

**Selected Articles**

**For**

**Examining and Overcoming**

**Our Implicit Biases**

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## *Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions*

By Sendhil Mullainathan, Professor Economics at Harvard University

New York Times; January 3, 2015

The deaths of African-Americans at the hands of the police in Ferguson, Mo., in Cleveland and on Staten Island have reignited a debate about race. Some argue that these events are isolated and that racism is a thing of the past. Others contend that they are merely the tip of the iceberg, highlighting that skin color still has a huge effect on how people are treated.

Arguments about race are often heated and anecdotal. As a social scientist, I naturally turn to empirical research for answers. As it turns out, an impressive body of research spanning decades addresses just these issues — and leads to some uncomfortable conclusions and makes us look at this debate from a different angle.

The central challenge of such research is isolating the effect of race from other factors. For example, we know African-Americans earn less income, on average, than whites. Maybe that is evidence that employers discriminate against them. But maybe not. We also know African-Americans tend to be stuck in neighborhoods with worse schools, and perhaps that — and not race directly — explains the wage gap. If so, perhaps policy should focus on place rather than race, as some argue.

But we can isolate the effect of race to some degree. A study I conducted in 2003 with Marianne Bertrand, an economist at the University of Chicago, illustrates how. We mailed thousands of résumés to employers with job openings and measured which ones were selected for callbacks for interviews. But before sending them, we randomly used stereotypically African-American names (such as “Jamal”) on some and stereotypically white names (like “Brendan”) on others.

The same résumé was roughly 50 percent more likely to result in callback for an interview if it had a “white” name. Because the résumés were statistically identical, any differences in outcomes could be attributed only to the factor we manipulated: the names.

Other studies have also examined race and employment. In a 2009 study, Devah Pager, Bruce Western and Bart Bonikowski, all now sociologists at Harvard, sent actual people to apply for low-wage jobs. They were given identical résumés and similar interview training. Their sobering finding was that African-American applicants with no criminal record were offered jobs at a rate as low as white applicants who had criminal records.

These kinds of methods have been used in a variety of research, especially in the last 20 years. Here are just some of the general findings:

- When doctors were shown patient histories and asked to make judgments about heart disease, they were much less likely to recommend cardiac catheterization (a helpful procedure) to black patients — even when their medical files were statistically identical to those of white patients.

- When whites and blacks were sent to bargain for a used car, blacks were offered initial prices roughly \$700 higher, and they received far smaller concessions.
- Several studies found that sending emails with stereotypically black names in response to apartment-rental ads on Craigslist elicited fewer responses than sending ones with white names. A regularly repeated study by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development sent African-Americans and whites to look at apartments and found that African-Americans were shown fewer apartments to rent and houses for sale.
- White state legislators were found to be less likely to respond to constituents with African-American names. This was true of legislators in both political parties.
- Emails sent to faculty members at universities, asking to talk about research opportunities, were more likely to get a reply if a stereotypically white name was used.
- Even eBay auctions were not immune. When iPods were auctioned on eBay, researchers randomly varied the skin color on the hand holding the iPod. A white hand holding the iPod received 21 percent more offers than a black hand.

The criminal justice system — the focus of current debates — is harder to examine this way. One study, though, found a clever method. The pools of people from which jurors are chosen are effectively random. Analyzing this natural experiment revealed that an all-white jury was 16 percentage points more likely to convict a black defendant than a white one, but when a jury had one black member, it convicted both at the same rate.

I could go on, but hopefully the sheer breadth of these findings impresses you, as it did me.

There are some counterexamples: Data show that some places, like elite colleges, most likely do favor minority applicants. But this evidence underlies that a helping hand in one area does not preclude harmful shoves in many other areas, including ignored résumés, unhelpful faculty members and reluctant landlords.

But this widespread discrimination is not necessarily a sign of widespread *conscious* prejudice.

When our own résumé study came out, many human-resources managers told us they were stunned. They prized creating diversity in their companies, yet here was evidence that they were doing anything but. How was that possible?

To use the language of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, we think both fast and slow. When deciding what iPod to buy or which résumé to pursue, we weigh a few factors deliberately (“slow”). But for hundreds of other factors, we must rely on intuitive judgment — and we weigh these unconsciously (“fast”).

Even if, in our slow thinking, we work to avoid discrimination, it can easily creep into our fast thinking. Our snap judgments rely on all the associations we have — from fictional television

shows to news reports. They use stereotypes, both the accurate and the inaccurate, both those we would want to use and ones we find repulsive.

We can't articulate why one seller's iPod photograph looks better; dozens of factors shape this snap judgment — and we might often be distraught to realize some of them. If we could make a slower, deliberate judgment we would use some of these factors (such as the quality of the photo), but ignore others (such as the color of the hand holding the iPod). But many factors escape our consciousness.

