

Assuming The Best: It's the Worst

When affirmative action comes up, I do what many people do: recall my own experiences and go with my feelings, knowing they must be right.

I consider the journalists I've met in my 18 years as a writer and editor at major newspapers in five large cities.

There was the respected arts reporter whose work I was asked to edit. Editing this journalist's raw copy was a revelation—nearly every sentence contained some spelling, research or elementary grammar error, indicating that the writer had received industrial-strength editing for years.

There was the time I was interviewed by a magazine journalist who took so few notes as we chatted that I assumed, "This person's memory must be amazing." Later, the magazine's fact-checker called, revealing that the writer had gotten more than a dozen facts, including my work and educational history, and the sex of my two children, wrong.

And there was the letter I saw that had been written by a hot columnist at another paper—a startling jumble of grammar, spelling and reasoning errors.

How, I wondered each time, had this person—the white male arts writer, the white female magazine scribe and the black male columnist—risen so high? While every journalist—me included—makes mistakes, I didn't know writers could make so many and remain employed.

My surprise grew into an assumption: Every field harbors successful practitioners with marginal talents. My experience suggests that the barely competent come in every color.

But what unsettled me more than work-world mediocrity was my own surprise when incompetency came in a white package. When a black female editor displayed the worst people skills I'd encountered, I was disappointed, not shocked. But when certain white editors made clearly misinformed statements and decisions, I was stunned.

See BRITT, D2, Col. 3

The Silent Assumption

BRITT, From D1

Like many Americans, I was taught that whites were *automatically* competent. Minorities had to prove it. It's a common assumption that runs so deep, some who harbor it hardly realize it. I've gotten letters from whites certain that *no* minority could be better qualified than they. Others who will never write just suspect it.

But that's only my feeling. On this issue, that's what most of us are dealing with: feelings. Sometimes, but not always, based on experience. Feelings that we were passed over for bogus, racial reasons; that our idiot boss is there only because she's a she. We know feelings are subjective, yet most of us are guided by them.

That's why when it comes to an emotionally fraught issue like affirmative action, I can't just trust my feelings. I must consult the statistics.

On affirmative action, the numbers fail to support many people's sincere feeling that women, blacks, Latinos and other minorities are robbing white men of innumerable opportunities.

As President Clinton pointed out Wednesday, women still earn only 72 percent as much as men do for comparable jobs.

According to congressional Republicans' "glass ceiling report," in the nation's largest companies, just 0.6 percent of senior managers are African Americans, 0.4 percent are Latinos and 0.3 percent are Asian Americans. Women hold 3 to 5 percent of such jobs.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, white male high school graduates make an average of \$23,080—a salary close to the

averages for college-educated black women (\$26,765) and white women (\$25,298). But college-educated white men make considerably more than sheepskin-toting women—\$43,063.

And blacks with college degrees are twice as likely as white graduates to be unemployed.

In a 1993 analysis of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data by the Wall Street Journal, African Americans were the only group to suffer a net loss of jobs in the 1990-91 recession. Whites gained 71,144 jobs among firms reporting to the EEOC; blacks lost 59,479.

The Chicago Federal Reserve Bank has reported that black applicants for home loans are more than twice as likely to be denied credit as whites with the same qualifications; Latino applicants are more than 1½ times as likely to be denied. Last year, the federal government received more than 90,000 complaints of employment discrimination—less than 3 percent of which were for "reverse discrimination."

Despite real gains in the status of women and minorities due largely to affirmative action, white men remain on top. Dismantling affirmative action—not eliminating its abuses, but abandoning it entirely—would ensure keeping them there. The largest, most effective affirmative action program—though nobody calls it that—still benefits white men, based on the silent assumption that they're superior.

I'd say that seems awfully unfair, but I'd be talking feelings again. You just can't trust them.

Even when you know they're right.