

It's Just a Preference

Jason is a 26 year-old man who was recently encouraged by his friends to try online dating. Most of them have had great success in finding dates, and some of them are still with or even married to partners they found online. Jason downloads Tinder and spends the next few minutes swiping through profiles. After several days without any responses, he finally matches with someone. After sending him an introductory message, Jason received one back that read "Sorry, accidentally swiped right. Not into Asians" before unmatching with him.

Racial preferences seem to be a common part of online dating. Researchers took data from Facebook's online dating app "Are You Interested?" and found that race played a significant role in amounts of interest. In a study of 2.4 million heterosexual interactions, they found that black men, black women, and Asian men got the fewest responses while white men and Asian women got the most.¹ In 2014, OkCupid's cofounder Christian Rudder compiled data about dating and racial preferences by tracking OkCupid's messaging system and found similar data: white men and Asian women received the most responses while black women and Asian men received the fewest.²

Many claim that these trends in dating preferences are racist, since negative stereotypes in the media often contribute to them. For example, black women and black men are portrayed as violent and aggressive—traits that are undesirable in a romantic partner. Similarly, while Asian men are portrayed as physically weak "nerds" and characters with laughable accents who provide comic relief, Asian women are portrayed as sexy and exotic. Critics of sexual racial preference, deemed "sexual racism," argue that to exclude a group or to even have a preference would be to make a preemptive judgment about someone using stereotypes solely based on their race. Others argue that dating does not exist in an apolitical vacuum; they claim that having these preferences reveals the racial biases that many have. Social historian Emma Dabiri filmed a documentary in 2017 in which she asked strangers who they would most likely date based only on their names (Oliver, Chung, Mohammed, Thomas, etc.), and found that most people chose traditionally white names.³ In 2011, 2,177 gay and bisexual men in Australia participated in an online survey in which two analyses were used to compare factors related to men's sexual preferences in online dating and their racist attitudes more broadly. The results concluded that those with sexual preferences in online dating correlated to more generally racist attitudes "which challenges the idea of racial attraction as solely a matter of personal preference."⁴

Others find nothing significant about these statistics. They argue that desire is deeply personal. People who are more or less attracted to certain ethnic groups can't control their desires, and no person should feel obligated to force attraction to those that they simply are not interested in, regardless of the reason. Some compare these preferences to sexual orientation, relating the lack of influence in gender preference to that of racial preference. Others argue that while media can play a role in what people consider attractive, it is ultimately a personal matter largely determined by genetics, nature, and familiarity.⁵

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Consider factors that come into dating preferences such as height, weight, wealth, ableness, race, gender identity, religion, etc. Ethically speaking, how do these differ from racial preferences? How are they similar?
2. To what extent are racial preferences in dating an individual character flaw? A broader social problem? Neither? Both?
3. What, if anything, should be done to address dating bias?

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/11/30/247530095/are-you-interested-dating-odds-favor-white-men-asian-women>

² <https://theblog.okcupid.com/race-and-attraction-2009-2014-107dcb4f060>

³ <https://medium.com/@CraigHarper19/is-having-a-racial-dating-preference-racist-e0f40df7905b>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279863184_Is_Sexual_Racism_Really_Racism_Distinguishing_Attitudes_Toward_Sexual_Racism_and_Generic_Racism_Among_Gay_and_Bisexual_Men

⁵ <https://humans.media/no-dating-preferences-aren-t-discriminatory>

