

# Equity in Graduate Education Virtual Journal Club

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## We want black students, just not you: How white admissions counselors screen black prospective students.

By Ted Thornhill

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### Summary

This study is one of the first to empirically test the existence of intraracial discrimination in admission processes. Thornhill draws upon Carbado & Gulati's (2013) theory of intraracial selection and discrimination which posits that gatekeepers prefer Black applicants who serve their institution's purposes. This audit study of the responses to emails sent from prospective Black applicants to 517 admission decision-makers build on previous studies that explore bias in admission recruitment processes. The author examines whether there is evidence of white admissions decision-makers practicing intraracial discrimination when they engage with prospective Black applicants. Thornhill constructed four emails, with varying degrees of racial salience (ie, the significance of race as a factor in the narrative). Each admissions counselor was sent two narratives, one that made the applicant's race salient and one in which race was not salient. The study explored whether white college admissions decision-makers screen out Black students who display a commitment to antiracism. The researcher finds that admission decision-makers respond less frequently to inquiry emails from Black prospective students who express a commitment to antiracism than a group of Black students who reveal no interest in racial justice issues.

Not Racially Salient		Racially Salient	
Narrative 1	Narrative 2	Narrative 3	Narrative 4
Nondescript English & Math Newspaper Marching band Tutoring	Env. Sustainability Biology & Env. Sci. Env. Leadership (2) Community efforts	Racial Unity Af/Am interest group Jazz Band Gospel Choir	Antiracist Black Student Org. Anti-racism alliance Community efforts

## Key Concepts Defined

**Intraracial discrimination** - is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of individuals based on perceived racial types (ie. how closely aligned an individual's traits are associated with our perceptions of a racialized group). In selection processes, intraracial discrimination (ie. within-group) occurs when distinctions that are more palatable to decision-makers (ie. racial harmony) are pursued. The theory of intraracial discrimination challenges notions that racial decision-making on the part of admission decision-makers stops at racial group membership and argues that organizations often go a step further and select individuals whose race is less salient.<sup>1</sup>

**Racial salience** - is commonly defined as the extent to which race is relevant to an individual's concept of oneself or in a specific situation at a specific point in time. Racial salience is often considered to be context dependent.<sup>2</sup>

## Selected Findings

- Thornhill found that participants responded at higher rates to messages that were non-racially salient (65%) than racially salient (55%) Black prospective students. Emails with the Antiracist narrative (Narrative 4) response rate was 17 percentage points lower than the other narratives, suggesting decision-makers were least interested in attracting applicants with that profile.
- White male counselors were 37% less likely to respond to emails with the Antiracist narratives (50% less likely to respond to emails from Black female prospective students).
- Strong evidence of intraracial discrimination in 2 of 3 audits that included antiracist narratives. Counselors revealed a preference for the alternative narrative ( $p < 0.001$ ).

<sup>1</sup> Carbado, D. W. (2013). Intraracial diversity. *UCLA Law Review*, 60(5), 1130.

<sup>2</sup> Scottham, K. M., Sellers, R. M., & Nguyễn, H. X. (2008). A measure of racial identity in African American adolescents: the development of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity--Teen. *Cultural diversity & ethnic minority psychology*, 14(4), 297-306.



## Discussion Questions

1. Intraracial discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of individuals based on perceived racial types. As we prepare for the first recruitment season amidst a new civil rights movement how might your program prepare to address the risk of of intraracial discrimination in admission review?
2. How might admissions committees, or departments more generally, address the discrimination found in this paper (i.e., that applicants with a profile like narrative 4 will be judged more harshly)?
3. What do the findings of this study suggest for how we understand fit and alignment? Who typically fits in STEM departments and on what basis? How could we change this, so more Black students see themselves in science?
4. How might STEM faculty design classroom, lab, and recruitment spaces where students feel comfortable being their whole selves?
5. How could a program design an evaluation rubric that mitigates the risk of intraracial discrimination when evaluating for non-cognitive competencies like leadership?

## Implications

- Routine admission processes such as responses to prospective student email inquiries can serve as a gate-keeping mechanism and possible source of reproducing existing inequalities in graduate education.
- The autonomy and discretion afforded to admissions decision-makers in the various stages of the admission recruitment and selection process can often introduce bias and may contribute to the inequalities present in graduate school.
- “Fit” with a department’s culture is often an implicit screening device that also “weeds out” historically underrepresented students. Program faculty/departments can change their recruitment messages to convey to prospective students that diverse perspectives and experiences are welcome.
- Department, division, and university diversity, equity, and inclusion goals often lack clarity and actionable steps individuals can take to advance equity. This study highlights the important role that department or organizational level policies can play in making norms and expectations about admission processes such as responses to student emails more explicit.

## Supplemental Reading

If you are interested in additional readings about Implicit Bias, you can review the following:

**Banaji, M. R., Bazerman, M. H., & Chugh, D. (2003). How (un) ethical are you? *Harvard Business Review*, 56-64.**

General Argument: Managers have an “illusion of objectivity” -- the notion that we're free of the very biases we recognize in others. These implicit biases can be contrary to our consciously held beliefs. The study explores four related sources of unintentional unethical decision making: implicit forms of prejudice, bias that favors one's own group, conflict of interest, and a tendency to overclaim credit.

Sources of bias defined:

- Implicit prejudice (= bias that emerges from unconscious beliefs)
- In-group favoritism (= bias that favors your group)
- Overclaiming credit (= bias that favors you)
- Conflict of interest (= bias that favors those who can benefit you)

**Greenwald, A. G., & Krieger, L. H. (2006). Implicit bias: Scientific foundations. *California Law Review*, 94(4), 945-967.**

General Argument: Introduces the concept of *implicit bias and* distinguishes between Sigmund Freud's views of unconscious mental processes and the “new science” of implicit bias.

Exploring Implicit Bias:

- “*Implicit biases* are discriminatory biases based on implicit attitudes or implicit stereotypes. Implicit biases are especially intriguing, and also especially problematic because they can produce behavior that diverges from a person's avowed or endorsed beliefs or principles” (p. 951)
- The piece reminds us that many mental processes function implicitly. The activation of implicit attitudes (evaluative dispositions) and implicit stereotypes (association between a social group and a trait) in our everyday interactions are typically precursors to the bias and discrimination found in many selection and hiring processes.