

T H R E E

The Warren Harding Error: Why We Fall For Tall, Dark, and Handsome Men

Early one morning in 1899, in the back garden of the Globe Hotel in Richwood, Ohio, two men met while having their shoes shined. One was a lawyer and lobbyist from the state capital of Columbus. His name was Harry Daugherty. He was a thick-set, red-faced man with straight black hair, and he was brilliant. He was the Machiavelli of Ohio politics, the classic behind-the-scenes fixer, a shrewd and insightful judge of character or, at least, political opportunity. The second man was a newspaper editor from the small town of Marion, Ohio, who was at that moment a week away from winning election to the Ohio state senate. His name was Warren Harding. Daugherty looked over at Harding and was instantly overwhelmed by what he saw. As the journalist Mark Sullivan wrote, of that moment in the garden:

Harding was worth looking at. He was at the time about 35 years old. His head, features, shoulders and torso had

a size that attracted attention; their proportions to each other made an effect which in any male at any place would justify more than the term handsome — in later years, when he came to be known beyond his local world, the word “Roman” was occasionally used in descriptions of him. As he stepped down from the stand, his legs bore out the striking and agreeable proportions of his body; and his lightness on his feet, his erectness, his easy bearing, added to the impression of physical grace and virility. His suppleness, combined with his bigness of frame, and his large, wide-set rather glowing eyes, heavy black hair, and markedly bronze complexion gave him some of the handsomeness of an Indian. His courtesy as he surrendered his seat to the other customer suggested genuine friendliness toward all mankind. His voice was noticeably resonant, masculine, warm. His pleasure in the attentions of the bootblack’s whisk reflected a consciousness about clothes unusual in a small-town man. His manner as he bestowed a tip suggested generous good-nature, a wish to give pleasure, based on physical well-being and sincere kindness of heart.

In that instant, as Daugherty sized up Harding, an idea came to him that would alter American history: Wouldn’t that man make a great President?

Warren Harding was not a particularly intelligent man. He liked to play poker and golf and to drink and, most of all, to chase women; in fact, his sexual appetites were the stuff of legend. As he rose from one political office to another, he never once distinguished himself. He was vague and ambivalent on matters of policy. His speeches were once described as “an army of pompous phrases moving

over the landscape in search of an idea.” After being elected to the U.S. Senate in 1914, he was absent for the debates on women’s suffrage and Prohibition — two of the biggest political issues of his time. He advanced steadily from local Ohio politics only because he was pushed by his wife, Florence, and stage-managed by the scheming Harry Daugherty and because, as he grew older, he grew more and more irresistibly distinguished-looking. Once, at a banquet, a supporter cried out, “Why, the son of a bitch *looks* like a senator,” and so he did. By early middle age, Harding’s biographer Francis Russell writes, his “lusty black eyebrows contrasted with his steel-gray hair to give the effect of force, his massive shoulders and bronzed complexion gave the effect of health.” Harding, according to Russell, could have put on a toga and stepped onstage in a production of *Julius Caesar*. Daugherty arranged for Harding to address the 1916 Republican presidential convention because he knew that people only had to see Harding and hear that magnificent rumbling voice to be convinced of his worthiness for higher office. In 1920, Daugherty convinced Harding, against Harding’s better judgment, to run for the White House. Daugherty wasn’t being facetious. He was serious.

“Daugherty, ever since the two had met, had carried in the back of his mind the idea that Harding would make a ‘great President,’” Sullivan writes. “Sometimes, unconsciously, Daugherty expressed it, with more fidelity to exactness, ‘a great-*looking* President.’” Harding entered the Republican convention that summer sixth among a field of six. Daugherty was unconcerned. The convention was deadlocked between the two leading candidates, so,

Daugherty predicted, the delegates would be forced to look for an alternative. To whom else would they turn, in that desperate moment, if not to the man who radiated common sense and dignity and all that was presidential? In the early morning hours, as they gathered in the smoke-filled back rooms of the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago, the Republican Party bosses threw up their hands and asked, wasn't there a candidate they could all agree on? And one name came immediately to mind: Harding! Didn't he *look* just like a presidential candidate? So Senator Harding became candidate Harding, and later that fall, after a campaign conducted from his front porch in Marion, Ohio, candidate Harding became President Harding. Harding served two years before dying unexpectedly of a stroke. He was, most historians agree, one of the worst presidents in American history.

