining federally guaranteed care.

Half of all opinions criticized health care disparities in terms of individual factors, while another 44 percent blamed systemic factors, with similar patterns for African Americans and Latinos. Discussions of unspecified minorities ran opposite to this trend, with more emphasis being placed on systemic explanations (58 vs. 36 percent). For African Americans the most common individual causes cited were poor personal habits (18 mentions), an individual's lack of insurance (five), poor understanding of a disease (four), and a genetic predisposition to an illness (three). The slate of individual explanations was notably different for Latinos. Poor language skills and contradictory cultural values topped the list, each with five opinions, followed by exacerbating underlying conditions (four) and a genetic predisposition to a disease (three).

Systemic factors that were most commonly discussed varied slightly by race. For all races the leading factor was a lack of insurance benefits or jobs with health care benefits. This was mentioned eight times for African Americans, 13 times for Latinos and 11 times for unspecified minority groups. (Systemic discussions of a lack of insurance differed from the personal decision not to invest in insurance. Systemic discussions pointed out how many jobs failed to offer health care benefits.) There were no major differences among the media outlets examined.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Juvenile justice is most noteworthy for how rarely it was addressed in a systemic context. Much of the coverage focused on individual crimes, with little attempt to find broader explanations. Two news events did introduce broader thematic concerns about juvenile justice. The first concerned the release of a black teenager, whom the Georgia Supreme Court ruled had been wrongly charged with aggravated child molestation in connection with a statutory rape case. Since he was black and the victim was white, accusations of racism in the prosecution were common. More generally, gang related crimes in Los Angeles and Washington, DC. drew coverage that explored the causes of gang activity.

There was also coverage of juvenile justice reforms of particular interest to this study in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and the *Washington Post*. In both Louisiana and Maryland, the juvenile justice systems were presented as needing major reform. These reform efforts and the politics surrounding them were covered by both papers, but this coverage made no mention of race or racial disparities.

Table 11 shows how explanations of juvenile crime were distributed across the races. Once again there was little discussion of juvenile justice in relation to whites. There were only six opinions on the factors that kept whites out of the juvenile justice system. Attention was heavily focused on African Americans, who accounted for 64 percent of all discussions. When discussing African Americans, four out of five opinions (81%) focused on systemic factors. These discussions revolved around accusations of discrimination in adjudication (16 mentions), selective enforcement (11), and overt racial discrimination in enforcement (eight).

The picture for Latinos was even more narrowly focused than for African Americans. All discussion surrounded gang membership or affiliation (18 mentions). Such explanations were considered systemic rather than individual, since much of the discussion addressed the role gangs

play in the community and how the law enforcement community relates to racial or ethnic gangs. While the decision to join a gang is undeniably an individual one, the discussions of gangs treated them at a more systemic level. No other group received significant levels of discussion, and there was too little discussion to reliably examine differences among media outlets.

Table 11						
Explanations of Juvenile Crime by Race						
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Unspecified Minority</i>	<i>Total N</i>	<i>%</i>
Individual Locus NEGATIVE	0%	19%	0%	0%	9	12%
Individual Locus POSITIVE	0%	0%	0%	0%	0	---
Systemic Locus NEGATIVE	0%	81%	100%	100%	58	80%
Systemic Locus POSITIVE	100%	0%	0%	0%	6	8%
TOTAL	100% 6	100% 47	100% 18	100% 2	73	

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was not to examine news coverage of race per se but to explore the treatment of race in connection with selected policy issues, with particular emphasis on the treatment of racial disparities. To accomplish this we examined 14 news outlets over a seven-week period during May and June 2004. This sample produced 547 news stories and opinion articles containing 646 opinions on racial differences related to education, employment, juvenile justice, and health care.

The relative emphasis on these policy areas was a somewhat arbitrary result of the newsworthy events that occurred during the period sampled. Paramount among these was the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which skewed the discussion of race toward the topics of education and desegregation. But the overall coverage was sufficiently broad to provide at least preliminary indications of how racial considerations affect several major areas of social controversy and public policy. We examined two dimensions of explanations for racial disparities: first, whether it was positive or negative in tone; and second, whether it focused on individual or systemic factors.

For each of the four issue areas, we developed a list of explanations or causes of racial disparities based on a preliminary observation of news content as well as items from Frameworks elicitations and other sources. These explanations ranged from individual laziness to institutional racism and from broken families to the impact of undocumented immigrants. While the explanations were diverse, they could be grouped into two categories – systemic or individual.

