

Race and gender of scientists affect perception of credibility

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Ideology is a key factor in determining how people assess the credibility of scientific researchers, according to a new UBC Sauder School of Business study.

People who tend toward an elitist world view are more inclined to judge white male researchers as more credible, while people who ascribe to egalitarian beliefs are the opposite: they're more likely to judge women or people of colour as more credible researchers.

"Our studies suggest that belief systems affect how we judge academics in ways we may not be aware of," said study co-author Karl Aquino, the Richard Poon Professor of Organizations and Society at UBC Sauder. "People might believe in the merits of research, but biases can still overpower logic and prevent people from evaluating scholars objectively."

In a series of five studies, Aquino and his co-authors asked more than 900 participants in the United States, Canada and India to read research reports that included photos of researchers that varied by gender or race. Participants then evaluated researchers' credibility. Their ideological leanings from elitist to egalitarian were gauged in a separate survey asking if they agreed with statements like, "It's OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others," or "We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible."

In the Indian sample, Aquino and his co-authors varied the [researchers'](#) caste instead of race or gender and also assessed whether people endorsed socialist or conservative political parties.

Importantly, the perceived credibility of the researcher impacted how the participants interpreted subsequent social situations.

Aquino says a key finding was that the people whose ideologies colour their perceptions are those with the most extreme ideologies, at either end of the spectrum.

"Elitists and egalitarians are equally susceptible to evaluating people in ways that reinforce their beliefs," said Aquino. "In the business world, the statements made by academic experts can influence decisions, so it's vital to be aware of how ideology influences whether people believe what comes from the mouth of an academic."

The study, "What Makes Professors Appear Credible: The Effect of Demographic Characteristics and Ideological Beliefs," co-authored by UBC Sauder PhD alumnus Luke Zhu, Aquino and Abhijeet Vadera is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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