1. The Dark Side of Thin-Slicing

So far in *Blink*, I have talked about how extraordinarily powerful thin-slicing can be, and what makes thin-slicing possible is our ability to very quickly get below the surface of a situation. Thomas Hoving and Evelyn Harrison and the art experts were instantly able to see behind the forger's artifice. Susan and Bill seemed, at first, to be the embodiment of a happy, loving couple. But when we listened closely to their interaction and measured the ratio of positive to negative emotions, we got a different story. Nalini Ambady's research showed how much we can learn about a surgeon's likelihood of being sued if we get beyond the diplomas on the wall and the white coat and

focus on his or her tone of voice. But what happens if that rapid chain of thinking gets interrupted somehow? What if we reach a snap judgment without *ever* getting below the surface?

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the experiments conducted by John Bargh in which he showed that we have such powerful associations with certain words (for example, “Florida,” “gray,” “wrinkles,” and “bingo”) that just being exposed to them can cause a change in our behavior. I think that there are facts about people’s appearance — their size or shape or color or sex — that can trigger a very similar set of powerful associations. Many people who looked at Warren Harding saw how extraordinarily handsome and distinguished-looking he was and jumped to the immediate — and entirely unwarranted — conclusion that he was a man of courage and intelligence and integrity. They didn’t dig below the surface. The way he looked carried so many powerful connotations that it stopped the normal process of thinking dead in its tracks.

The Warren Harding error is the dark side of rapid cognition. It is at the root of a good deal of prejudice and discrimination. It’s why picking the right candidate for a job is so difficult and why, on more occasions than we may care to admit, utter mediocrities sometimes end up in positions of enormous responsibility. Part of what it means to take thin-slicing and first impressions seriously is accepting the fact that sometimes we can know more about someone or something in the blink of an eye than we can after months of study. But we also have to acknowledge and understand those circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray.

2. *Blink in Black and White*

Over the past few years, a number of psychologists have begun to look more closely at the role these kinds of unconscious — or, as they like to call them, implicit — associations play in our beliefs and behavior, and much of their work has focused on a very fascinating tool called the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The IAT was devised by Anthony G. Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and Brian Nosek, and it is based on a seemingly obvious — but nonetheless quite profound — observation. We make connections much more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already related in our minds than we do between pairs of ideas that are unfamiliar to us. What does that mean? Let me give you an example. Below is a list of words. Take a pencil or pen and assign each name to the category to which it belongs by putting a check mark either to the left or to the right of the word. You can also do it by tapping your finger in the appropriate column. Do it as quickly as you can. Don't skip over words. And don't worry if you make any mistakes.

Male

Female

| | |
|-------|------------|
| | John |
| | Bob |
| | Amy |
| | Holly..... |
| | Joan..... |
| | Derek..... |
| | Peggy..... |

.....Jason.....
Lisa.....
Matt.....
Sarah.....

That was easy, right? And the reason that was easy is that when we read or hear the name “John” or “Bob” or “Holly,” we don’t even have to think about whether it’s a masculine or a feminine name. We all have a strong prior association between a first name like John and the male gender, or a name like Lisa and things female.

That was a warm-up. Now let’s complete an actual IAT. It works like the warm-up, except that now I’m going to mix two entirely separate categories together. Once again, put a check mark to either the right or the left of each word, in the category to which it belongs.

| | |
|--------|--------|
| Male | Female |
| or | or |
| Career | Family |

.....Lisa.....
Matt.....
Laundry.....
Entrepreneur.....
John.....
Merchant.....
Bob.....
Capitalist.....
Holly.....
Joan.....

.....Home.....
Corporation.....
Siblings.....
Peggy.....
Jason.....
Kitchen.....
Housework.....
Parents.....
Sarah.....
Derek.....

My guess is that most of you found that a little harder, but that you were still pretty fast at putting the words into the right categories. Now try this:

| | |
|--------|--------|
| Male | Female |
| or | or |
| Family | Career |

.....Babies.....
Sarah.....
Derek.....
Merchant.....
Employment.....
John.....
Bob.....
Holly.....
Domestic.....
Entrepreneur.....
Office.....
Joan.....

.....Peggy.....
Cousins.....
Grandparents.....
Jason.....
Home.....
Lisa.....
Corporation.....
Matt.....

