

Identities, Attributions, and Prejudices: A Study of the Errors of Associating Bias to Judgment as Shown in the *All American Boys*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concepts of Associationism and Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) or Correspondence Bias by analyzing the 2015 collaborative fictional novel *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. Garnering attention as the 26th most-banned book of 2022, in America, the novel tells the story of two teenage boys, Rashad Butler and Quinn Collins, and delineates how they navigate life in a politically charged environment plagued by social evils. By examining the book through the lens of 'Correspondence Bias,' the social reality of phenomena such as conditioning, profiling, and stereotyping can be understood. Correspondence bias or FAE is a perceptual bias that forms an unsubstantial connection between a person's action and their personality by ignoring the external situational factors. The practice of racism, when perceived as an extension of the attribution errors, results in a revelation about the fundamental nature of discrimination and bias. This perpetuated bias culminates in a form of conditioning that leaves the victim traumatized and unprotected against the enforced stigmatization. This paper also aims to examine the practice of 'associationism' in relation to the racist practices that are perpetually linked to irrational beliefs and ideologies formed based on implicit bias. *All American Boys* is a testimonial piece of work that exposes and represents the grueling reality of the racial discrimination that has afflicted contemporary American society. Thus, this paper is an endeavor to comprehend such invidious acts from a sociological, psychological, and theoretical perspective, as well as to analyze the effect such issues exert over the aspect of social identity.

Key Words: Racism, Stereotypes, Conditioning,
Discrimination, etc.

INTRODUCTION

All American Boys is a 2015 novel that gained acclaim for its brutally honest representation of the cruel reality of racism in contemporary American society. The book commands interest just by the fact that it is a collaborative work of fiction authored by two writers who impart their voices to their respective ethnic characters. The book attracted controversy and even made it to the list of banned literature due to its raw depiction of overtly sensitive issues like police brutality. The story revolves around the perspectives and the lives of two teenage boys, Rashad and Quinn, who are caught in the whirlwind of an incident that changed their lives forever.

Rashad is just like any other teenager who thought of partying and girls, and lived the carefree life of a student. But his life turns upside down when he is wrongfully accused of stealing and is subjected to the hostile charges of racism and police brutality. Although this incident does not directly affect Quinn's life, he was a direct yet passive witness to the incident. His guilty conscience eventually leads him to evolve into a morally responsible citizen who voices anguish and boldly protests in the face of injustice. The novel openly showcases the prejudices and the biases that accompany the act of racism and exposes the horrifying reality of the persistent presence of racism even in an ultra-modern, civilized society that gloats in the glory of progress.

Discriminating against people solely based on one's own bias and prejudice is an anomaly of human psychology. Perceiving differences based on illogical assumptions stems from the need to validate the hierarchy of societal existence. However, generalizing such assumptions as the intrinsic characteristic is a perceptual error that promotes stigma and unwarranted prejudices. In social psychology, this error is termed 'Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)', which refers to the tendency to attribute someone's behavior primarily to their personality while overlooking the external factors. FAE is presumed to fall under the category of 'Correspondence Bias.' Correspondence Bias occurs when strong assumptions are made solely by inferring a person's behavior or traits. In the context of racism, attributing a person's behavior primarily to their physical appearance (skin color and race) is an error of judgment brought on by biased perception.

Associationism is another psychological phenomenon that can also be used to analyze racist practices, as it is a method that examines how ideas or concepts become associated with each other, like the relation between race and crime. Such associationism leads to the formation of social stereotypes and unwarrantedly targets a community, thereby perpetuating inequality and placing a substantial burden of stigma on the affected. This paper is thus an attempt to analyze racist practices showcased in the novel using the framework of Associationism and FAE or Correspondence Bias. This paper also focuses on revealing how conditioning can instill self-doubt in the target and bias in the perpetrator, respectively, and analyzes the ill effects of harboring ignorance in the face of injustice.

THE ERROR OF ASSOCIATION AND THE FATALITY OF ATTRIBUTION

“If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it must be a duck.”(p. 49)

Prejudiced conceptions consequently lead to the sociological process of racialization, which is a systemic construction of racial identities within a society. These constructs are based on unfounded generalizations about the various behavioral and sociological aspects of racial groups. This often leads to an erroneous tendency that can be described using the psychological theory of FAE (Fundamental Attribution Error) or Correspondence Bias. Associationism in the context of racism refers to the inclination to unreasonably associate the racial group with adverse traits or stereotypes, resulting in bias and racism. The novel, *All American Boys*, poignantly showcases the detrimental side of such prejudiced tendencies and the extent to which they can inflict harm on the targeted individual or community.

