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OP-ED COLUMNIST

What? Me Biased?

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For the last year and a half, a team of psychology professors has been conducting remarkable experiments on how Americans view Barack Obama through the prism of race.

The scholars used a common research technique, the implicit association test, to measure whether people regarded Mr. Obama and other candidates as more foreign or more American. They found that research subjects — particularly when primed to think of Mr. Obama as a black candidate — subconsciously considered him less American than either Hillary Clinton or John McCain.

Indeed, [the study](#) found that the research subjects — Californian college students, many of them Democrats supportive of Mr. Obama — unconsciously perceived him as less American even than the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

It's not that any of them actually believed Mr. Obama to be foreign. But the implicit association test measured the way the unconscious mind works, and in following instructions to sort images rapidly, the mind balked at accepting a black candidate as fully American. This result mattered: The more difficulty a person had in classifying Mr. Obama as American, the less likely that person was to support Mr. Obama.

It's easy to be skeptical of such research, so test for your own unconscious biases at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo> or at <http://backhand.uchicago.edu/Center/ShooterEffect>.

Race is a controversial, emotional subject in America, particularly in the context of this campaign. Many Obama supporters believe that their candidate would be further ahead if it were not for racism, while many McCain supporters resent the insinuations and believe that if Mr. Obama were white, he wouldn't even be considered for the presidency.

Yet with race an undercurrent in the national debate, that also makes this a teachable moment. Partly that's because of new findings both in neurology, using brain scans to understand how we respond to people of different races, and social psychology, examining the gulf between our conscious ideals of equality and our unconscious proclivity to discriminate.

Incidentally, such discrimination is not only racial. We also have unconscious biases against the elderly and against women seeking powerful positions — biases that affect the Republican ticket.

Some scholars link racial attitudes to a benefit in evolutionary times from an ability to form snap judgments about who is a likely friend and foe. There may have been an evolutionary advantage in recognizing instantaneously whether a stranger was from one's own tribe or from an enemy tribe. There's some evidence

that the amygdala, a center in the brain for emotions, flashes a threat warning when it perceives people who look “different.”

Yet our biases are probably largely cultural. One reason to think that is that many African-Americans themselves have an unconscious pro-white bias. All told, considerable evidence suggests that while the vast majority of Americans truly believe in equality and aspire to equal opportunity for all, our minds aren't as egalitarian as we think they are.

“To me, this study really reveals this gap between our minds and our ideals,” said Thierry Devos, a professor at San Diego State University who conducted the research on Mr. Obama, along with Debbie Ma of the University of Chicago. “Equality is very much linked to ideas of American identity, but it's hard to live up to these ideas. Even somebody like Barack Obama, who may be about to become president — we have a hard time seeing him as American.”

A flood of recent research has shown that most Americans, including Latinos and Asian-Americans, associate the idea of “American” with white skin. One study found that although people realize that Lucy Liu is American and that Kate Winslet is British, their minds automatically process an Asian face as foreign and a white face as American — hence this title in an academic journal: “Is Kate Winslet More American Than Lucy Liu?”

One might argue that Mr. Obama registers as foreign in our minds because he does have overseas family connections, such as his father's Kenyan ancestry. But similar experiments have found the same outcome with famous African-American sports figures.

Moreover, Professor Devos found that when participants in the latest study were told to focus on the age of each candidate, or on the political party of each candidate, then Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain were perceived as equally American. It was only when people were prompted to focus on skin color and to see Mr. Obama as black that he was perceived as foreign.

This 2008 election is a milestone and may put a black man in the White House. That creates an opportunity for an adult conversation about the murky complexities of race, in part because there's evidence that when people become aware of their unconscious biases, they can overcome them.

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