

In a recent study pairs of men, aged 19 to 24, one white and one black, were sent out to apply for jobs in Chicago and Washington, D.C. The members of the pairs had similar physical, personality, and speech characteristics, and they were given fake resumes with similar backgrounds. Both individuals in a pair applied for the same jobs, and the results of their efforts were compared. In one quarter of the 476 test cases (218 in Chicago and 258 in Washington, D.C.) the employers exhibited racial bias, and in such cases the black applicant received unfavorable treatment three times as often as the white applicant.

Was this study, as designed and conducted, morally justifiable? If so, why? If not, why not? (reported in the Chicago Tribune 5/18/91)

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The study is morally justifiable. It involves deception in some important respects, but the basic moral rule that forbids deception is not an absolute. In this case, no one was harmed, either physically or emotionally, by the deception. Furthermore, the subject of the study - the extent of racial bias in hiring - has great importance in regard to many critical areas of public policy in the United States at this time, and the data from the study was highly pertinent to conclusions about its subject.

Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, 1995

© Robert Ladenson, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995