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How the cello hacks the system and fights racial bias | Opinion



Learning skills that are perceived as upper class, such as the cello, can help minorities suffering from negative stereotypes on the part of employers.



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As Maya packed up her cello after our final string class, I couldn't help but feel a wave of concern wash over me. Tomorrow, she would be released from the residential detention facility where she had spent the past year. For nine months, she'd been a dedicated cellist in [my music program](#), but at that moment, she faced an uncertain future. Soon, this 17-year-old Black girl would be navigating job interviews and educational decisions with the handicap of a criminal record.

But even beyond that criminal record, I'm aware of [the bias](#) she'll face. Multiple studies show employers [tend to judge](#) applicants based on group averages [associated with the applicant's race or gender](#) rather than assessing them based on their unique skills. For example, if an employer believes that minority candidates are, on average, less qualified than white candidates, they may be less likely to offer interviews or jobs to individual minority applicants, regardless of their actual qualifications.



Bethany Thompson directs violin and cello programs with teens in detention in the Florida Juvenile Justice system. (courtesy, Bethany Thompson)

In other words, Maya is going to encounter negative stereotypes because of her race as she competes for employment. That, coupled with her criminal record, means she has an uphill battle ahead of her.

So how do we help minority teens like Maya overcome these obstacles, stand out, and earn a second chance? While the negative biases she faces are menacingly obvious, it's also clear that society subscribes to powerful positive biases as well. The 2019 [college admission scandal](#) demonstrated the lengths to which affluent parents would go to position their child as elite and deserving, all in order to acquire Ivy League credentials. These parents understood that society places immense value on upper-class cultural signals, which are often used as proxies for merit,

discipline and intelligence.

This stark contrast between the effects of racial and upper-class biases raises a provocative question: If racial bias shuts doors while elite cultural markers open them, could the strategic acquisition of elite cultural practices, such as Maya's classical music training, unlock opportunities previously barred to minorities?

The answer may very well be yes. [A 2023 study](#) found that evaluators from elite backgrounds rated working-class students more favorably when they engaged in prestigious cultural activities. Similarly, [a 2018 study](#) found that including prestigious tastes, such as classical music, on a resume led to a 20% increase in callback rates for women applying for customer-facing jobs. Employers associated these cultural signals with perceptions of polish, warmth and competence.

These findings suggest hopeful implications, particularly for those without traditional markers of success. When Maya — a minority applicant with a criminal record — highlights her background as a cellist, she [may cause potential employers](#) to pause and reconsider their assumptions about her.

Of course, the ideal solution would be to eradicate biases altogether. But with the reality of long-held prejudices, we need two strategies: one for now (elite signaling) and one for later (societal change). Ultimately, in a world where bias is inescapable, the question is not whether to engage with it, but how. By weaponizing bias against itself — using prestigious cultural signals to be grouped with the elite — disadvantaged minorities can hack the system and carve out new spaces for themselves. This is not a perfect solution, but a pragmatic one — a temporary measure until more fundamental change can take root. In order to help teens like Maya, who are reentering society now and can't wait for a long-term solution, we must use every tool at our disposal — including the cello — to level the playing field.



Lemaro R. Thompson is an assistant professor of management at Florida Southern College. (courtesy, Lemaro R. Thompson)

So, as I say goodbye to Maya, I am optimistic that her music lessons will prove to be a key to challenging stereotypes and unlocking future opportunities. Her time as a cellist may not change the world, but it could change how the world sees her. And if that small shift in perception opens doors once closed to her, then it's a good place to start.

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