In general, causes or explanations focused on the particular factors addressed individual or family strengths and weaknesses, moral standing, assimilation of American values, or individual misjudgments. Systemic discussions focused on elements beyond the control of a single individual or family. In Table 12 we combine all discussions into a single table to get an overall view of discussions of racial disparities. It is clear from this overview that systemic explanations

were almost twice as frequent as personal or individual ones. It is also clear that the discussions were heavily focused on negative effects.

Table 12		
Explaining Racial Disparities: All Topics		
	Systemic Factors	Personal Factors
Positive Effect	15	37
Negative Effect	85	63
Total	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(738)	(423)

Buoyed by news coverage surrounding the Brown v. Board of Education anniversary, education dominated the relevant issue news during the sample period. The anniversary of the Brown decision filled the news and opinion pages with condemnations of America's shameful history of segregation and its deleterious effects on the educational opportunities and academic achievements of African-Americans.

The Brown anniversary also produced numerous news stories and columns that took stock of the direction the nation has taken in the areas of desegregation and school performance over the intervening half century. Most journalists and sources who addressed this issue saw some type of improvement, although nearly one in four argued that less overt forms of segregation continue to exist which are no less offensive than those of the past. Despite the dominant body of opinion that conditions have improved, a majority also argued that more remains to be done.

Discussions of contemporary racial disparities in educational achievement were more diverse. Critiques of individual failings among African-Americans, such as poor motivation and low expectations, appeared almost as frequently as criticisms of social conditions, such as continuing de facto residential segregation and a related lack of quality educational facilities.

There was also considerable discussion of Latinos. But these focused not only on the systemic barriers to academic attainment but also on individual success stories meant to illustrate the effects of hard work and diligence in overcoming obstacles.

Table 13		
Explaining Racial Disparities: Academic Achievement		
	<i>Systemic Factors</i>	<i>Personal Factors</i>
Positive Effect	20	46
Negative Effect	80	54
Total	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(436)	(258)

The role of the individual also loomed large in the search for solutions to educational disparities that were linked to race. When stories addressed the issue of who should solve the educational disparities that were identified, individuals and their families were named over 40% of the time, far more than any other agent of change. When we combined these responses with that of “the minority community,” they made up a majority of all of opinions. By contrast all levels of government together accounted for only 30% of all mentions. Thus, a majority of opinions cited in the media argued for self-help rather than government intervention to mitigate racially based educational disparities.

The discussion of employment policy followed a pattern similar to that of education. Nearly half of all opinions focused on systemic causes of racial disparities. The situation of African-Americans was portrayed as almost entirely negative, with the most blame being affixed to discrimination in hiring. By contrast there was almost as much positive as negative commentary on the situation of Latinos, and the focus was on individual rather than systemic causes. Unemployment was attributed most frequently to such factors as poor language skills and

a failure to assimilate into American culture. Conversely, successful employment was presented as the product of hard work and proper education on the part of individuals.

Discussions of racial differences in health care were almost entirely negative in tone, with the majority of opinions blaming individual rather than systemic factors for both African-Americans and Latinos. But the individual causes that were cited were specific to each group. For African-Americans poor personal habits were by far the most frequently cited cause of poor health care. Among Latinos the problem was blamed mainly on cultural values and language difficulties. Among both groups, however, the leading systemic factor mentioned was a lack of health insurance coverage (or jobs with health care benefits).

Table 14		
Explaining Racial Disparities: Blacks v. Hispanics		
Blacks		
	<i>Systemic Factors</i>	<i>Personal Factors</i>
Positive Effect	18	25
Negative Effect	82	75
Total	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(350)	(203)
Hispanics		
	<i>Systemic Factors</i>	<i>Personal Factors</i>
Positive Effect	10	52
Negative Effect	90	48
Total	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(103)	(85)

Finally, juvenile justice coverage was mostly limited to news about individual crimes; it was rarely discussed in a broader social context, apart from some stories on gang-related

activities. When such discussion did occur, attention was heavily focused on African-Americans. The juvenile justice system was usually blamed either for discrimination or a failure to effectively deal with minority youth, such as inner-city gangs. There was almost no positive commentary that endorsed the juvenile justice system’s ability to diminish racial disparities.

