

Researchers discuss study of the everyday response to racism

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When someone makes a racially charged comment or joke, how would you respond? Research led by Harvard sociologist Michèle Lamont says your answer may very well depend on the group to which you belong. Credit: Jon Chase

An African-American man in New York gets on an elevator with a

group of white men, one of whom proceeds to tell a joke that includes blacks and monkeys. What happens next? In this case, the black man struggles to keep his composure, comments that he's not a fan of jokes, and steps off the elevator before reaching his destination.

The response was one of hundreds logged by a team of sociologists led by Michèle Lamont, professor of sociology and African and African American studies, director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, and the Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies.

The sociologists' eight-year study examined the responses of minority groups to acts of [racism](#), discrimination, and stigmatization in three cities: New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Tel Aviv. The results, published in a recent book, "Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel," examine the typical responses from five minority groups against a variable that the researchers call "groupness," a measure of collective identity strength.

The examination included interviews with blacks in New York and Rio, and with members of three groups in Israel: Palestinians, Mizrahi Jews who originated in the Middle East, and recently immigrated Ethiopian Jews. Researchers discovered that group strength was an important factor in determining people's responses—whether they confronted discrimination head-on or not—but that other factors also played a role.

Lamont and one of her six co-authors, Graziella Moraes Silva, who received her Ph.D. at Harvard and is now at the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies in Switzerland, sat down with the Gazette for a question-and-answer session to talk about the project and what its findings say about race relations in the United States.

GAZETTE: Your work examines the experience of blacks in New York and Rio, and of several minority groups in Tel Aviv. How does the

experience of African-Americans compare with the other groups?

LAMONT: The big difference is that African-Americans have at their disposal extensive cultural tools that tell them that, in the American context, racism is wrong and that they are entitled to fair treatment. The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement has had a huge impact in empowering African-Americans to confront [instances of racism]. In Brazil, there's far more hesitation about confronting. Also, African-Americans have a very strong identity as a group. They put their racial identity above their national identity, which is not the case in Brazil.

We're able to show that African-Americans confront [racism] much more readily, and they feel legitimate in confronting. Ethiopian Jews, another group that we studied, are recent immigrants to Israel. They want to be assimilated, so they don't have as confrontational a stance. Arab Palestinians are extremely excluded—they know that they are perceived as "the enemy within," as allies to the Palestinians—and therefore they're much more likely to confront. Their expectations about having full citizenship, about being included in Israel, are very, very low. So they're also less likely to say they feel ignored or misunderstood because they don't expect to be understood.

GAZETTE: So, though race relations in the U.S. may seem to be at a low point, in some ways minorities here are in a better situation than [minority groups](#) in other countries because here, at least, there are remedies?

LAMONT: The fact that they are able and willing to confront makes a huge difference. They know the quest for recognition of their value and their dignity is a legitimate claim.

Before the '60s, certainly, making a claim on the basis of racial identity was not OK in American society. Now, universities like Harvard

acknowledge diversity as a worthy goal. That's also the case for corporations. So organizations are facing the imperative to diversify and to treat all their members with equal dignity.

Another interesting finding is, in this country, although antidiscrimination legislation has passed, it makes only a partial difference. Someone who wrote an endorsement for the book pointed that out. Despite all this legislation, the everyday experience of African-Americans is one that is painful because they constantly experience stigmatization, being misunderstood, ignored, stereotyped as slow or poorly educated, even if they're middle class.

That raises a lot of questions about where we go from here. I think Black Lives Matter, the movements that we've seen over the last few years, are clearly ones for claiming recognition.

GAZETTE: How much of the current conversation and even unrest around race is an outgrowth of technology, with video evidence of blatant abuse and discrimination? How important is technology in raising awareness?

LAMONT: There's no question that it's not only those video recordings, but also social media.

Research shows that the leaders of the generation behind Black Lives Matter, the majority of them are young women identified with the LBGTQ movement in colleges. A lot of the gains of the movement are symbolic, not symbolic in the sense of meaningless, but symbolic in terms of redefining the terms of the discourse.

People are starting to understand the texture of daily life of African-Americans in a way that was not accessible before. One of the women who just won the MacArthur Award, Claudia Rankie, wrote a book of

poetry called "Citizen," which is all about the daily experience of African-Americans.

We [still] live in a country where [many] whites have no contact with blacks, ever. They live in neighborhoods that are entirely white. They only go to white churches. This enormous gap is being bridged by the transfer of information, but nevertheless these worlds remain apart.