Did you notice the difference? This test was quite a bit harder than the one before it, wasn't it? If you are like most people, it took you a little longer to put the word "Entrepreneur" into the "Career" category when "Career" was paired with "Female" than when "Career" was paired with "Male." That's because most of us have much stronger mental associations between maleness and career-oriented concepts than we do between femaleness and ideas related to careers. "Male" and "Capitalist" go together in our minds a lot like "John" and "Male" did. But when the category is "Male or Family," we have to stop and think — even if it's only for a few hundred milliseconds — before we decide what to do with a word like "Merchant."

When psychologists administer the IAT, they usually don't use paper and pencil tests like the ones I've just given you. Most of the time, they do it on a computer. The words are flashed on the screen one at a time, and if a given word belongs in the left-hand column, you hit the letter *e*, and if the word belongs in the right-hand column, you hit the letter *i*. The advantage of doing the IAT on a computer is that the responses are measurable down to the milli-

second, and those measurements are used in assigning the test taker's score. So, for example, if it took you a little bit longer to complete part two of the Work/Family IAT than it did part one, we would say that you have a moderate association between men and the workforce. If it took you a lot longer to complete part two, we'd say that when it comes to the workforce, you have a strong automatic male association.

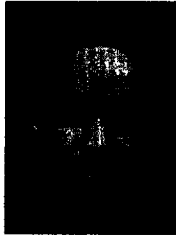
One of the reasons that the IAT has become so popular in recent years as a research tool is that the effects it is measuring are not subtle; as those of you who felt yourself slowing down on the second half of the Work/Family IAT above can attest, the IAT is the kind of tool that hits you over the head with its conclusions. "When there's a strong prior association, people answer in between four hundred and six hundred milliseconds," says Greenwald. "When there isn't, they might take two hundred to three hundred milliseconds longer than that — which in the realm of these kinds of effects is huge. One of my cognitive psychologist colleagues described this as an effect you can measure with a sundial."

If you'd like to try a computerized IAT, you can go to www.implicit.harvard.edu. There you'll find several tests, including the most famous of all the IATs, the Race IAT. I've taken the Race IAT on many occasions, and the result always leaves me feeling a bit creepy. At the beginning of the test, you are asked what your attitudes toward blacks and whites are. I answered, as I am sure most of you would, that I think of the races as equal. Then comes the test. You're encouraged to complete it quickly. First comes the warm-up. A series of pictures of faces flash on the screen.

When you see a black face, you press *e* and put it in the left-hand category. When you see a white face, you press *i* and put it in the right-hand category. It's *blink, blink, blink*: I didn't have to think at all. Then comes part one.

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| European American | African American |
| or | or |
| Bad | Good |

.....Hurt.....
Evil.....
Glorious.....



.....



.....

.....Wonderful.....

And so on. Immediately, something strange happened to me. The task of putting the words and faces in the right categories suddenly became more difficult. I found myself slowing down. I had to think. Sometimes I assigned some-

thing to one category when I really meant to assign it to the other category. I was trying as hard as I could, and in the back of my mind was a growing sense of mortification. Why was I having such trouble when I had to put a word like "Glorious" or "Wonderful" into the "Good" category when "Good" was paired with "African American" or when I had to put the word "Evil" into the "Bad" category when "Bad" was paired with "European American"? Then came part two. This time the categories were reversed.

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| European American | African American |
| or | or |
| Good | Bad |

.....Hurt.....
Evil.....
Glorious.....



.....



.....
Wonderful.....

And so on. Now my mortification grew still further. Now I was having no trouble at all.

Evil? *African American or Bad.*

Hurt? *African American or Bad.*

Wonderful? *European American or Good.*

I took the test a second time, and then a third time, and then a fourth time, hoping that the awful feeling of bias would go away. It made no difference. It turns out that more than 80 percent of all those who have ever taken the test end up having pro-white associations, meaning that it takes them measurably longer to complete answers when they are required to put good words into the “Black” category than when they are required to link bad things with black people. I didn’t do quite so badly. On the Race IAT, I was rated as having a “moderate automatic preference for whites.” But then again, I’m half black. (My mother is Jamaican.)

