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Conventional Wisdom in Society Today

For many people throughout the world, lacking factual knowledge on a given subject can result in the desire to fill that void with either blissful ignorance or assumptions. Throughout the novel *Freakonomics* By Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner they continuously challenge these assumptions based off of ignorance which are known as conventional wisdom. The pair state things on the subject such as, "...conventional wisdom is often found to be a web of fabrication, self-interest, and convenience." (Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics*, pg. IV) This could not be more of an accurate statement as people often times tend to speculate things based on how convenient it is to themselves and how it suits their own self interest. As human beings, we like to be knowledgeable on a wide variety of subjects, but when we lack knowledge regarding something, we often times tend to assume things that could not be farther from the truth. Conventional wisdom is something that must be challenged and measured against facts in order to rid it from our current society today.

In the novel, *Freakonomics* it is clear that the authors are not fans of conventional wisdom, especially if we consider the fact that they wrote an entire novel

challenging it. Although they have a variety of reasons to believe what they believe, one in particular stands out. The authors write, "...conventional wisdom is so often wrong." (Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics*, pg. IV) What we assume in our minds most often times isn't the truth nor is it anything close to actuality. This statement is so often overlooked because of its simplicity, however, just because something is not complex doesn't make it any less important.

If left unchallenged, conventional wisdom can pose a real threat on our society and cause us to return to our old ways. For example, back in the 1950's and 1960's a white girl might assume that she is better than a black person due to her surroundings and how she was raised. If we stuck to these beliefs, we would never learn from them and be able to comprehend that it is unjust and needs change. Had there never been the civil rights movement, this conventional wisdom would have been left unchallenged and it is quite likely that we would still be living in an extremely racist society today. The United States of America may never have even existed had we never challenged conventional wisdom. Many colonists assumed that we were fine under the rule of Great Britain and probably even better off than without their support. With this mindset, people like Sam Adams, George Washington, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson would have never played a significant role in our history books and it is likely we would not even know who they are. Our country was built on revolution and the desire for change. We challenged what we were taught and installed into our culture what we believe today. When it comes to conventional wisdom, this is also something that must be challenged as the result of it being left as is could result in horrific things such as

racism. Therefore, it simply must be measured against facts and be proven incorrect in order to remove it from our world.

In various chapters of the novel, what we assume to be true is challenged through thought provoking commentary from Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner. The pair take on a wide variety of topics ranging from drug dealers living with their mothers and race assumption based on names. In one situation, they discuss how interviewers can be biased based on the race that they believe job applicants to be. The pair researched this and found that, "...if DeShawn Williams and Jake Williams sent identical résumés to the same employer, Jake Williams would be more likely to get a callback." (Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics*, pg. 170) Many people who heard the name DeShawn would assume that the boy named that is black due to the set conventional wisdom in our minds. This can lead us to believe that the interviewer has something wrong with him and his mind is stuck in the 1960's when racism was a popular thing. It also raises a variety of questions that the authors mention, "Was he rejected because the employer is a racist and is convinced that DeShawn Williams is black?" (Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics*, pg. 170) Perhaps the employer was indeed racist and that is why Jake, who he assumed was white, got the job. If given the benefit of the doubt that the employer was not entirely racist, another question comes into play. Many people may ask (the authors included) may ask "Or did he reject him because "DeShawn" sounds like someone from a low-income, low-education family?" (Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics*, pg. 170) The pair challenge the conventional wisdom that goes on in the

mind of the employer. They go about challenging it by asking questions regarding the unjustified assumptions that the interviewer believed to be true. Eventually, they come to the conclusion that you cannot judge a person's ability to do a job correctly based off of simple things on their resume such as their name.

Saying that America is completely free of any form of racism nowadays is like saying Donald Trump would make an excellent president, both are complete and utter lies. Whether we would like to admit it or not, we often times tend to assume things about someone based on the color of their skin. For example, if a white boy and Hispanic boy were put side by side and someone was asked to guess who was the child of immigrant parents, the majority of people would most likely guess that it was the Hispanic child simply because of his ethnicity. In reality, the white boy was really the son of German immigrants. Conventional wisdom is programmed in our brains like software is in a computer. In this case, the conventional wisdom is that immigrants in America are almost completely made up of Hispanic people, when in reality that's just not accurate. This is a somewhat racist assumption as immigrants coming into our country as of now are primarily Syrian refugees escaping war. Americans need to ditch this assumed knowledge and make it a thing of the past like racism will hopefully be one day.

Overall, conventional wisdom is an issue throughout the world today. If it is to ever cease to exist one day, it must be challenged. What good does it do for our current society anyways? We must separate myth from fact in order to begin believing the actual truth, and not just what we assume it to be.

Sources

Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. New York: William Morrow, 2005. Print.