GAZETTE: Let's talk about the project itself: a lot of people involved, a lot of countries, lots of interviews, and a long time to pull together. Where did it come from, and how did you manage it?

LAMONT: Our question [was] how do different degrees of "groupness" influence how people experience and respond to racism? What are the tools that their society gives them to respond?

Racial groups' self-consciousness varies enormously. In Brazil, national identity is more salient than it is in the U.S. for our respondents. In Israel, with Zionism, the two Jewish groups—Ethiopian Jews and Mizrahim—really tend to downplay [racism]. They say, "We are like the Russian Jews. We are going to become assimilated," even though on a day-to-day level they may experience the father-in-law putting the Mizrahi son-in-law down because he's viewed as being part of a vulgar group.

So the texture of their everyday lives is characterized by a lot of exclusion, yet the Zionist dream is operating very powerfully in a way that it doesn't operate on the Arab Palestinians.

GAZETTE: What are the lessons learned?

MORAES SILVA: There were very few systematic comparisons of how racism and discrimination were actually experienced in those societies. I

think we are making a really big contribution by linking the macro-historical perspective and the role of institutions, cultural repertoires, and legal aspects with experiences, and showing how the comparison is much more complex than what's usually assumed. The experience is very different, and they have different ways to deal with it.

The second big contribution is to think about victims of racism and discrimination as not passive, but active and dealing with the thing, interpreting it, and finding very creative ways to handle it.

GAZETTE: In the book, you talk about stigmatization and how the everyday slights are more pervasive than overt episodes of discrimination. Can you describe that everyday experience, and is it different in different countries?

LAMONT: In Brazil, the most frequent stereotype is being perceived as poor and having low education and low status. So basically everyone is presumed poor. Brazil is an extremely unequal society where the neighborhoods are much more interracial so racial groups interact with each other a lot, but nevertheless most black people are presumed to be poor.

Here, being simply insulted and disrespected is the main kind, being called the "n word," being cut in line. Some people call these micro-aggressions. We don't use the word because being ignored is also a big deal, and that's not an aggression. It's just like, "I didn't see you. You're so irrelevant you don't register for me."

What really stood out for me was the African-American in the workplace who never has an ally. He interprets a situation as racism because there's no one ever to say, "I see things exactly the way you did. This happened, I agree with you. This guy was a jerk."

One of the big arguments of the book is that most of the literature on racism in the U.S. is about things you can sue about. You can present CVs of people who are identical on all grounds but race, then demonstrate that discrimination has actually happened because the white person gets hired. The literature on racism in the U.S. is about not having housing, education, jobs.

This book is largely about things you cannot sue about, like no one ever backs you up at work. You cannot make a case around this, yet it really is the texture of daily life.

MORAES SILVA: One of the things that was more salient in the Brazilian interviews than in the American ones is racism as something that's unexpected. In that sense, it's like crime. You know that it exists, but you never expect that you're going to be robbed. These experiences hurt, and, although you know they might happen, you're never prepared. You can think about how you're going to deal with it, how you'll respond, but sometimes you just don't have the energy. One other thing that was really frustrating for the Brazilian interviewees is the indifference of whites, that other people don't react, so the burden of confrontation becomes that of the victim, which is really unfair.

GAZETTE: How important is uncertainty? There were groups that said to themselves, "Well, it's not racism, that person's just a jerk." How do you disentangle that?

LAMONT: In the Brazilian case, if the person doesn't name race, it's much harder to confront. We argue that the stronger the group, the easier it is for people to have access to a set of cultural tools that they can draw on and say, "You're not only a jerk, this is racism." We have many examples in Brazil where they think racism is happening, but because there's no "n word" that's being used, they just shut up and don't confront. So that's a huge difference.

A lot of what we're looking at here are psychological phenomena. There's a big literature on stress and coping, but our approach is very different. This concept of groupness is about tracing causal paths that don't have to do with what's happening between people's ears.

If I'm African-American, I belong to a strong group because of self-identification—something psychologists look at—but also because of the meaning given to my group: the fact that we have a shared history of slavery and discrimination. Groupness also has to do with spatial and institutional segregation and homophily, social boundaries and symbolic boundaries. And those tools can all be mobilized.

It's really an analysis of how various kinds of cultural and social resources feed into different kinds of responses, which is a very different approach to these questions from what a psychologist would do.

GAZETTE: Would it be accurate to say that the stronger the group identity, the more willing an individual is to identify a slight as based on race and to confront the issue?

LAMONT: That's largely it, with one caveat in that we don't think that there's a linear relationship between strength of groupness and confronting.