So what does this mean? Does this mean I’m a racist, a self-hating black person? Not exactly. What it means is that our attitudes toward things like race or gender operate on two levels. First of all, we have our conscious attitudes. This is what we choose to believe. These are our stated values, which we use to direct our behavior deliberately. The apartheid policies of South Africa or the laws in the American South that made it difficult for African Americans to vote are manifestations of conscious discrimination, and when we talk about racism or the fight for civil rights, this is the kind of discrimination that we usually refer to. But the IAT measures something else. It measures our second level of attitude, our racial attitude on an *unconscious* level — the immediate, automatic asso-

ciations that tumble out before we've even had time to think. We don't deliberately choose our unconscious attitudes. And as I wrote about in the first chapter, we may not even be aware of them. The giant computer that is our unconscious silently crunches all the data it can from the experiences we've had, the people we've met, the lessons we've learned, the books we've read, the movies we've seen, and so on, and it forms an opinion. That's what is coming out in the IAT.

The disturbing thing about the test is that it shows that our unconscious attitudes may be utterly incompatible with our stated conscious values. As it turns out, for example, of the fifty thousand African Americans who have taken the Race IAT so far, about half of them, like me, have stronger associations with whites than with blacks. How could we not? We live in North America, where we are surrounded every day by cultural messages linking white with good. "You don't choose to make positive associations with the dominant group," says Mahzarin Banaji, who teaches psychology at Harvard University and is one of the leaders in IAT research. "But you are required to. All around you, that group is being paired with good things. You open the newspaper and you turn on the television, and you can't escape it."

The IAT is more than just an abstract measure of attitudes. It's also a powerful predictor of how we act in certain kinds of spontaneous situations. If you have a strongly pro-white pattern of associations, for example, there is evidence that that will affect the way you behave in the presence of a black person. It's not going to affect what you'll choose to say or feel or do. In all likelihood, you

won't be aware that you're behaving any differently than you would around a white person. But chances are you'll lean forward a little less, turn away slightly from him or her, close your body a bit, be a bit less expressive, maintain less eye contact, stand a little farther away, smile a lot less, hesitate and stumble over your words a bit more, laugh at jokes a bit less. Does that matter? Of course it does. Suppose the conversation is a job interview. And suppose the applicant is a black man. He's going to pick up on that uncertainty and distance, and that may well make him a little less certain of himself, a little less confident, and a little less friendly. And what will you think then? You may well get a gut feeling that the applicant doesn't really have what it takes, or maybe that he is a bit standoffish, or maybe that he doesn't really want the job. What this unconscious first impression will do, in other words, is throw the interview hopelessly off course.

Or what if the person you are interviewing is tall? I'm sure that on a conscious level we don't think that we treat tall people any differently from how we treat short people. But there's plenty of evidence to suggest that height — particularly in men — does trigger a certain set of very positive unconscious associations. I polled about half of the companies on the Fortune 500 list — the list of the largest corporations in the United States — asking each company questions about its CEO. Overwhelmingly, the heads of big companies are, as I'm sure comes as no surprise to anyone, white men, which undoubtedly reflects some kind of implicit bias. But they are also almost all tall: in my sample, I found that on average, male CEOs were just a shade under six feet tall. Given that the average American male is

five foot nine, that means that CEOs as a group have about three inches on the rest of their sex. But this statistic actually understates the matter. In the U.S. population, about 14.5 percent of all men are six feet or taller. Among CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, that number is 58 percent. Even more striking, in the general American population, 3.9 percent of adult men are six foot two or taller. Among my CEO sample, almost a third were six foot two or taller.

The lack of women or minorities among the top executive ranks at least has a plausible explanation. For years, for a number of reasons having to do with discrimination and cultural patterns, there simply weren't a lot of women and minorities entering the management ranks of American corporations. So, today, when boards of directors look for people with the necessary experience to be candidates for top positions, they can argue somewhat plausibly that there aren't a lot of women and minorities in the executive pipeline. But this is not true of short people. It is possible to staff a large company entirely with white males, but it is not possible to staff a large company without short people. There simply aren't enough tall people to go around. Yet few of those short people ever make it into the executive suite. Of the tens of millions of American men below five foot six, a grand total of ten in my sample have reached the level of CEO, which says that being short is probably as much of a handicap to corporate success as being a woman or an African American. (The grand exception to all of these trends is American Express CEO Kenneth Chenault, who is both on the short side—five foot nine—and black. He must be a remarkable man to have overcome *two* Warren Harding errors.)

