

Difficulty in noticing that white people are white, new study finds

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Credit: University of Surrey

Professor Peter Hegarty from the University of Surrey developed a celebrity guessing game in which participants were shown one of two groups of actors; Colin Firth, Kate Winslet and Jim Carey or Halle Berry, Morgan Freeman and Eddie Murphy. Players in the game made a series of guesses at what these actors had in common and generated the names of more actors to see whether they were right. Participants tried

to guess the common 'rule' that these celebrities share and won the game when they did.

The study found that:

- In one test, 90% of participants successfully guessed that the [actors](#) Eddie Murphy, Halle Berry and Morgan Freeman were all black, and on average did so in less than 7 minutes. In contrast, only 25% of participants successfully guessed that Jim Carey, Kate Winslet, and Colin Firth were white before the 20 minutes of the game were up.
- Across the three tests, participants who were white and not white experienced the same amount of difficulty in identifying the common 'rule' that all three white actors were white.
- Participants were most likely to guess the rule for white actors if they were told that a black actor did not share what the other actors had in common.

When presented with one white actor and three black actors and asked what made the white actor unusual among the group, less than 5% of [participants](#) mentioned the fact that the actor was white.

"Everyone knows Hollywood actors are mostly white and that being white is the norm among film stars," said Professor Hegarty.

"This study clearly shows one consequence of this; the failure to notice that white actors are white. Also, the guessing game is based on a process that psychologists have used to model how scientists formulate and test scientific theories for over fifty years. To the extent that this model is accurate, then these results suggest why scientists might be much quicker to label something common to [black](#) people as race-related, than something common to [white](#) people."

More information: Peter Hegarty. On the failure to notice that White people are White: Generating and testing hypotheses in the celebrity guessing game., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2017). DOI: [10.1037/xge0000243](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000243)

Provided by University of Surrey

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