

Teaching Guide for *Is It Racist? Is It Sexist?*

**Pre- and Post-Reading Exercise**

*Have students answer the following questions before reading the book, and then again at the end of the unit or semester.*

*The first time, make it clear that their answers to questions 1, 2, and 3 are not being graded; they are communicating with their future selves, not the instructor or other students. Collect their papers, and give them back after they do the exercise a second time. Debrief by asking how their answers are similar or different each time, and what they have learned.*

1. Multiple choice questions on your judgment calls:

You are often faced with questions of whether something is racist or sexist, in the news or in daily life. How would you judge each of these situations?

a. During Covid-19 lockdowns, President Biden said: “The reason I was able to stay sequestered in my home is because some Black woman was able to stack the grocery shelf.”

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loh-Rwev1e4&ab\\_channel=C3PMeme](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loh-Rwev1e4&ab_channel=C3PMeme))

- Yes, there’s racism there
- No, there’s no racism there
- I’m not sure

Because \_\_\_\_\_

b. CNN anchor Don Lemon said about presidential candidate Nikki Haley: “Nikki Haley isn’t in her prime, sorry. When a woman is considered to be in her prime — in her 20s, 30s and maybe her 40s.” Asked, “Prime for what? I think we need to qualify. Are you talking about prime for childbearing or are you talking about prime for being president?” Lemon replied: “Don’t shoot the messenger, I’m just saying what the facts are. Google it.”

(<https://apnews.com/article/don-lemon-nikki-haley-e40445ae824a56e3548c17a029a80775>)

- Yes, there’s sexism there
- No, there’s no sexism there
- I’m not sure

Because \_\_\_\_\_

c. Some elite colleges have legacy admissions; they give preference to candidates whose relatives attended the school. Many of these elite colleges only admitted white candidates until the 1960s, meaning that, for years, only white students could benefit from legacy admissions. Now, a generation after elite colleges allowed people of all races into their schools and soon after non-white students began benefiting from legacy admissions, some institutions are shutting down this practice.

- Yes, there’s racism in having legacy admissions in the late 20th century

- Yes, there's racism in ending legacy admissions
- No, there's no racism there
- I'm not sure

Because \_\_\_\_\_

d. In the United States, more companies offer more paid maternity leave than paid paternity leave.

(<https://www.shrm.org/about/press-room/new-shrm-research-shows-employers-offering-paid-leave-increased>)

- Yes, there's sexism there
- No, there's no sexism there
- I'm not sure

Because \_\_\_\_\_

2. Reflect:

Do you think there are many inequalities by race and gender today? If so, what are some examples?

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If you think there are unfair inequalities by race and gender, what do you think are solutions for reducing them?

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3. Pair-share exercise:

Pair up with someone in the class who came to a different conclusion about at least one of the examples, and have a conversation about how each of you thinks and why you disagree:

- a) What definitions of racism and sexism are each of you using?
- b) What evidence does each of you draw from?
- c) Does talking to them make you want to reconsider how you came to your decision?
- d) What are the benefits and drawbacks of each of your approaches?

*Note to instructor: Students may gravitate to friends and to others with similar answers, so take steps to avoid such affinity pairing; assign pairs with as much variety in answers as possible. After students have finished the 4 multiple choice and reflection questions, you could ask for hand-raises for each of the answers, take notes with names and yes/no answers, and encourage*

*students to look around to see who, if anyone, answered differently. Or you could collect papers and sort by answers and assign pairs with different answers.*

## **Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Questions**

### **Chapter 1**

1. The book opens with the very different perspectives of Jack and Gavin on the same two situations. On the story of the cop shooting the Black teen, which interviewee would your own answers be more similar to? Why? How about the story of the Mexican and white men with heart attacks? Would your opinion be more like Jack's, or more like Gavin's? Why?
2. The authors argue that Americans are constantly asked about their opinions about what's racist and sexist, even implicitly. Have you ever weighed these questions yourself? If so, under what circumstances?
3. The authors argue that Americans often disagree with each other about what is racist and sexist. Have you ever noticed or been in one of these disagreements yourself? If so, what were the circumstances?
4. Do you think there is an objective way to decide what is racist or sexist? If so, what would it be? If not, why not?
5. The chapter begins to introduce the different ways white people decide what's racist and sexist. What's your first reaction to these approaches?
6. The study finds that white people's gender and class position do not strongly relate to their views about what's racist or sexist. This goes against many theories' ideas that our social position shapes how we think. Why do you think they might have found such weak associations between these identities and people's views?
7. The study suggests that people's views of racism and sexism are based partly in motivated reasoning, meaning processing information in ways that support what they want to believe. As you were reading about the different views of white conservatives and white liberals, did you find yourself deploying reasons to defend or dismiss either side? How so?