Is this a deliberate prejudice? Of course not. No one ever says dismissively of a potential CEO candidate that he's too short. This is quite clearly the kind of unconscious bias that the IAT picks up on. Most of us, in ways that we are not entirely aware of, automatically associate leadership ability with imposing physical stature. We have a sense of what a leader is supposed to look like, and that stereotype is so powerful that when someone fits it, we simply become blind to other considerations. And this isn't confined to the executive suite. Not long ago, researchers who analyzed the data from four large research studies that had followed thousands of people from birth to adulthood calculated that when corrected for such variables as age and gender and weight, an inch of height is worth \$789 a year in salary. That means that a person who is six feet tall but otherwise identical to someone who is five foot five will make on average \$5,525 more per year. As Timothy Judge, one of the authors of the height-salary study, points out: "If you take this over the course of a 30-year career and compound it, we're talking about a tall person enjoying literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of earnings advantage." Have you ever wondered why so many mediocre people find their way into positions of authority in companies and organizations? It's because when it comes to even the most important positions, our selection decisions are a good deal less rational than we think. We see a tall person and we swoon.

3. Taking Care of the Customer

The sales director of the Flemington Nissan dealership in the central New Jersey town of Flemington is a man

named Bob Golomb. Golomb is in his fifties, with short, thinning black hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He wears dark, conservative suits, so that he looks like a bank manager or a stockbroker. Since starting in the car business more than a decade ago, Golomb has sold, on average, about twenty cars a month, which is more than double what the average car salesman sells. On his desk Golomb has a row of five gold stars, given to him by his dealership in honor of his performance. In the world of car salesmen, Golomb is a virtuoso.

Being a successful salesman like Golomb is a task that places extraordinary demands on the ability to thin-slice. Someone you've never met walks into your dealership, perhaps about to make what may be one of the most expensive purchases of his or her life. Some people are insecure. Some are nervous. Some know exactly what they want. Some have no idea. Some know a great deal about cars and will be offended by a salesman who adopts a patronizing tone. Some are desperate for someone to take them by the hand and make sense of what seems to them like an overwhelming process. A salesman, if he or she is to be successful, has to gather all of that information—figuring out, say, the dynamic that exists between a husband and a wife, or a father and a daughter — process it, and adjust his or her own behavior accordingly, and do all of that within the first few moments of the encounter.

Bob Golomb is clearly the kind of person who seems to do that kind of thin-slicing effortlessly. He's the Evelyn Harrison of car selling. He has a quiet, watchful intelligence and a courtly charm. He is thoughtful and attentive. He's a wonderful listener. He has, he says, three simple rules that

guide his every action: "Take care of the customer. Take care of the customer. Take care of the customer." If you buy a car from Bob Golomb, he will be on the phone to you the next day, making sure everything is all right. If you come to the dealership but don't end up buying anything, he'll call you the next day, thanking you for stopping by. "You always put on your best face, even if you are having a bad day. You leave that behind," he says. "Even if things are horrendous at home, you give the customer your best."

When I met Golomb, he took out a thick three-ring binder filled with the mountain of letters he had received over the years from satisfied customers. "Each one of these has a story to tell," he said. He seemed to remember every one. As he flipped through the book, he pointed randomly at a short typewritten letter. "Saturday afternoon, late November 1992. A couple. They came in with this glazed look on their faces. I said, 'Folks, have you been shopping for cars all day?' They said yes. No one had taken them seriously. I ended up selling them a car, and we had to get it from, I want to say, Rhode Island. We sent a driver four hundred miles. They were so happy." He pointed at another letter. "This gentleman here. We've delivered six cars to him already since 1993, and every time we deliver another car, he writes another letter. There's a lot like that. Here's a guy who lives way down by Keyport, New Jersey, forty miles away. He brought me up a platter of scallops."

There is another even more important reason for Golomb's success, however. He follows, he says, another very simple rule. He may make a million snap judgments about a customer's needs and state of mind, but he tries

never to judge anyone on the basis of his or her appearance. He assumes that everyone who walks in the door has the exact same chance of buying a car.