Associating negative traits and forcibly attributing criminalized behaviors as definitive of a collective identity is a psychologically complex tendency born from a conditioned society that exhibits bigotry and ignorance. It can be argued that racialization is the result of the act of baseless association. As said earlier, racialization can hinder individual progress as well as the societal progress of the community and inflict trauma that can become generational baggage.

“*Were your pants sagging?* Dad interrogated..... *But they don’t know that*, Dad said. *What they see is what he represents.*” (p.30)

This line from the novel highlights how consequentially grave the act of associating character traits with appearance is. This association is possible because of the existence of stereotypes or cliches that enhance and promote a certain image as the definitive aspect by which individuals are grouped to become a columnized clump. A person who wears a certain style of clothing or wears their hair in a certain way is a matter of personal choice; it does not become the defining criterion of their personality.

“Of course, part of working hard, to him, was looking the part, dressing the part, and speaking the part..... They’ll think you are doing drugs, he’d say. Spoony’s clothes..... That was just his style. That was pretty much his whole generation’s style..... Nineties hip-hop..... Hoodies and unlaced boots. They’ll think you’re selling drugs, Dad would say. *Why can’t you get a haircut? Why can’t you dress like a respectable adult....*” (p.31)

As this excerpt from the novel entails, a dressing style or hairstyle or even the music preference could be a determinant that could brand a person as a drug user or a drug peddler, which is again a common denominator attributed to certain racial communities.

“Listen to me. There’s no better opportunity for a black boy in this country than to join the army.” (p.7)

This ambition is born out of a need to prove one’s worth to acquire a social standing in a biased society. Rashad’s father believed that the only way to be deemed a decent person in a highly discriminatory society is to play one’s part as a responsible citizen and to fit into the socially accepted norms.

“He could’ve been killed!..... For a bag of chips that he was gonna pay for! For having brown skin and wearing his jeans a certain way. And guess what Dad, that ROTC uniform was right there in that bag. The bag was open so that cop probably saw it. But did it matter?” (p.32)

Playing one’s part was not enough to escape the bigoted cliches that were inherently attributed to Rashad. Such are the errors and fallacies of associationism and attribution exhibited through unfounded discrimination. Rashad evidently played the part of a decent kid, an ROTC kid with decent grades, but that was not enough. Be it Rashad or Spoony or English, all of them had, at some point in their lives, been humiliatingly subjected to the banality of racial profiling.

“He’d never been beaten up, but he’d been stopped on the street several times, questioned by cops, asked to turn his pockets out and lift his shirt up, for no reason. He’d been followed around stores, and stared at on buses by women who clutched their purse tight enough to poke holes in the leather. He was always a suspect.” (p.35)

This description of Spoony’s experience is relevant to show how concepts like FAE or Correspondence Bias, and associationism can be used to study the harsh consequences of racialization. When analyzing the ‘grocery store incident’ in the novel, we can see how the practice of associationism hinders Paul, as well as the shopkeeper, from acting rationally and reasonably. They wrongly attributed the racialized clichés (of criminal behavior/stealing) to his personality, shunning the situational evidence that proved Rashad’s innocence.

“Yeah, he was trying to steal those chips, the clerk interrupted.....”

“What was going on? He was accusing me of things that hadn’t even happened...”

“I was just trying to get my phone out of my bag when she fell over me- I tried to explain, but the policeman shut me down quick.” (p.14)

The utter helplessness Rashad felt and the irrationality of the shopkeeper’s and Paul’s actions are very evident in these conversations that entail the consequences of attributing stereotypes. The shopkeeper brazenly assumed Rashad to be a thief solely based on his prejudiced notion, and Paul rashly ignored the situation and suspected Rashad to be an armed assailant. This is the dire consequence of associationism and attribution when an utter negligence of external conditions leads to a grave misinterpretation of certain situations.

“Ma’am, are you okay? the officer asked, concerned. And before she could finish her sentence, the sentence that would’ve explained that she had tripped and fell over me, the cop cut her off. Did he do something to you.” (p.13)

Throughout the novel, instances are provided that explain how associationism and attribution lead to dire misjudgment. As mentioned earlier, when Rashad’s father asked “if his pants were sagging”, he asked it being completely aware of how society associated certain stigmas with the people of his race. The fact that the same question would never find relevance if asked to Quinn, how fallacious and marginalizing stereotypes can be. The altercation between Paul and Rashad can undoubtedly be classified as an

instance of 'hate crime.' Paul's irrational use of brutal force, his addressing Rashad as a thug, as well as the Marc Blair incident, reveal that the error of attribution made by Paul is the hate he associated with his stigmatizing beliefs.

