

# *The Ethical Professor*

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## **Unconscious Prejudice**

Recently, the issue of prejudice has been widely reported in the media and has even been a topic of some controversy on our own campus. As educators, we like to think that we are always fair-minded and even-handed in the way we judge our students and present ideas for discussion.

But is this so? While we seldom communicate our biases overtly, how often do our unconscious prejudices – of whatever sort - get expressed inadvertently to our students or to each other? Consider your response to this story:

*A father and his son are driving to a baseball game. The engine of their car stalls suddenly when they are crossing a railroad track, and they are hit by an oncoming train. The father is killed instantly, and the badly injured boy is rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. The surgeon looks in shock at the boy, saying, "I cannot possibly operate on this child. He's my son."*

Did you think, "Wait a minute – wasn't the father killed?"

He was. The surgeon was the boy's *mother*. We might expect that many men would fall prey to this stereotype, but it is surprising how many *women* discover that they too assumed the surgeon must be a man.

Research has shown that even when we want very much to act without any bias, it can creep in: when we pick examples to illustrate an idea, or discuss personal experiences, or bring up current news events, or even post "funny" cartoons on an office door. It's good to reflect on our actions from time to time in order to shine a light on those deeply buried false assumptions that all of us carry with us.