Racial prejudice, overt and hidden, remains pervasive in American society.

Posted Mar 19, 2019


Studies indicate that a black driver in an urban area is twice as likely as a white driver to be stopped by a police officer for a vehicle equipment violation. Black defendants are charged about thirty-five percent more for bail than white defendants. More than fifty-seven percent of “highly stereotypically-looking” blacks (as rated by people who had no idea what the study was about) and only twenty-four percent deemed low in such facial features were sentenced to death for their crimes.

Potential buyers asked about a house allegedly being sold by a black family set the value at $20,000 less than an identical house occupied by a white family. And job applicants with black-sounding names, including those presenting high-quality resumes, were fifty percent less likely to get a callback than those with white-sounding names.

This data, Jennifer Eberhardt acknowledges, does not provide conclusive proof of discrimination. But it certainly suggests that race prejudice, overt and hidden, remains pervasive in American society.
In *Biased*, Jennifer Eberhardt, a professor of psychology at Stanford University and the cofounder and codirector of SPARQ (Social Psychological Answers to Real-World Questions), provides an immensely informative and insightful analysis of race-based stereotypes. She also offers practical suggestions for managing mechanisms of prejudice that “are rooted in the structures of our brains.”

Eberhardt draws on the latest research in social psychology, recent bias incidents (including the arrest of two black men in Starbucks), and stories from her own life (she was arrested for an unspecified vehicular infraction) to illuminate the “mental gymnastics” people use to process, categorize, and judge. Whites, she points out, tend to respond to black faces categorically, rather than as distinct individuals. Many of them rate men with black faces as taller, heavier, stronger, and (by implication) more threatening than white men. During the height of the NYPD “stop, question, and frisk” initiative, a whopping eighty-eight percent of individuals detained for “furtive movement” were black; although they were less likely to have a weapon, they were more likely to be subjected to physical force. Study participants were more likely to press “shoot” at videos of a black person with a gun – and without a gun. When exposed to ape imagery, they were more likely to deem brutal treatment of black suspects as justified.

Despite these disturbing realities, and evidence that these days group polarization has intensified, Eberhardt believes that “with an awareness of how bias operates, we trade our innocence for protection” and find opportunities “to practice being our best selves.”

She gives a shout-out to Nextdoor, an online social networking service working with 145,000 neighborhoods in the United States, that reduced racial profiling by 75% by requiring users to click through a checklist of reminders (including “don’t assume criminality based on race and ethnicity”) before reporting a “suspicious person.” Airbnb now encourages listers to use its “instant book” option, borrowed from hotels, in which the deal is consummated if the space is available and the guest can pay, with no customer photographs or profiles required.

Eberhardt agrees that integrated schools can mitigate bias, but advocates an approach that encourages students to affirm racial identities and teachers to frame criticism “as an expression of faith in their students’ abilities.” She encourages employers to adopt hiring procedures, akin to the practice of auditioning musicians behind a curtain, to reduce gender bias. Emphasizing that bias tends to appear in high-stress situations, where options seem limited and immediate action seems called for, she notes that after the Oakland Police Department, an early adopter of body cameras, instructed officers to call for backup instead of pursuing suspects as they run through backyards and back alleys, arrest rates held steady, crime fell, and police-involved shootings declined dramatically.
Bias, Eberhardt reminds us, “is not an affliction that can be cured or banished.” Nonetheless, she concludes, we need not remain hostage to it. Her book certainly points us in the right direction.