Incidents like this can affect a society in an unthinkable manner. Friends can turn into foes, brothers can turn against each other, and family bonds and relations can become askew. It is shown in the novel how a city was split into two factions, with some calling the incident an act of racism while some justifying the incident as the involvement of a dutiful cop. For example, the cab driver from the news who believed that it was just another "case of a teenage criminal, caught red-handed."

"And why is that? Because of the way he looks?..... I mean, listen, I've been robbed before. Right around here..... And he looks like the guy who robbed me. He was dressed just like him." (p.103)

Rashad's dressing style was a factor of concern only because he was a black boy. Sweatshirts, jackets, and sneakers are worn by almost all teenagers, but when the same apparel is worn by a black kid, it becomes a point of racialized attribution. The presupposition that a boy who looked like Rashad could have drugs or guns in his car, or would be an immediate suspect in a burglary case, happens because the external factors are completely overlooked. The very shocking confession made by Rashad's father is the most grievous instance of an error in associative attribution and racialization. Rashad's father, a black man himself, shot a black teenager (Daniel Shackelford) just because he looked the part of a 'thug' and on suspicion of robbery when he was the one being robbed by the white boy. He shot the kid, thinking he was about to take a gun out of his backpack, when he was just reaching for his inhaler.

"The black kid was dressed like..... Dressed like your brother. Hair all over his head. A hoodie. Boots. His pants were damn near all the way down,,,,, I ran over and jacked the black boy up because I knew he was in the wrong. I just knew it." (p.127)

What he thought he knew was nothing but his biased belief in the stereotypes and cliches attributed to his community. Unkempt hair and low-riding jeans were tangible criteria for suspecting a young boy because, apparently, he looked the part. Rashad's father saw discipline, hard work, and neat appearances as an antidote to the stigmas, biases, cliches, and stereotypes that plagued his race. However, this made him "no different than Galluzzo.

Another trigger-happy cop who was quick to assume and even quicker to shoot.” Daniel Shackelford, Marc Blair, and Rashad Butler all became victims of racial profiling as well as racialization that was born out of errors in classifying attributions.

CONDITIONING TRAUMA AND SUBMISSION

The erroneous acts of attribution and associationism can be presumed as the inadvertent consequences of the subversive act of conditioning. Conditioning occurs when a person is constantly subjected to a constructed set of ideas or experiences that then becomes the normalized reality. This, then, goes on to affect one's perceptions, and it hinders one's ability to take rational decisions. The novel provides us with various instances that showcase how these socio-psychological acts and concepts can perpetuate consequential discrimination, which affects the lives of the various characters within the story.

Conditioning a person into believing that their existence depends on submission to oppression leads to the proliferation of generational trauma. A trauma that promotes fear and self-doubt in a person that stops them from freely expressing their individuality. From a different perspective, conditioning can also act as a catalyst that justifies the practice of oppression, as it can lead to the silent advocacy of premeditated bias. Thus, conditioning can also lead to the escalation and rationalization of discriminatory practices among individuals as well as generations. Conditioning can undoubtedly lead to the emergence of oppressors as well as targets.

In the novel, the character of David Butler, Rashad's father, was a man who lived a strictly righteous life, abiding by the rules and laws of society. Apart from the societal laws, he had a set of guidelines carefully designed to lead a silent life, a life hidden from the biased eyes of society. David Butler cannot be blamed for his strict adherence to these guidelines because the society he lived in was inherently biased and prejudiced. Despite having served in the military and police, he still felt the urge to prove himself and to earn his place in society by being docile. He believed that, to have a peaceful/normal existence in society, one should exercise caution and prove one's worth to gain the title of 'All American', unlike those who are born with the privilege, the privilege of being white.

From the story, it is palpable that he had carefully tempered himself to the extent that he believed that a person's choice of dressing or hairstyle could be

found offensive enough to perpetuate and justify racial profiling. However, the truly formidable part is that he perpetuated his beliefs and teachings to his children, thus fabricating low self-esteem and self-doubt in their young minds. David Butler believed that one's lifestyle as well as physical appearance could be deemed a criterion for discrimination. Wearing your hair in a certain way or your jeans in a certain manner was, according to David, a catalyst for unwarranted suspicion. What he failed to perceive was the illogical discrepancy of such reasoning; just because a dark-skinned boy has unkempt hair and low-waist jeans, it should not make him a target of racial profiling, it does not make him a criminal, a junkie, or a thug. These are stereotypes designed by society to justify and uphold discriminatory practices.

