



Do book consumers discriminate against Black, female, or young authors?

**Interview with
Prof. Dana Weinberg, Queens College, CUNY**

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KENNEALLY: At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, sociologist Dana Weinberg collaborated on a complex survey looking for patterns of discrimination among book readers. A Queens College City University of New York professor and a crime novelist, Weinberg created an inconspicuous market research survey for Amazon's MTurk crowdsourcing marketplace – answer some questions for a book publisher.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

The study by Professor Weinberg and her Queens College collaborator Adam Kapelner declared, "We will ask you to examine book covers and book descriptions and then to offer your opinions about the book."

The team collected ratings of more than 25,000 book surveys across over 9,000 subjects, making the effort the largest experimental study of the book market to date. Subjects were presented with mocked-up book covers and descriptions from fiction and nonfiction genres.

Using author names and photographs, the researchers signaled authors' race, gender, and age, and randomly assigned these combinations to each book presented. Subjects noted their interest in purchasing the book, their evaluation of the authors' credentials, and the amount they were willing to pay for the book.

Professor Dana Weinberg joins me now from New York to share the survey findings, recently published in PLOS One. Welcome to the program, Dana.

WEINBERG: Thank you for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: The context for your research not only was the social upheaval triggered in May 2020 with the murder by Minneapolis police of George Floyd, but also the growing recognition that book publishing shows marked evidence of both gender and racial



discrimination. Certainly, questions about systemic racism in publishing weren't new. But the level of concern had risen considerably in 2020.

WEINBERG: In 2020, the entire country, I think, became focused on issues of race and inequality, following in 2018 when Professor Kapelner and I had done our first study about gender and publishing, and the #MeToo movement had been very much on people's minds.

In 2020, there was a hashtag on Twitter called #PublishingPaidMe that was following in the wake of these protests. People were writing in about how much money they were making from their publishers. And one of the things that became clear was that authors of color were not being paid at the same rate as white authors.

KENNEALLY: All this really matters, of course, because publishing is historically a cultural gatekeeper.

WEINBERG: Yes. Up until self-publishing really took off, the publishers were the ones who decided who was going to get in front of the public – so what was going to be published, how it was going to be presented and marketed, what kind of signals there would be about its value both as a cultural product and also something that consumers might want to buy. So the publishers as gatekeepers really determined whose voices we heard and who got the spotlight.

KENNEALLY: By 2020, of course, a number of publishers were making statements of support for racial justice. They were talking about engaging in anti-racism workforce training. And they certainly pledged to publish more books by writers of color. What you set out to find was the marketplace circumstances that they were trying to accomplish this in.

WEINBERG: When you look at the history of publishing, we do see a lot of whitewashing. We see that the employees of publishers are mostly white. So there's not a lot of diversity in the workforce itself in terms of who's making the decisions and who's doing the marketing and all of that. But then also there has been this history of a lack of diversity in who's getting published. And when publishers have historically decided that they want to highlight voices of people of color, it's often been in niche markets – writing about racism, for example, or writing about the lives of Black people or something along those lines, so that it's been very focused on a certain niche market where there's a sense that there would be a certain expertise or a certain audience.

There's two potential sides to this story. One potential is that publishers are just discriminatory against women, against people of color, and they don't give those voices



their due. On the other side of it, there's sort of a rational actor argument to be made, which is that this really about the consumer market and what consumers are willing to buy.

At the end of the day, publishers want to make money. So if they believe that the public is not going to buy books by Black authors or female authors or young authors, then those books are not going to get accepted for publication or promoted with the same kind of budget. We were trying to understand how much was coming from the publishers and what was really going on with the general public in terms of their attitudes towards different kinds of authors.

KENNEALLY: What you're reminding us of is the increasing power that book readers, consumers, have in this marketplace, particularly because of the dominance of online retailers. It's in that space, in that online platform space, where buyers, readers, are making lots of decisions. They're discriminating themselves, not just the publishers.

WEINBERG: And not only that. It can also be the retailers themselves in terms of how they design their algorithms. So you have a whole potential feedback loop of possibly discrimination by publishers in terms of who gets published, discrimination by consumers in terms of the ratings and other things and sales that actually go into the algorithms, and then the algorithms themselves depressing potentially the visibility of these different authors.

KENNEALLY: In previous research, you had found some possible gender discrimination in price-setting by both traditional publishers and independent authors – the self-published authors, so-called. That research had pointed to potential for female names or female-dominated genres being priced lower than those with male names or in male-dominated genres. What were you expecting, then, with all that as background, from this latest survey? Were you expecting to see similar patterns of discrimination?

WEINBERG: The findings of lower value of work by women or in genres that were predominantly female and also thought of as being for women led us to do our first pilot experiment, where we looked at two different genres. We actually looked at romances and thrillers and looked at consumers' views of authors based on gender. There, we just used names.

So in this new study, we decided to expand the number of genres so that we had both fiction and nonfiction and could really look across a range of expertise and expectations, and then we decided to go even further to bring in elements of race and age. So we got very creative both in terms of how the names were used – because generationally, there are certain names that you would hear more often – Tanya for Generation X and Betty for the baby boomers and that kind of thing. So there's a lot of encoding just in the names



themselves. But then also we had accompanied this with pictures of authors. So we had a variety of Black authors of different ages and different genders and also white authors. We randomized which ones the respondents would get and just asked them about the book, and then we saw how they responded to which author was there.

KENNEALLY: The questions and your approach was really thorough, and as you say, very creative. So tell us – what did you find?

WEINBERG: We found nothing. Well, that's not true. In terms of discrimination, we didn't find anything that we expected to find. We didn't find any discrimination against Black authors, against female authors, or even against millennial authors – this idea that perhaps the younger generation doesn't know as much as the older generation or might not be as good. So we didn't find any evidence of that kind of discrimination.

In fact, we also got a surprise, which was that here we were in the summer of the Black Lives Matter protests, and our respondents – and as you said, there were more than 9,000 of them – on average showed that they were willing to pay more for books by Black authors, to the tune of about 3.5%, which translated to about 50 cents a book – which doesn't sound like that much in itself, but when you think about the life cycle of a book and how many sales there are, that can actually add up to a very large difference in favor of Black authors.

KENNEALLY: There's an openness, a receptivity, to books by people of color in the marketplace that we should find encouraging and take advantage of.

WEINBERG: At the very least, we find that there's no basis for the publishers to discriminate against different kinds of authors, that the readers – as long as there was a description of the author as having the credentials and all of the markings of coming from the book publishers here that we had done, that readers really weren't sensitive to the identities of the authors, or in the most positive case, that they were actually really welcoming of this diversity of voices, especially ones that had been underrepresented.

So the economic arguments of if we publish books by these kinds of authors, we're not going to sell them, and we're not going to make back our money, just don't hold. In fact, it looks like there is an opportunity for greater profitability.

KENNEALLY: Professor Dana Weinberg, thank you very much for sharing your research with us today.

WEINBERG: Thank you for having me.



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