

## ***Meet Me at Starbucks***

On April 12, 2018, at a Starbucks location in Philadelphia, two black men, Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson, were waiting for a friend, Andrew Yaffe. Nelson and Robinson were entrepreneurs and were going to discuss business investment opportunities with Yaffe, a white real estate developer. As they waited, an employee asked if she could help them. They said “no,” that they were just waiting for a business meeting. Then a manager told Nelson that he couldn’t use the restroom because he was not a paying customer.

Because the two men had not purchased anything yet, a store manager called police, even though Robinson had been a customer at the store for almost a decade and both men had used the store location for business meetings before. At least six Philadelphia Police Department officers arrived. The police officers did not ask the men any questions; they just demanded that they leave immediately. They declined. The police officers then proceeded to arrest the men for trespassing. As the arrest occurred, Mr. Yaffe arrived. He said: “Why would they be asked to leave? Does anyone else thing this is ridiculous? It’s absolute discrimination.” The two men were taken out in handcuffs. They were taken to the police station, photographed, and fingerprinted. They were held for almost nine hours before being released from custody. Prosecutors decided that there was insufficient evidence to charge the men with a crime.

After a video of the arrest went viral, Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson released a statement: “We apologize to the two individuals and our customers and are disappointed this led to an arrest. We take these matters seriously and clearly have more work to do when it comes to how we handle incidents in our stores. We are reviewing our policies and will continue to engage with the community and the police department to try to ensure these types of situations never happen in any of our stores.”

Johnson then announced that every company-owned Starbucks location in the nation would close on May 29, 2018, for “racial-bias education.” When one customer complained on Facebook that closing the stores because of just one incident seemed overkill, Starbucks responded: “There are countless examples of implicit bias resulting in discrimination against people of color, both in and outside our stores. Addressing bias is crucial in ensuring that all our customers feel safe and welcome in our stores.” A similar complaint about closing thousands of stores because of the actions of a handful of employees prompted this response

from Starbucks: “Our goal is to make our stores a safe and welcoming place for everyone, and we have failed. This training is crucial in making sure we meet our goal.”



### Discussion Questions

1. In a presentation, Professor Will Cox shows two news photos published in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. One shows a young black man walking through swirling water holding a carton of soda. The other shows a white couple in similar water, holding a bag of bread. The caption for the photos read, respectively: “A young man walks through chest-deep water after *looting* a grocery store” and “Two residents waded through chest-deep water after *finding* bread and soda.” Do you think the writers of these captions thought of themselves as racist?
2. Do you think the manager of the Starbucks in Philadelphia thought of herself as racist?
3. Do you think that what happened to Nelson and Robinson would have happened had they been white?
4. What stereotypes were invoked in this case and by whom?
5. How did stereotyping influence and/or frame the situation for the manager? For the police? For bystanders?
6. What is your opinion about Starbucks’ response to the arrest of Nelson and Robinson?
7. Will Starbucks’ training session on implicit bias have a beneficial impact?
8. Studies show that Latinos receive less pain medication than similarly-situated white patients, that elderly women receive fewer life-saving interventions than elderly men, and that obese children are more likely to be assumed by teachers to be less intelligent than slim children. Are these examples of implicit bias?
9. Can you think of examples of implicit bias?
10. Do you think that implicit bias is a serious problem? If so, is it more serious than explicit bias?

**Resources:**

“Starbucks CEO Apologizes After Employee Calls Police on Black Men Waiting at a Table,”  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/14/starbucks-apologizes-after-employee-calls-police-on-black-men-waiting-at-a-table/?utm\\_term=.244857b9fc1c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/14/starbucks-apologizes-after-employee-calls-police-on-black-men-waiting-at-a-table/?utm_term=.244857b9fc1c)

“Starbucks to Angry Facebookers: We Can’t Deny This is a Race Issue,”  
<https://www.fastcompany.com/40561997/starbucks-to-angry-facebookers-we-cant-deny-this-is-a-race-issue>

“Black Men Arrested at Philadelphia Starbucks Say They Feared for Their Lives,”  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/starbucks-arrest-rashon-nelson-donte-robinson-feared-for-their-lives/>

“Is This How Discrimination Ends?”  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/05/unconscious-bias-training/525405/>

“Does Starbucks Understand the Science of Racial Bias?”  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/05/starbucks-unconscious-bias-training/559415/>

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