“You cannot prejudge people in this business,” he said over and over when we met, and each time he used that phrase, his face took on a look of utter conviction. “Prejudging is the kiss of death. You have to give everyone your best shot. A green salesperson looks at a customer and says, ‘This person looks like he can’t afford a car,’ which is the worst thing you can do, because sometimes the most unlikely person is flush,” Golomb says. “I have a farmer I deal with, who I’ve sold all kinds of cars over the years. We seal our deal with a handshake, and he hands me a hundred-dollar bill and says, ‘Bring it out to my farm.’ We don’t even have to write the order up. Now, if you saw this man, with his coveralls and his cow dung, you’d figure he was not a worthy customer. But in fact, as we say in the trade, he’s all cashed up. Or sometimes people see a teenager and they blow him off. Well, then later that night, the teenager comes back with Mom and Dad, and they pick up a car, and it’s the other salesperson that writes them up.”

What Golomb is saying is that most salespeople are prone to a classic Warren Harding error. They see someone, and somehow they let the first impression they have about that person’s appearance drown out every other piece of information they manage to gather in that first instant. Golomb, by contrast, tries to be more selective. He has his antennae out to pick up on whether someone is confident or insecure, knowledgeable or naïve, trusting or suspicious — but from that thin-slicing flurry he tries to

edit out those impressions based solely on physical appearance. The secret of Golomb's success is that he has decided to fight the Warren Harding error.

4. Spotting the Sucker

Why does Bob Golomb's strategy work so well? Because Warren Harding errors, it turns out, play an enormous, largely unacknowledged role in the car-selling business. Consider, for example, a remarkable social experiment conducted in the 1990s by a law professor in Chicago named Ian Ayres. Ayres put together a team of thirty-eight people — eighteen white men, seven white women, eight black women, and five black men. Ayres took great pains to make them appear as similar as possible. All were in their mid-twenties. All were of average attractiveness. All were instructed to dress in conservative casual wear: the women in blouses, straight skirts, and flat shoes; the men in polo shirts or button-downs, slacks, and loafers. All were given the same cover story. They were instructed to go to a total of 242 car dealerships in the Chicago area and present themselves as college-educated young professionals (sample job: systems analyst at a bank) living in the tony Chicago neighborhood of Streeterville. Their instructions for what to do were even more specific. They should walk in. They should wait to be approached by a salesperson. "I'm interested in buying this car," they were supposed to say, pointing to the lowest-priced car in the showroom. Then, after they heard the salesman's initial offer, they were instructed to bargain back and forth until the salesman either accepted an offer or refused to bargain

any further — a process that in almost all cases took about forty minutes. What Ayres was trying to do was zero in on a very specific question: All other things being absolutely equal, how does skin color or gender affect the price that a salesman in a car dealership offers?

The results were stunning. The white men received initial offers from the salesmen that were \$725 above the dealer's invoice (that is, what the dealer paid for the car from the manufacturer). White women got initial offers of \$935 above invoice. Black women were quoted a price, on average, of \$1,195 above invoice. And black men? Their initial offer was \$1,687 above invoice. Even after forty minutes of bargaining, the black men could get the price, on average, down to only \$1,551 above invoice. After lengthy negotiations, Ayres's black men still ended up with a price that was nearly \$800 higher than Ayres's white men were offered without having to say a word.

What should we make of this? Are the car salesmen of Chicago incredible sexists and bigots? That's certainly the most extreme explanation for what happened. In the car-selling business, if you can convince someone to pay the sticker price (the price on the window of the car in the showroom), and if you can talk them into the full premium package, with the leather seats and the sound system and the aluminum wheels, you can make as much in commission off that one gullible customer as you might from half a dozen or so customers who are prepared to drive a hard bargain. If you are a salesman, in other words, there is a tremendous temptation to try to spot the sucker. Car salesmen even have a particular word to describe the customers who pay the sticker price. They're called a lay-down.

One interpretation of Ayres's study is that these car salesmen simply made a blanket decision that women and blacks are lay-downs. They saw someone who wasn't a white male and thought to themselves, "Aha! This person is so stupid and naïve that I can make a lot of money off them."

This explanation, however, doesn't make much sense. Ayres's black and female car buyers, after all, gave one really obvious sign after another that they weren't stupid and naïve. They were college-educated professionals. They had high-profile jobs. They lived in a wealthy neighborhood. They were dressed for success. They were savvy enough to bargain for forty minutes. Does anything about these facts suggest a sucker? If Ayres's study is evidence of conscious discrimination, then the car salesmen of Chicago are either the most outrageous of bigots (which seems unlikely) or so dense that they were oblivious to every one of those clues (equally unlikely). I think, instead, that there is something more subtle going on here. What if, for whatever reason — experience, car-selling lore, what they've heard from other salesmen — they have a strong automatic association between lay-downs and women and minorities? What if they link those two concepts in their mind unconsciously, the same way that millions of Americans link the words "Evil" and "Criminal" with "African American" on the Race IAT, so that when women and black people walk through the door, they instinctively think "sucker"?

