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Our Racist, Sexist Selves

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF Published: April 6, 2008

To my horror, I turn out to be a racist.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times Nicholas D. Kristof

The University of Chicago offers an online psychological test in which you encounter a series of 100 black or white men, holding either guns or cellphones. You're supposed to shoot the gunmen and holster your gun for the others.

I shot armed blacks in an average of 0.679 seconds, while I waited slightly longer — .694 seconds — to shoot armed whites. Conversely, I holstered my gun more quickly when encountering unarmed whites than unarmed blacks.

Take the test yourself and you'll probably find that you show bias as well. Most whites and many blacks are more quick to shoot blacks, no matter how egalitarian they profess to be.

Harvard has a similar battery of psychological tests online. These "implicit attitude tests" very cleverly show that a stunningly large proportion of people who honestly believe themselves to be egalitarian unconsciously associate good with white and bad with black.

The unconscious is playing a political role this year, for the evidence is overwhelming that most Americans have unconscious biases both against blacks and against women in executive roles.

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At first glance, it may seem that Barack Obama would face a stronger impediment than Hillary Clinton. Experiments have shown that the brain categorizes people by race in less than 100 milliseconds (one-tenth of a second), about 50 milliseconds before determining sex. And evolutionary psychologists believe we're hard-wired to be suspicious of people outside our own group, to save our ancestors from blithely greeting enemy tribes of cave men. In contrast, there's no hard-wired hostility toward women, though men may have a hard-wired desire to control and impregnate them.

Yet racism may also be easier to override than sexism. For example, one experiment found it easy for whites to admire African-American doctors; they just mentally categorized them as "doctors" rather than as "blacks." Meanwhile, whites categorize black doctors whom they dislike as "blacks."

In another experiment, researchers put blacks and whites in sports jerseys as if they belonged to two basketball teams. People looking at the photos logged the players in their

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memories more by team than by race, recalling a player's jersey color but not necessarily his or her race. But only very rarely did people forget whether a player was male or female.

"We can make categorization by race go away, but we could never make gender categorization go away," said John Tooby, a scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who ran the experiment. Looking at the challenges that black and female candidates face in overcoming unconscious bias, he added, "Based on the underlying psychology and anthropology, I think it's more difficult for a woman, though not impossible."

Alice Eagly, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University, agrees: "In general, gender trumps race. ... Race may be easier to overcome."

The challenge for women competing in politics or business is less misogyny than unconscious sexism: Americans don't hate women, but they do frequently stereotype them as warm and friendly, creating a mismatch with the stereotype we hold of leaders as tough and strong. So voters (women as well as men, though a bit less so) may feel that a female candidate is not the right person for the job because of biases they're not even aware of.

"I don't have to be conscious of this," said Nilanjana Dasgupta, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "All I think is that this person isn't a good fit for a tough leadership job."

Women now hold 55 percent of top jobs at American foundations but are still vastly underrepresented among political and corporate leaders — and one factor may be that those are seen as jobs requiring particular toughness. Our unconscious may feel more of a mismatch when a woman competes to be president or a C.E.O. than when she aims to lead a foundation or a university.

Women face a related challenge: Those viewed as tough and strong are also typically perceived as cold and unfeminine. Many experiments have found that women have trouble being perceived as both nice and competent.

"Clinton runs the risk of being seen as particularly cold, particularly uncaring, because she doesn't fit the mold," said Joshua Correll, a psychologist at the University of Chicago. "It probably is something a man doesn't deal with."

But biases are not immutable. Research subjects who were asked to think of a strong woman then showed less implicit bias about men and women. And students exposed to a large number of female professors also experienced a reduction in gender stereotypes.

So maybe the impact of this presidential contest won't be measured just in national policies, but also in progress in the deepest recesses of our own minds.

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