

Faculty in doctoral programs more responsive to white male prospective students, research finds

April 16 2015

Faced with requests to meet with potential doctoral students of easily identifiable gender, race or ethnicity, faculty in almost every academic discipline are significantly more responsive to white males than to women and minorities, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

And faculty in higher-paid disciplines, such as business, engineering/computer science and the [life sciences](#), and those at private universities, show more of this bias than their counterparts in lower-paying disciplines and [public universities](#), the study found.

"Our findings offer evidence that white males have a leg up over other students seeking mentoring at a critical early career juncture in the fields of business, education, human services, engineering and computer science, life sciences, natural/physical sciences and math, social sciences and marginally in the humanities," said lead researcher Katherine L. Milkman, PhD, of the University of Pennsylvania. "Notably, the magnitude of the discrimination we found is quite large."

In business—the most discriminatory discipline observed in the study—women and [minorities](#) seeking guidance were collectively ignored at 2.2 times the rate of Caucasian males, Milkman said. "Even in the least discriminatory academic discipline—the humanities (where discrimination did not reach statistical significance)—women and

minorities were still collectively ignored at 1.4 times the rate of Caucasian males when seeking guidance in the future."

Also, contrary to one of their hypotheses, Milkman and her colleagues Modupe Akinola, PhD, of Columbia University and Dolly Chugh, PhD, of New York University, found no evidence that as the representation of women and minorities in disciplines and universities increases, that discrimination against those groups decreases. Additionally, "there were no benefits to women of contacting female faculty, or to black or Hispanic students of contacting faculty of the same race or ethnicity," Akinola said. "Only Chinese students experienced significant benefits from contacting same-race faculty."

For this study, the researchers identified 6,300 doctoral programs and approximately 200,000 faculty at 259 U.S. universities ranked in U.S. News & World Report's 2010 "Best Colleges" issue. From those, they randomly selected one or two faculty members from each doctoral program, yielding 6,548 faculty subjects. They then went to the universities' website and collected each professor's email address, rank, gender and race/ethnicity.

The researchers then created emails from supposedly prospective doctoral students asking to meet with the professors "to briefly talk about your work and any possible opportunities for me to get involved in your research." Each email was signed with one of 20 names selected based on census and other data to indicate the gender and race/ethnicity (white, black, Hispanic, Indian, Chinese) of the purported student sender. On the theory that faculty would be predisposed to respond to students who shared their race/ethnicity, same race/ethnicity pairings were over-represented in the sample. Emails to the professors were queued in random order and sent on the same day at 8 a.m. in the time zone of each faculty member's university. A total of 6,548 emails were sent.

The researchers gave faculty members a week in which to respond to the emails. If a faculty member failed to answer a student, the researchers considered that a non-response. Differences identified in the response rate to white males versus other students provided the researchers with evidence of discrimination. Sixty-seven percent of the emails sent to faculty received responses.

The researchers said this is the first study to experimentally explore discrimination not only at an early career pathway stage but with a representative [faculty](#) sample and with a subject pool unbiased by the prospect of being observed by researchers.

"Such differences in treatment could have meaningful career consequences for individuals and for society," Chugh said. "By addressing what happens before prospective doctoral students enter academia, we hope to also shape what happens after."

More information: Milkman, K. L., Akinola, M., & Chugh, D. (2015, April 13). What Happens Before? A Field Experiment Exploring How Pay and Representation Differentially Shape Bias on the Pathway Into Organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Advance online publication. [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000022](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000022)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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