Overall, most of the coverage was critical of America’s treatment of its minority citizens and the racial disparities this treatment produced. Even the celebratory coverage of the Brown v. Board of Education anniversary, and the vast social changes it set in motion or accelerated, was tempered by the frequent acknowledgment that the promise of Brown has not yet been fully realized, and our society needs to keep working toward this goal.

Table 15		
Explaining Racial Disparities in Academic Achievement : Blacks v. Hispanics		
Blacks		
	<i>Systemic Factors</i>	<i>Personal Factors</i>
Positive Effect	31	25
Negative Effect	69	75
Total	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(153)	(108)
Hispanics		
	<i>Systemic Factors</i>	<i>Personal Factors</i>
Positive Effect	11	82
Negative Effect	89	18
Total	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(56)	(44)

The only minority groups that attracted enough coverage to justify separate analysis were African-Americans and Latinos. And the coverage of these two groups was somewhat different.

Despite heavy criticism of systemic factors, coverage of black America was more likely to trace problems to individual failings, while individual Latinos were more likely to be the subjects of positive features showing how individuals had overcome obstacles to attain success.

Appendix I: Chronology of Major Events

The big event of the sample period was the anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision on May 17th. Stories marking the anniversary began appearing in some papers early in the month, although most ran during the week leading up to the anniversary. The event was addressed by major columnists of varying perspectives, from George Will and Thomas Sowell to David Broder and William Raspberry, as well as a host of local columnists from around the country.

Coverage included extensive profiles of both famous and unsung figures in the drive to integrate schools, as well as many historical sketches of life before and after the Brown decision. There were also appearances in Topeka by President Bush and Senator Kerry to mark the anniversary. Coverage of the anniversary took an unexpected twist when Bill Cosby admonished lower class blacks for failing to live up to the civil rights legacy. His remarks sparked a new debate over the proper interpretation of the Brown decision and the subsequent 50 years of civil rights activism.

Earlier in the month President Bush signed an executive order aimed at improving education for Native Americans. This was covered by some papers, but was certainly not a major news event. Also early in the month, a new study suggested that heavy intake of caffeine posed particular risks for African American teens. New statistics released by the American Cancer Society showed improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of many forms of cancer, but disparities in the prognosis for minorities with cancer.

One of the few juvenile crime stories to be picked up in almost every paper also occurred early in the month. The Georgia Supreme Court's decision to release a black teenager convicted of aggravated child molestation for underage sex with a white girl was covered almost everywhere. The court determined that the teen should not have been charged with child molestation, and that prosecutors had overstepped the intent of the law. The court let stand his conviction for statutory rape and released him for time served.

In addition to marking the Brown anniversary, the Presidential election campaign entered into this study only marginally, when Sen. Kerry attacked the President on his education plan and the President's own immigration plan was met by a Democratic counter-proposal. About a week before the Brown anniversary, Maryland Governor Robert Ehrlich criticized multiculturalism. This was covered in the *Washington Post* and in news briefs around the country.

The week of the Brown anniversary, a gang related machete attack in Virginia made national news. When arrests were made within days of several teenage suspects, the story drew to a close, although the subject of growing gangs fueled continued coverage in the *Washington Post*. In the last week of May, the brutal murder of three children in Baltimore was widely covered around the country. The eventual arrest of an uncle and a teenage cousin for the murder kept the story alive.

On the first of June, the Supreme Court handed down a decision that gave the police greater leeway in interrogating juvenile suspects without violating their Miranda rights. Such policy stories on juvenile justice were rare, with most stories simply reporting on specific, isolated juvenile offenses. Early June offered one of the few business stories that was national in scope. Wal-Mart made the announcement that it would launch a new diversity initiative that included tying some executive bonuses to diversity goals. This policy change was covered by most of the major papers.

On the cultural front, the film documentary "With All Deliberate Speed" and the television documentary "I Sit Where I Want" both premiered as a part of the Brown anniversary. "Deliberate Speed" explored the history of Brown and the major players. "I Sit Where I want" examined the more informal social segregation that still dominates high school life, even in desegregated schools. The documentary found the lunchroom to be a microcosm of self-imposed segregation.

Later in June came the release of the "mockumentary" film "A Day Without a Mexican." In the film a mysterious fog rolls across California one night; the next morning every Mexican in

the state is gone. From the Lt. Governor to the gardeners and farm laborers, California suddenly finds itself in a labor crisis. The filmmakers said they intended to draw attention to how central Latinos are to the economy of California and, by extension, the nation as a whole.