“Never fight back. Never talk back. Keep your hands up. Keep your mouth shut. Just do what they ask you to do, and you'll be fine.” (p.30)

This was the life lesson that David Butler fervently preached to his sons throughout his life. He thought that by conditioning his sons into accepting prejudices as the norm and by subjecting their mindsets to acclimate to bias with docility would help them survive societal discrimination. However, in the face of blind and brutal prejudice, this falls short as these acts are born from violence and hate.

The fateful ‘incident’ at the store highlighted the way Rashad was subjected to the atrocities of racial profiling. From the store owner who falsely accused Rashad of stealing to Paul, the police officer who brutally assaulted him, it is shown how Rashad was irrationally targeted by people who judged him for his skin color. The sad truth is that no number of life lessons or advice could prepare a person for the experience that can absolutely shatter their sense of identity and existence. Rashad was conditioned to submit and never resist, and Paul was conditioned to believe that a person who looked like Rashad should not resist, even if innocent.

“...thugs can't just do what they are told. Need to learn how to respect authority. And I'm gonna teach you.” (p.15)

Innocent until proven guilty is the thumb rule of law, yet Rashad was punished without trial or evidence. Paul had been conditioned by the ruthless society to racialize and discriminate against Rashad's community as he stereotypically perceived them as “thugs. Rashad was a victim of the label that was unfairly attributed to his race, the label of a “thug.” Attributing

criminalist tendencies to an entire community based on the criterion of race is an aggravated form of profiling; this generalizes as well as marginalizes the community, making them susceptible targets of hate crimes.

“My hands were already up, a reflex from seeing a cop coming towards me.”(p.14)

Even though Rashad was completely innocent, his fear-incited reflexes made him look guilty, and the absolute conviction in Paul’s judgment made Rashad doubt himself momentarily. Just like Paul, the shopkeeper, influenced by his distorted perceptions, suspiciously eyed Rashad the moment he stepped into the store. He blatantly accused Rashad of stealing and ardently stuck to the claim even when Rashad revealed his intention to buy from the store. The shopkeeper’s misplaced and unwarranted suspicion is indicative of his fallacious perception of black teenage boys. The shopkeeper’s and Paul’s flawed perspectives showcase how stereotypes collectively affect a society’s ability to perceive and associate. Throughout the novel, insights are provided on how stereotypes are effectively and strongly branded upon people’s minds. These selective perceptions create a stigma that devalues their collective existence and ostracizes the target community to lead a segregated existence plagued with self-doubt and fear.

THE ALL-AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE MANTLE OF IGNORANCE

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?”

— Hillel the Elder

The title of this novel is indicative of the deeply infringed irony that encapsulates the society depicted in the novel. Rashad and Quinn are both young teenage boys who were overwhelmed by the pressure of finding their place and identity in a turbulent society. However, their paths were distinctly divergent; while one had to achieve his position in society, the other was born into it ‘All-American’ refers to the quintessential values of American culture like patriotism, sense of community, brotherhood, family, and ambition etc. The word ‘All’ in ‘All-American’ refers to the implicit value of inclusivity, denoting that these values are representative of everyone regardless of race or class.

“That was my role: the dutiful son, the All-American boy with an All-American fifteen-foot dead eye jump shot and an All-American 3.5 GPA.” (p.18)

Thus, by employing this title, the author urges the readers to reflect on the false sense of inclusivity prevalent in society. Quinn is assigned the 'All-American' identity as part of his 'white-privilege', but Rashad is living a life where he has to navigate his identity as he faces racial discrimination that makes him question his place in the biased society. "But Ma, all we want is to feel like we can be who we are without being accused of being something else. That's all." (p.109)

Rashad, Spoony, or English are just as 'All-American' as Quinn is, but their race brings about an exclusion as they are not accepted as the ideal images of 'Americanness.' Thus, the novel is an exploration of how Rashad and Quinn found the meaning of being 'All-American' boys through their shared yet distinct experiences. The disparities in their experiences form the crux of the story as their different perspectives expose the reality of racism and its aftermath that visibly shook the foundations of the 'All-American' sense of community.

"I could be all the way across the country in California, and I'd still be white, cops and everyone else would still see me as just a regular kid, an All-American boy. Regular. All American. White." (p.99)

When a person is being treated differently, they are not only targeted but also ignored. The 'All-American' society failed to protect Rashad as they saw Rashad through the heavily tinted spectacles of deep-rooted bias. Even after failing to protect him, society ignored the implicit irrationality of such a brutal act and failed to recognize the perils of racism that battered his young soul. Quinn's narrative, thus, functions as a directive that exposes the shortcomings of the 'All-American' society that feigns ignorance in the face of injustice. Quinn's narrative is interwoven with Rashad's, but Quinn still bore silent witness to Rashad's misfortune. In the story, Quinn was initially concerned with Paul's involvement in the incident rather than Rashad's ill-fate. Quinn was preoccupied with Paul's transformation from being his childhood hero and mentor to a brute of a man.