### **Chapter 2**

1. The white people in the study who usually said no, situations are not racist or sexist, called "acquitters" by the authors, use narrow definitions of racism and sexism that focus on intent. Under what circumstances, if any, do you think narrow definitions are appropriate?
2. Chapter 2 includes many examples that interviewees were asked about. Compare your own opinions with the judgment calls of the acquitters profiled here.
  - a) How about the story of the female doctor greeted with "Hello, nurse." How are your opinions similar to or different from the acquitters in this chapter?

- b) Do you agree with the acquitters that there is no sexism in the story about the pay disparity of the married couple in the same field but different years of experience? Why or why not?
- c) What's your judgment call on the teacher who suggests mostly boys to an advanced math course? How did you decide?
- d) How about the story of the entrepreneur and who she will and won't hire?

3. Acquitters use an investigative method to determine what's racist and sexist. Discuss the pros and cons of each part of this method:

- a case-by-case approach
- focusing on explicit evidence
- assuming the same thing would have happened to a white person or man
- considering alternative explanations besides racism or sexism
- giving the benefit of the doubt to the person or organization accused of racism or sexism.

4. If you tend to be a convictor, did you see anything in acquitters' methods you might want to borrow? If you tend to be an acquitter, did you see anything in your own method that you might want to change?

### Chapter 3

1. The white people in the study who usually said yes, situations are racist or sexist, called "convictors" by the authors, use broad definitions of racism and sexism, ones that focus on outcomes. Under what circumstances do you think broad definitions are appropriate?

2. Convictors use the algorithmic method to determine what's racist and sexist. Discuss the pros and cons of each part of this method:

- pattern-matching
- seeing racism and sexism in unspoken places
- assuming the same thing would not happen to a white person or man
- not considering alternative explanations, or conflating them with racism
- deferring to the opinions of people of color or women

3. If you tend to be an acquitter, did you see anything in convictors' methods you might want to borrow? If you tend to be a convictor, did you see anything in your own methods that you might want to change?

### Chapter 4

1. Motivated acquitters – those who most vehemently and consistently insist that there is no racism or sexism in a situation – often recount stories of having difficult lives, stories that suggest that they are the victims of harm. Do their stories matter to you in interpreting their views? Why/why not?

2. Motivated acquitters are very attuned to conservative media's and rightwing politicians' talking points about how racism and sexism claims are exaggerated. Do you think their—or anyone's—views on racism and sexism would be different if they consumed less news, or different news?
3. Motivated acquitters define racism and sexism in especially narrow ways. Do their rules about what counts as racist or sexist seem reasonable to you? Why/why not?
4. Motivated acquitters tend to quickly dismiss accusations of racism and sexism, saying that the accusers are not credible. If someone benefits from repeatedly making accusations—by getting rich, getting votes, or selling news—should we take their accusations less seriously? Why/why not?
5. Motivated acquitters take a hypocritical stance: they insist on investigating every incident on a case-by-case basis, but they also dismiss others' accusations of racism and sexism out of hand, without reviewing the evidence in the particular case. Are there ways you've seen people who share your views—whatever they are—take hypocritical stances on racism and sexism too?
6. Do you agree with the authors that the motivated acquitters' approach tends to produce harm to people of color (by denying racism) or to women (by denying sexism)? Why/why not?

## **Chapter 5**

1. Motivated convictors – those who most vehemently insist that situations are definitely racist or sexist – are often people who see themselves as privileged, and compared with the other categories, they do tend to have more advantages in terms of the class they grew up in, their education, and their current class. Do you think this shapes their beliefs? If so, how?
2. Motivated convictors use especially broad definitions of racism and sexism, including institutional rules and practices that were not intended to cause disproportionate harm. Do you think such institutional bias is common? If so, do you think calling such institutional rules and practices with disparate impact “racist” or “sexist” helps draw attention to them and change them, or do you think calling them something else would be better?
3. Motivated convictors tend to see racism and sexism as going only one way, against people of color and women, which fits their system-based approach as to what counts as racist and sexist. This one-way definition also leads them to deny that some phrases used to demean white people are racist, or that slurs against men are sexist. Do you think this is appropriate? Why or why not?
4. Motivated convictors often case-infer, assuming that they must have observed a case because there is a pattern of similar cases occurring. Are there any positive aspects or this approach? Negative aspects? Why/why not?
5. When the authors asked respondents about how “men and women are treated these days,” motivated convictors had a lot to say about how women are mistreated and hardly anything to say about how men are mistreated. Yet the authors note that there are many outcomes in which

men are disadvantaged compared to women. How do you think we should think about the ways men are disadvantaged compared to women?

6. Motivated convictors are also somewhat hypocritical; they, like all convictors, believe that we should not mistreat people based upon their race or gender, but then make assumptions about others' likelihood of racism or sexism based on their race and gender. Do you think that they would see this as hypocritical, or would they have another explanation for it?

