

Streib, J. and Leondar-Wright, B. (2025) *Is It Racist? Is It Sexist?: Why Red and Blue White People Disagree, and How to Decide in the Gray Areas*. Stanford University Press

Review by Karen Gaffney

If you focus just on the primary part of the title of this book, *Is It Racist? Is It Sexist?*, then you might think you don't need to read this book because you already know how to identify racism and sexism. However, if you take a look at the subtitle, *Why Red and Blue White People Disagree, and How to Decide in the Gray Areas*, I hope you're already starting to reconsider that initial impression.

In explaining the motivation behind this book, co-authors Jessi Streib and Betsy Leondar-Wright explain early on that, "From the 1980s until the early 2000s, most white people tended to hold stable views of what's racist and sexist" (p. 4). However, since then, "their views are increasingly up for grabs" (p. 4). In other words, white people disagree with each other much more about racism and sexism than they did in the recent past, and exploring the reasons behind that is a valuable and much-needed direction for research. So, the authors interviewed over 125 white people ages 35 to 59 from different parts of the United States. Selfishly, as a person who fits this racial and age demographic, I was particularly curious about their results. I also thought it was noteworthy that they created a cleverly ambiguous title for their interviewee recruitment that would attract white people with a range of perspectives: "American Lives and Viewpoints Study."

In order to analyze "white people's judgment calls," (p. 6) Streib and Leondar-Wright create what they call a "courtroom metaphor" (p. 20) as a framework to investigate their results, focusing on "acquitters" and "convictors" and then splitting each of those groups into "motivated" and "moderate." Acquitters tend to search for proof of explicit intention of racism or sexism in order to convict, which is often difficult to identify, leading to many acquittals. Convictors, on the other hand, focus more on a broader landscape of injustice that can be much less explicit, leading to their convictions.

Why would white people of a generally similar age demographic disagree with each other so much about racism and sexism, and why has that disagreement increased? Ultimately, the authors explain that the results point to what is called "motivated reasoning," which involves how we filter and interpret information in relation to our preexisting beliefs, which are also connected to our values and group identities (p. 9).

Interestingly, the authors share that they initially looked to explain their results using the demographic information about the people they interviewed, but that was not sufficient. They also explain why a variety of other sociological theories (standpoint theory, materialist theory, and class theory) likewise did not satisfactorily explain their results, leading them back to the role of

motivated reasoning to “serve as the primary explanation for white people’s judgment calls” (p. 15). This approach involves “how people think, not just who they are” (p. 16).

After the book maps out the framework described above, the six chapters that form the core of the book are divided based on acquitters and convictors in general, and then more precisely with chapters on both motivated and moderate forms of each of these groups. These chapters focus on scenarios presented to interviewees, which prompt their judgment calls, which the authors then analyze by focusing on motivated reasoning. As the authors share the scenarios, they also provide background information about their interviewees, including what, if any, news media they follow, their socio-economic status, education, job, political affiliation, family, and childhood experiences. Some also reference personal experiences with trauma. This context is more three-dimensional than a simple profile would provide.

The opening Acquitters chapter shares cartoons shown to the interviewees with accompanying short scenarios. For example, one scenario reads: “A white cop shoots an unarmed black man who’s holding up his cell phone. Afterward he said he saw a gun, and he’s sure he’d fire on a white person who made the same threatening gesture. Is this a story about racism?” (p. 25). As Streib and Leondar-Wright analyze the motivated reasoning behind people who say this is not a story about racism, they share questions and comments from the interviewees, who tend to focus on this scenario in isolation (rather than as part of a larger systemic pattern), the intention of the officer and his history, what preceded the shooting, and so forth. The interviewees also consider other possible explanations. The chapter explains that acquitters tend to give the benefit of the doubt unless they identify malicious intent. I will note that one aspect of this book that I especially appreciate is the use of footnotes to fact-check the points interviewees make, providing an additional layer of valuable context, particularly when interviewees provide rationales that are not supported by evidence.

The first chapter on Convictors explains how interviewees included under this category responded to the same scenarios described earlier, and here, these interviewees don’t need to see evidence of explicit intent to identify a scenario as racist or sexist and rather look at the impact and whether it is disproportionately negatively impacting people of color or women. Instead of focusing on the scenario as an isolated event, as acquitters do, convictors focus on “pattern-matching,” sometimes in ways that are insightful and valuable and other times in ways that ignore the role of other aspects of systemic injustice like classism and xenophobia (p. 71).

Ultimately the authors share concerns about both the mindset of acquitters and convictors because they focus on confirming their pre-existing beliefs rather than taking all of the evidence into consideration, but at the same time, the authors are much more concerned about how acquitters cause harm. In particular, “acquitters’ repeated not-guilty calls affirm and spread a false message that racial and gender inequality and mistreatment are rare, while convictors’ repeated guilty calls affirm and spread a true belief that they are common” (p. 69-70). In other words, it’s quite harmful that acquitters think racism and sexism are highly unusual, while it’s significant that convictors recognize the systemic nature of racism and sexism, though the concern is that “sometimes the patterns they rely on are inaccurate or too broad” (p. 71).

The final chapter, “A Better Method for Making Judgment Calls” highlights the high-stakes nature of our role in making such calls because of the impact such calls can have, from voting to human resources decisions to decisions educators make every day. Making judgment calls based on how our pre-existing beliefs might be affirmed is clearly not the way to go, as the authors explain. They advocate for shifting away from “belief-based” and focusing on a more “evidence-based” approach (p. 152). They also introduce a new metaphor of the “surveyor” approach rather than the “courtroom” metaphor to emphasize a way of measuring the “landscape and working to improve it” (p. 154). Moreover, they envision “how everyone can become better surveyors” (p. 172). Part of this involves becoming “more comfortable with ambiguity” (p. 173).

There is incredible value in the approach of this book. I think it could be particularly interesting in classroom discussion, along with community conversations. The book was published in 2025, and the interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020. If those same interviews were conducted and analyzed in 2025 and 2026, what would be similar and different? That’s a question I am left with. Some interviewees already expressed limited awareness of what racism and sexism even meant, and some expressed an individualistic mindset. Likewise, some interviewees also expressed limited engagement with any news media or awareness of current events, and some expressed significant engagement with right-wing media. In 2025, with massive funding cuts to public broadcasting, with demands to whitewash museum exhibits about racism and sexism, with mandates to eliminate DEI and courses related to racism and sexism from high schools and colleges, how do we shift towards the authors’ vision of a society with more surveyors?

Reviewer Bio:

Karen Gaffney, PhD is a Professor of English at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey. She facilitates anti-racism workshops and serves in local anti-racism coalitions. In 2025, the second edition of her book *Dismantling the Racism Machine: A Manual and Toolbox* was published by Routledge. This book is an accessible introduction to race and racism with tools for action. Her website dividednolonger.com provides a variety of anti-racism resources to support the book.