

In Queensland, it matters if you're black or white

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Black passengers face clear discrimination on Brisbane buses, a study from The University of Queensland School of Economics has shown.

Almost 60 years after African-American woman Rosa Parks became a civil rights icon when she refused to give up her seat to a [white](#) man on a bus in the American South, the UQ study has found [black](#) and Indian people are a discriminated 'out group' on buses in Queensland.

Professor Paul Frijters and PhD student Redzo Mujcic recorded 1552 encounters between test subjects and bus drivers in Brisbane.

"The results were startlingly clear," Professor Frijters said.

"In a significant majority of cases, bus drivers showed preferential treatment toward white [Caucasians](#) over black or Indian passengers," he said.

Professor Frijters and Mr Mujcic had four groups of students board buses: a group defined as "black" for the purposes of the study, comprising Indigenous Australians, Africans, African Americans and [Pacific Islanders](#); a group that consisted of Indians of somewhat lighter complexion than the previous group; a group of fair-skinned Asians; and a group of fair-skinned Caucasians.

The study is part of a general theory of [human behaviour](#) that will be revealed in Professor Frijters' forthcoming book, '[An Economic Theory](#)

[of Greed, Love, Groups, and Networks'](#)

"Black, Indian, white Asian or white Caucasian test subjects were required to board a bus at various Brisbane locations with a faulty GO card, and then ask the bus driver if they could get on for free," Professor Frijters said.

"In 72 percent of the encounters, white Caucasian test subjects were given a free ride, versus 36 percent of black test subjects.

"People with Indian or black complexions are more likely to be treated as an 'out group' and less worthy of help compared to white Caucasians and white Asians," he said.

Indian test subjects were treated slightly more favourably than black test subjects, and were let on 51 percent of the time, while white Asian test subjects (Chinese, Japanese and Malaysian) were let on 73 percent of the time almost the same as caucasians.

Males were eight percent more likely than females to be let on for free, and bus drivers were six percent more likely to favour someone of the same race as themselves.

To gauge the importance of dress, the researchers used the same test subjects dressed in business suits and with briefcases.

In this attire, some 75 percent of the black and Indian test subjects were let on versus 93 percent of white test subjects, indicating that higher social status engendered more favouritism from bus drivers.

"The reason bus drivers were more reluctant to give black and Asian help-seekers a free ride was that they did not personally relate to them," Professor Frijters said.

"To test this, the subjects were sent to bus stops dressed in army suits, making it appear they were patriots and were defending the same community as the [bus driver](#).

"Some 97 percent of white test subjects were given a free ride if they dressed in an army suit, while only 85 percent of black and Indian test subjects were let on wearing an army suit.

"This shows that the reluctance to let on normally dressed black and Indians test subjects was indeed related to an 'out group' reaction by bus drivers that could be partially overcome by 'in group' clothing."

To test the possibility that black and Indian test subjects were perceived as less trustworthy and more aggressive than the other test subjects, pictures of the test subjects were presented to random passers-by who were asked to rate how aggressive, trustworthy and pretty the test subjects looked.

The test subjects who were rated as less aggressive were let on slightly more often than "more aggressive" ones, while perceived trustworthy individuals were also favoured at a higher rate than "untrustworthy" ones, but this did not affect the results on race.

As a follow-up, the researchers surveyed a random selection of bus drivers at resting stations in Brisbane, presenting them with pictures of the same test subjects and asking the drivers if they would let them on or not with an empty travel card.

"Some 80 percent of the bus drivers at resting stations indicated they would give free rides to Indian and black test subjects, even though in reality fewer than 50 percent were let on," Professor Frijters said.

"Indeed, bus drivers said they would let on white subjects five percent

less often than black subjects, while in reality white [test subjects](#) were favoured at least 40 percent more than black subjects."

The main reason given for not letting someone on was that it was against the rules, while the main reason given to let someone on was that it was no burden to do so.

Professor Frijters' book, An [Economic Theory](#) of Greed, Love, Groups, and Networks, considers a broad range of issues, including how people's choices are affected by the groups they belong to and the loving relations they have formed with their children, their partners and their society as a whole.

More information:

www.uq.edu.au/economics/?page=193452&pid=140112

Provided by University of Queensland

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