7. The authors argue that motivated convictors' approach has many advantages to accurately identifying racism and sexism, but some disadvantages as well. Do you agree with them about what these advantages and disadvantages are?

## **Chapter 6**

1. Moderate acquitters - the white people who mostly said no, they didn't see racism or sexism, in a less consistent, non-ideological way - tend to have little knowledge of racism and sexism. Many of them grew up around bigoted older relatives. Some also spent their lives dealing with a lot of troubles, from drug addiction to full-time caregiving. Do any of these background factors shape how you see their views? Why/why not?

2. Moderate acquitters are firm believers in treating everyone as an individual. They uphold an ideal of being color-blind, and believe in treating men and women equally. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?

3. Perhaps ironically, moderate acquitters are better able than people in other categories to consider more evidence about whether an incident is racist or sexist because they know so little about these topics. What is your reaction to this irony? Is there a way to teach about more patterns of racial and gender mistreatment while still helping people keep an open mind about specific incidents?

4. Many people claim that white people do not want to know about racism as it is in their self-interest not to do so. In this chapter, we saw that some of the white people who know little about racism are also women who know little about sexism, or don't think about it much. What do you make of this? Does it undermine claims of ignorance-as-self-interest, or are there other ways of interpreting their acquitting?

5. At the time of the study, one pattern of racist mistreatment had been very prominent in the media: the tendency of police shootings to disproportionately kill Black men. Moderate acquitters who otherwise never mentioned widespread patterns of either ism did often raise this pattern. What are the implications of this exception for raising public awareness of patterns of inequality?

6. Are there any parts of moderate acquitters' approaches that you want to emulate? Any parts you want to discard?

## **Chapter 7**

1. There's a stereotype that white working-class men are especially racist and sexist. But moderate convictors – the white people in the study who tend to say yes, there is racism or sexism in a situation, but not consistently and less ideologically – are mostly working-class. How does this finding align with or challenge your views of the white working class?
2. These respondents tend to use outcomes-based definitions but sometimes slip into using intent-based definitions. Is their inconsistency a good or bad thing?
3. Moderate convictors often named many examples of racism and sexism that they witnessed in their lives. Why do you think they, more than other categories, were able to name so many examples?
4. Moderate convictors are more open to counter-evidence than motivated convictors, and they less often case-infer (make assumptions about a case based on a national pattern). In your opinion, is their more measured approach better for rooting out inequality than motivated convictors' because they rely more on evidence, or worse because they then make statements about racism and sexism with less confidence and passion?
5. Moderate convictors are more likely than motivated convictors to separate out racism and classism. On one hand, using outcome-based definitions, many biases that are classist will also be racist, as they often disproportionately impact people of color. On the other hand, racism and classism are different phenomena (most poor people are white, and most people of color are not poor). Thus there are many reasons not to conflate them, including acknowledging hardships faced by white working-class and poor people. What do you think is the best approach for thinking about how classism relates to racism?
6. Are there any parts of moderate convictors' approach that you want to borrow from or make sure not to use?

### **Wrap-up Questions on Chapters 1 to 7**

1. What are your thoughts now about how best to decide what's racist and sexist?
2. Did reading others' views of what's racist or sexist make you reconsider how you make your own? If so, how so?
3. Did reading about how others form their views about what's racist or sexist make you think differently about people you often disagree with? If so, how?

### **Chapter 8**

1. What do you think of the surveyor approach? What are its pros and cons?

2. If your ideal of your community or the nation is fewer unfair inequalities, how could you apply the surveyor method to getting to that vision? What steps would you take first, and how would you persist until your efforts paid off?
3. The surveyor approach requires considerable evidence and patience. Is that effort worthwhile, in your opinion? Why or why not?
4. Think of an allegation of racism or sexism you're aware of (in social media, in your family or social circles, in politics, etc.). What's your favored approach to making your judgment call? How would you apply the surveyor method to the situation?
5. In your opinion, how much does it matter whether most Americans are acquitters, convictors or surveyors?
6. Do you think it is possible to convince others to use your favored approach? Why/why not?

### **After Reading the Book**

1. Go back to the pre-reading exercises and do them again. Then read your original answers and compare your thinking today with then. [*Instructors: Use a different color paper or powerpoint background to re-introduce the questions and instructions. If some students didn't do the exercises the first time, reassure them that that's ok, have them do them now, and ask them to imagine what their earlier answers might have been.*]
2. Do you have the same opinions about whether the examples were racist or sexist? Why/why not?
3. How would you now describe the approach that you used to decide whether the examples were racist and sexist?
4. Now, after reading the book, how would you describe why you and others disagree? Do you now have a better understanding of where they were coming from? Can you imagine persuading them of your views?
5. After reading the book, why do you think it might matter how you decide what's racist, sexist, and not?
6. What's your main take-away from the book?