These salesmen may well have a strong conscious commitment to racial and gender equality, and they would probably insist, up and down, that they were quoting

prices based on the most sophisticated reading of their customers' character. But the decisions they made on the spur of the moment as each customer walked through the door was of another sort. This was an unconscious reaction. They were silently picking up on the most immediate and obvious fact about Ayres's car buyers — their sex and their color — and sticking with that judgment even in the face of all manner of new and contradictory evidence. They were behaving just like the voters did in the 1920 presidential election when they took one look at Warren Harding, jumped to a conclusion, and stopped thinking. In the case of the voters, their error gave them one of the worst U.S. Presidents ever. In the case of the car salesmen, their decision to quote an outrageously high price to women and blacks alienated people who might otherwise have bought a car.

Golomb tries to treat every customer exactly the same because he's aware of just how dangerous snap judgments are when it comes to race and sex and appearance. Sometimes the unprepossessing farmer with his filthy coveralls is actually an enormously rich man with a four-thousand-acre spread, and sometimes the teenager is coming back later with Mom and Dad. Sometimes the young black man has an MBA from Harvard. Sometimes the petite blonde makes the car decisions for her whole family. Sometimes the man with the silver hair and broad shoulders and lantern jaw is a lightweight. So Golomb doesn't try to spot the lay-down. He quotes everyone the same price, sacrificing high profit margins on an individual car for the benefits of volume, and word of his fairness has spread to the point where he gets up to a third of his business from the

referrals of satisfied customers. “Can I simply look at someone and say, ‘This person is going to buy a car?’” asks Golomb. “You’d have to be pretty darn good to do that, and there’s no way I could. Sometimes I get completely taken aback. Sometimes I’ll have a guy come in waving a checkbook, saying, ‘I’m here to buy a car today. If the numbers are right, I’ll buy a car today.’ And you know what? Nine times out of ten, he never buys.”

5. Think About Dr. King

What should we do about Warren Harding errors? The kinds of biases we’re talking about here aren’t so obvious that it’s easy to identify a solution. If there’s a law on the books that says that black people can’t drink at the same water fountains as white people, the obvious solution is to change the law. But unconscious discrimination is a little bit trickier. The voters in 1920 didn’t think they were being suckered by Warren Harding’s good looks any more than Ayres’s Chicago car dealers realized how egregiously they were cheating women and minorities or boards of directors realize how absurdly biased they are in favor of the tall. If something is happening outside of awareness, how on earth do you fix it?

The answer is that we are not helpless in the face of our first impressions. They may bubble up from the unconscious — from behind a locked door inside of our brain — but just because something is outside of awareness doesn’t mean it’s outside of control. It is true, for instance, that you can take the Race IAT or the Career IAT as many times as you want and try as hard as you can to respond

faster to the more problematic categories, and it won't make a whit of difference. But, believe it or not, if, before you take the IAT, I were to ask you to look over a series of pictures or articles about people like Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela or Colin Powell, your reaction time would change. Suddenly it won't seem so hard to associate positive things with black people. "I had a student who used to take the IAT every day," Banaji says. "It was the first thing he did, and his idea was just to let the data gather as he went. Then this one day, he got a positive association with blacks. And he said, 'That's odd. I've never gotten that before,' because we've all tried to change our IAT score and we couldn't. But he's a track-and-field guy, and what he realized is that he'd spent the morning watching the Olympics."

Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions — we can alter the way we think — by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions. If you are a white person who would like to treat black people as equals in every way — who would like to have a set of associations with blacks that are as positive as those that you have with whites — it requires more than a simple commitment to equality. It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and familiar with the best of their culture, so that when you want to meet, hire, date, or talk with a member of a minority, you aren't betrayed by your hesitation and discomfort. Taking rapid cognition seriously — acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that

first impressions play in our lives — requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions. In the next section of this book, I'm going to tell three stories about people who confronted the consequences of first impressions and snap judgments. Some were successful. Some were not. But all, I think, provide us with critical lessons of how we can better understand and come to terms with the extraordinary power of thin-slicing.