

Straight Talk for White Men

SUPERMARKET shoppers are more likely to buy French wine when French music is playing, and to buy German wine when they hear German music. That's true even though only 14 percent of shoppers say they noticed the music, [a study finds](#).

[Researchers discovered](#) that candidates for medical school interviewed on sunny days received much higher ratings than those interviewed on rainy days. Being interviewed on a rainy day was a setback equivalent to having an MCAT score 10 percent lower, according to a new book called "[Everyday Bias](#)," by Howard J. Ross.

Those studies are a reminder that we humans are perhaps less rational than we would like to think, and more prone to the buffeting of unconscious influences. That's something for those of us who are white men to reflect on when we're accused of "privilege."

White men sometimes feel besieged and baffled by these suggestions of systematic advantage. When I wrote a series last year, "[When Whites Just Don't Get It](#)," the reaction from white men was often indignant: *It's an equal playing field now! Get off our case!*

Yet the evidence is overwhelming that unconscious bias remains widespread in ways that systematically benefit both whites and men. So white men get a double dividend, a payoff from both racial and gender biases.

Consider [a huge interactive exploration](#) of 14 million reviews on [RateMyProfessors.com](#) that recently suggested that male professors are disproportionately likely to be described as a "star" or "genius." Female professors are disproportionately described as "nasty," "ugly," "bossy" or "disorganized."

One reaction from men was: *Well, maybe women professors are more disorganized!*

But [researchers at North Carolina State conducted an experiment](#) in which they asked students to rate teachers of an online course (the students never saw the teachers). To some of the students, a male teacher claimed to be female and vice versa.

When students were taking the class from someone they believed to be male, they rated the teacher more highly. The very same teacher, when believed to be female, was rated significantly lower.

Something similar happens with race.

Two scholars, Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, sent out fictitious résumés in response to help-wanted ads. Each résumé was given a name that either sounded stereotypically African-American or one that sounded white, but the résumés were otherwise basically the same.

[The study found](#) that a résumé with a name like Emily or Greg received 50 percent more callbacks than the same résumé with a name like Lakisha or Jamal. Having a white-sounding name was as beneficial as eight years' work experience.

[Then there was the study](#) in which researchers asked professors to evaluate the summary of a supposed applicant for a post as laboratory manager, but, in some cases, the applicant was named John and in others Jennifer. Everything else was the same.

“John” was rated an average of 4.0 on a 7-point scale for competence, “Jennifer” a 3.3. When asked to propose an annual starting salary for the applicant, the professors suggested on average a salary for “John” almost \$4,000 higher than for “Jennifer.”

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It's not that we white men are intentionally doing anything wrong, but we do have a penchant for obliviousness about the way we are beneficiaries of systematic unfairness. Maybe that's because in a race, it's easy not to notice a tailwind, and white men often go through life with a tailwind, while women and people of color must push against a headwind.

While we don't notice systematic unfairness, we do observe specific efforts to redress it — such as affirmative action, which often strikes white men as profoundly unjust. Thus a majority of white Americans surveyed in [a 2011 study](#) said that there is now more racism against whites than against blacks.

None of these examples mean exactly that society is full of hard-core racists and misogynists. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a Duke University sociologist, aptly calls the present situation “racism without racists”; it could equally be called “misogyny without misogynists.” Of course, there are die-hard racists and misogynists out there, but the bigger problem seems to be well-meaning people who believe in equal rights yet make decisions that inadvertently transmit both racism and sexism.

So, come on, white men! Let’s just acknowledge that we’re all flawed, biased and sometimes irrational, and that we can do more to resist unconscious bias. That means trying not to hire people just because they look like us, avoiding telling a young girl she’s “beautiful” while her brother is “smart.” It means acknowledging systematic bias as a step toward correcting it.