

By age 6, kids tend to see white men as more 'brilliant' than white women

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Albert Einstein. Benjamin Franklin. Thomas Edison. Steve Jobs.

Picture a brilliant person in your mind's eye and you're likely to conjure a white male. That idea gets into kids' heads as early as the age of 6, a new study finds.

Researchers who polled more than 200 New York kindergartners and first-graders found that they had already begun to believe that [white men](#) are more "brilliant" than [white women](#). That notion helps lay the groundwork for a pervasive stereotype that privileges white boys over other children, and may have implications for their future careers and the course of their lives, scientists said.

"This white-male-genius stereotype that we have culturally in our society really affects kids and their beliefs about who is brilliant and who can become brilliant," said Mary Murphy, a social psychologist at Indiana University who was not involved in the new study.

In the United States, women earn more than half of the college and graduate school degrees. They also outperform boys at school, including in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) subjects. But that hasn't stopped people like former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers from saying things like the reason there are fewer women in top-level science jobs is a "different availability of aptitude at the high end."

Experts say the idea that "brilliance" is necessary for certain disciplines and jobs is widely shared, and there's a growing body of evidence that people associate such brilliance with white men.

Andrei Cimpian, a psychologist at New York University, has been exploring these biases and their implications for years. For instance, he and colleagues found that in fields that prize "brilliance" and "genius," there were far fewer women and African Americans with Ph.D.s.

That discrepancy can be found in elementary school classrooms. One study reported that even when [black students](#) had test scores comparable to those of white students, they were far less likely to be assigned to gifted programs unless their teacher was black.

Stereotypes about intelligence and gender take root at a young age. Cimpian and his colleagues have shown that while 5-year-old boys and girls each think their own gender is more likely to be brilliant, by age 6, girls have started to absorb and express the idea that men are more likely to be brilliant than women.

That paper, published in 2017 in *Science*, involved a largely white student body. For their new study, published this month in the *Journal of Social Issues*, Cimpian's team wanted to find out whether this gender stereotype was shared by students of other races.

The scientists set up a guessing game for 203 5- and 6-year-olds from two public schools in New York City. About 37% of the students were white, 30% were Latinx, 6% were Asian, 5% were black, and 22% described themselves as multiracial.

The children were shown pictures of pairs of adults—either a white man and white woman, or a black man and black woman—in naturalistic scenes, like a home or an office. The scientists asked the students to guess which of the adults was "really, really smart"—a kid-friendly way of describing brilliance. (The scientists also included rounds where they asked which adult was "really, really nice" in order to conceal what the test was really about.)

The researchers found that at age 5, boys and girls each favored their own gender in the brilliance department. But by age 6, both boys and girls associated brilliance with white men more than they did with white women. This held true for children regardless of racial background.

For instance, when they were 5 years old, 57% of white girls said the white women were smarter than the white men—but only 38% held that opinion when they were 6. The change was even more pronounced for girls of color: 62% of them favored white women over white men when they were 5, though only 39% did so when they were 6.

This bias could hurt white girls in the long run, said Cimpian, the study's senior author. After all, if a girl absorbs the idea that math and science are for really smart people, and if she doesn't see herself as really smart, she might spend her time and energy on other subjects.

"A small initial bias can snowball into something significantly greater down the line," he said.

How can boys be seen as better in science and math when girls get the better grades? Cimpian offered a possible explanation: Girls who succeed are seen as hard-working rather than as really smart—and there's evidence that teachers endorse some of these subtle biases, he added.

The results involving white adults were in line with his previous work, but there was a twist when it came to judging pictures of men and women who were black. In these cases, white children overall were slightly more likely to see the woman as more brilliant than the man. Boys and girls of color, on the other hand, still favored their own gender at age 6.

"This suggests that these stereotypes about gender that even young children acquire are actually pretty nuanced and complicated from the very beginning," Cimpian said.

The study authors did not ask kids to explain what drove these stereotypes, but researchers said they had some hypotheses.

Yasmiyn Irizarry, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin who was not involved in the study, alluded to a complex mix of factors, not least of which is that masculinity in black men is often seen as dangerous rather than an ideal. "If you see somebody as being more dangerous, more criminal, as being more problematic, would you think of them as simultaneously being more smart?" Irizarry said.

Murphy pointed out that to the extent that there is any diversity in media programming, characters who are children of color are often girls (think Dora the Explorer and Doc McStuffins) rather than boys.

The study authors did not compare perceptions of white men and women directly to black men and women, Cimpian said. "It is very much a live possibility that even though children chose black women more often than black men, they still don't think of black women as being anywhere nearly on par with white men," he said.

Black women face particular challenges because they are not perceived as prototypical women (that position goes to white [women](#)) or as prototypical black people (which goes to black men). As a result, they may have to deal with a type of "cognitive invisibility" that leads others to ignore their contributions in school and the workplace.

"This sort of invisibility can have pernicious consequences, in terms of whether they're ever the ones being talked to in the room, whether they're considered for promotion, things of that nature," Cimpian said.

So where exactly do these stereotypes come from? A mix of input from parents, teachers, peers and the media—as well as the preexisting gender imbalances in brilliance-oriented fields—is likely to blame, experts said.

"It's incumbent on parents and educators to supplement these cultural representations of brilliance with stories, photos (and) pictures of

brilliance represented in a much more diverse array," Murphy said. That includes "who can be brilliant and the ways in which people can be brilliant."

Cimpian emphasized the importance of teaching children that these role models didn't succeed merely due to their apparent brilliance, but by overcoming obstacles and doing the hard work needed to achieve their goals. This kind of message should make role models more relatable, and thus more motivating, he said.

Irizarry cautioned that role models could only help so much, given the pervasiveness of these stereotypes. She pointed to a study that tracked the eye movements and behavior of pre-kindergarten teachers, finding that when teachers were primed to expect trouble, they focused far more attention on black boys than on other students in their classrooms.

Young children probably pick up on these subtle, sometimes subconscious, signals, Irizarry said. They see who is praised and who is singled out for discipline, and start to draw their own conclusions.

"I doubt anybody came to them and said, 'Guess what? White boys are the smartest,'" she said. Yet that's what the the 6-year-olds in Cimpian's study appeared to believe.

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