

# Opinion: Research shows white privilege is real

By Ian Ayres, New York Times

The recent reunion show for the 40th anniversary of “Saturday Night Live” re-aired a portion of Eddie Murphy’s 1984 classic “White Like Me” skit, in which he disguised himself to appear Caucasian and quickly learned that “when white people are alone, they give things to each other for free.”

The joke still has relevance. A field experiment about who gets free bus rides in Brisbane, a city on the eastern coast of Australia, shows that even today, whites get special privileges, particularly when other people aren’t around to notice.

As they describe in two working papers, Redzo Mujcic and Paul Frijters, economists at the University of Queensland, trained and assigned 29 young adult testers (from both genders and different ethnic groups) to board public buses in Brisbane and insert an empty fare card into the bus scanner. After the scanner made a loud sound informing the driver that the card did not have enough value, the testers said, “I do not have any money, but I need to get to” a station about 1.2 miles away. (The station varied according to where the testers boarded.)

With more than 1,500 observations, the study uncovered substantial, statistically significant race discrimination. Bus drivers were twice as willing to let white testers ride free as black testers (72 percent versus 36 percent of the time). Bus drivers showed some relative favoritism toward testers who shared their own race, but even black drivers still favored white testers over black testers (allowing free rides 83 percent versus 68 percent of the time).

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