"Paulie's always been the good guy." (p.72)

Quinn's inner struggle to believe in Paul's innocence drove him to blatantly ignore the ugly truth that society presented. He wanted to escape the frenzy that surrounded the incident; he did not want to be part of the unsettling

conversations. He wanted to turn a blind eye to the reality of his indifference and forced ignorance.

“Couldn’t I leave it at the door wherever I went? Maybe we all should have tried to do that. It wasn’t any of our problem.” (p.77)

Quinn wanted to believe that he could ignore the issues, but it only made him realize that by doing so, he too became part of the issue. He too forcibly tried to attribute the biased notions upon Rashad in vain to vindicate Paul and to rest his own guilty conscience.

“Maybe he got out of hand? I just had to say. Maybe he was on drugs.” (p.97)

Quinn wanted to believe that Paul “was just doing his job” and that he was not committing a brazen act of racial injustice. Quinn did not want to face the reality that challenged his ‘All-American’ society and its flawed values

“I didn’t want my life to change from the way it was before I’d seen that.” (p.98)

Quinn walked away because he wanted to live his life as a regular ‘All-American’ boy; he didn’t want to acknowledge that it was everyone’s problem, that it was an ‘All-American’ problem. Through Quinn’s narrative, the story reflected on the need for society to reconcile to its responsibilities and to remain intolerant towards injustice and despotism. As Desmond Tutu once said, if a person is neutral in situations of injustice, then they have chosen the side of the oppressor. Quinn’s realization helped him change his flawed perspective and to realize that to protest against discrimination is the freedom that ‘All-American’ values should represent. It is quite symbolic that Rashad and Quinn were unable to “see” each other in the beginning, but at the end their eyes met and they finally saw each other and understood each other. Quinn was lastly able to look beyond his ignorance and understand the cause Rashad stood for.

“Asking only to be seen and respected like the citizen he was. Would he be thought of as the ‘All-American boy?’” (p.160)

CONCLUSION

“How you feelin, Rashad?” the pastor asked. Everybody was asking that, as if I ever was going to tell them the truth. Nobody wanted to hear the truth, even though everybody already knew what it was. I felt ... violated. That’s the only way I can put it. Straight-up violated.” (p.51)

From being falsely accused as a criminal to being mediatized as a victim, Rashad's journey renders the brave act of breaking the traumatic cycle of conditioning and associationism. Acts of discrimination and violence are often discussed in relation to their impact on the societal and legal frameworks; however, their impact on individual victims is often overlooked. The trauma inflicted on Rashad was enduring, both physically and mentally, and it moved on to his family, friends, and his community, fostering fear, anger, and a loss of trust in the institutions instilled to protect them.

The novel honestly portrayed how trauma evinces in various ways, either through physical harm or emotional anguish or even through the distress of communities grappling with bias and stigmas. It was a compelling study of how citizens of the society are affected by these instances and how awareness and resilience can emerge from within the society.

Rashad and Quinn's stories developed as they faced their fears and struggles to reclaim their identities and their voices. Rashad's life was changed by the trauma, but his victory came from his refusal to be reduced to a mere victim. Quinn's life changed when he finally refused to be part of the problem.

All American Boys, suggestively depicts the issues of conditioning, stereotype maintenance, associationism, and racialization with relation to how society and institutions react to the said issues. The novel garners significance for providing a deep understanding of the complex issues through a profoundly moving narrative. From being conditioned to never fight back and to never resist, Rashad emerged as a beacon of strength and courage that urged a community to fight back and resist the force of injustice, whereas Quinn symbolized change and awareness. By intertwining their narratives, the author alighted upon the importance of unity in a fight against social evils.

The novel came out in 2015, but the significance of the message it relays has not dwindled, even in this post-COVID era. Hate crimes, racism, perpetuation of stigmas, etc., may have statistically reduced, but as said before, the systemic bias remains. The ascend of different governments and the corresponding political situations are crucial to the continuance of radical changes for the betterment of society. This paper was written with the aim of ascertaining the significance of discussing the issues raised in the novel by examining the nuances that are inherent to understanding institutionalized bias. *All American Boys*, thus, righteously served as a framework to uncover the

psychological and behavioral implications that are associated with discerning such discriminatory acts and their effects on societal relations.

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