This kind of discrimination — crisply articulated in a 1995 article by the psychologists Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard and Anthony Greenwald of the University of Washington — has been studied by dozens of researchers who have documented implicit bias outside of our awareness.

The key to “fast thinking” discrimination is that we all share it. Good intentions do not guarantee immunity. One study published in 2007 asked subjects in a video-game simulation to shoot at people who were holding a gun. (Some were criminals; some were innocent bystanders.) African-Americans were shot at a higher rate, even those who were not holding guns.

Ugly pockets of conscious bigotry remain in this country, but most discrimination is more insidious. The urge to find and call out the bigot is powerful, and doing so is satisfying. But it is also a way to let ourselves off the hook. Rather than point fingers outward, we should look inward — and examine how, despite best intentions, we discriminate in ways big and small.

## *Our Biased Brains*

By Nicholas Kristof, Op-Ed Columnist

New York Times; May 7, 2015

To better understand the roots of racial division in America, think about this:

The human brain seems to be wired so that it categorizes people by race in the first one-fifth of a second after seeing a face. Brain scans show that even when people are told to sort people by gender, the brain still groups people by race.

Racial bias also begins astonishingly early: Even infants often show a preference for their own racial group. In one study, 3-month-old white infants were shown photos of faces of white adults and black adults; they preferred the faces of whites. For 3-month-old black infants living in Africa, it was the reverse.

This preference reflected what the child was accustomed to. Black infants living in overwhelmingly white Israel didn't show a strong preference one way or the other, according to the study, published in *Psychological Science*.

Where does this ingrained propensity to racial bias come from?

Scholars suggest that in evolutionary times we became hard-wired to make instantaneous judgments about whether someone is in our "in group" or not — because that could be lifesaving. A child who didn't prefer his or her own group might have been at risk of being clubbed to death.

"It's a feature of evolution," says Mahzarin Banaji, a Harvard psychology professor who co-developed tests of unconscious biases. These suggest that people turn out to have subterranean racial and gender biases that they are unaware of and even disapprove of.

**Even if we humans have evolved to have a penchant for racial preferences from a very young age, this is not destiny.**

I've written about unconscious bias before, and I encourage you to test yourself at [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu). It's sobering to discover that whatever you believe intellectually, you're biased about race, gender, age or disability.

What's particularly dispiriting is that this unconscious bias among whites toward blacks seems just as great among preschoolers as among senior citizens.

Banaji's research projects show that unconscious racial bias turns up in children as soon as they have the verbal skills to be tested for it, at about age 4. The degree of unconscious bias then seems pretty constant: In tests, this unconscious bias turns out to be roughly the same for a 4- or 6-year-old as for a senior citizen who grew up in more racially oppressive times.

In one set of experiments, children as young as about 4 were shown ambiguous photos of people who could be white or Asian. In some, the people in the photos were smiling; in others, they were frowning.

White American kids disproportionately judged that the people who were smiling were white and that those who were frowning were Asian. When the experiment was conducted in Taiwan with exactly the same photos, Taiwanese children thought that the faces when smiling were Asian, when frowning were white.

The American children were also shown faces that were ambiguous as to whether the person was white or black. In those cases, white kids disproportionately thought that the smiling people were white and the frowning ones were black.

Many of these experiments on in-group bias have been conducted around the world, and almost every ethnic group shows a bias favoring its own. One exception: African-Americans.

Researchers find that in contrast to other groups, African-Americans do not have an unconscious bias toward their own. From young children to adults, they are essentially neutral and favor neither whites nor blacks.

Banaji and other scholars suggest that this is because even young African-American children somehow absorb the social construct that white skin is prestigious and that black skin isn't. In one respect, that is unspeakably sad; in another, it's a model of unconscious race neutrality. Yet even if we humans have evolved to have a penchant for racial preferences from a very young age, this is not destiny. We can resist the legacy that evolution has bequeathed us.

"We wouldn't have survived if our ancestors hadn't developed bodies that store sugar and fat," Banaji says. "What made them survive is what kills us." Yet we fight the battle of the bulge and sometimes win — and, likewise, we can resist a predisposition for bias against other groups.

One strategy that works is seeing images of heroic African-Americans; afterward, whites and Asians show less bias, a study found. Likewise, hearing a story in which a black person rescues someone from a white assailant reduces anti-black bias in subsequent testing. It's not clear how long this effect lasts.

Deep friendships, especially romantic relationships with someone of another race, also seem to mute bias — and that, too, has implications for bringing young people together to forge powerful friendships.

"If you actually have friendships across race lines, you probably have fewer biases," Banaji says. "These are learned, so they can be unlearned."