Arab Palestinians are a very strong group, but they're so alienated that they don't even think they should have membership [in Israeli society]. They know that it's out of sight, so therefore their response is more to turn inward. The tight relationships that they have with some Jews are mostly in the workplace. They are based on interpersonal friendship, so they don't appeal a lot to a human rights language, because it's irrelevant, almost, in this environment. But they'll talk a lot about interpersonal friendship. They feel largely powerless and outside of the polity.

MORAES SILVA: Identification is part of groupness, but groupness is also about boundaries. That's really where Brazil and the U.S. are far apart. Black Brazilians tend to have much more porous boundaries with whites than African-Americans do. It's not that they don't identify as blacks, it's not that they don't see [discrimination](#) and racism, but one of the consequences of having such a strong history of saying "We are all part of this country, and black, white, we all belong" is that you are not allowed to say you are white [or black], because that's also considered being racist.

GAZETTE: So in Brazil, neighborhoods are more integrated, there's more intermarriage, there's more cross-racial friendship ...

MORAES SILVA: Poor neighborhoods are more integrated, but the society is so unequal that they say that in cities like Rio you have neighborhoods with the same infrastructure as those of rich European and U.S. cities, but also other neighborhoods with conditions such as those of poor sub-Saharan Africa countries. When you look at the inequality of social and economic indicators of neighborhoods in the same city, it's ridiculous.

GAZETTE: Just to backtrack a bit to the Arab-Palestinian experience, it almost seemed that they don't believe the solution exists within Israel itself; the solution exists through an international agreement. In the U.S., though, black Americans know that there has to be change from within, so they're the ones who have to do it?

LAMONT: I think what we see now [in America] is a little bit like post-Reconstruction. African-Americans could vote at some point, they could own land, but there were all these mechanisms in place that prevented them from being fully integrated.

Now we're post-Civil Rights Movement. They have equality in principle,

yet they suffer stigmatization every day. A lot of the great frustration that is heard through Black Lives Matter and the social media activity of young African-Americans is just absolutely amazing in the unrelenting claims for recognition that are being made. It is not only about denouncing police violence. I don't think that many commentators fully understand what this is about.

A lot of this is sharing experiences as a means to gain social resilience and to objectify that this experience was racism—"Look at what happened to me"—and then having confirmation from others. Now that we define reality in the same way, let's move forward. This solidarity in joint definition is really important. And I think it's partly significant because it comes from a generation that lives within a shadow of reverse racism.

When they look at a place like Harvard, they know other people who are not here think it's because they got preference. So the issue is how they behave, knowing that a number of their peers think that they benefited from reverse racism. We asked our interviewees, "What do you teach your kids about how to respond?" Their normative response is one of self-improvement: get your degree, be upwardly mobile, buy that car. But at the same time, only a quarter of them emphasize collective responses, the kind of responses that brought us the Civil Rights Movement.

I think that there is a real tension between "do not cry racism" and "pursue your degree and become a doctor" as the best proof that racists are wrong, and the knowledge that, historically, it's collective mobilization that brought big social change through the Civil Rights Movement.

GAZETTE: So much has happened since you started this book. How have events changed the context in which the book might be understood?

MORAES SILVA: In Brazil, for example, there's been a lot of change, and it's still changing. We can identify trends, we can see where the indignation of Black Lives Matter is coming from. We see how people are experiencing this stigmatization day by day, every day.

GAZETTE: So there are echoes of Black Lives Matter in Brazil and perhaps in Israel?

MORAES SILVA: Definitely. The Brazilian police are much more violent than police in the U.S., and their target is basically brown and black men. So the visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement made [people say], "See all this in the U.S.? Here it's much worse, and we don't say anything." Black Lives Matter gave legitimacy to certain things that were not said. What happens in the U.S. really influences Brazil, and in that case it was good. There are cases where it's not so good.

LAMONT: Black Lives Matter made a lot of statements about Israel, saying basically the situation in Palestine is racism. So those are examples of transnational cultural repertoires where those ideas are traveling across countries, feeding off each other.

The book is also really an intervention in the study of inequality. Most of our colleagues, whose work I appreciate, study outcomes: housing, homelessness, incarceration, low infant mortality, or life expectancy. This book is more about inequality processes, such as stigmatization, which feeds into inequality. It's about explanations. You're trying to analyze what kinds of changes enable specific kinds of reactions and constrain others.

We're also setting an agenda for the study of inequality in the social sciences that is different from what many economists are doing, or demographers. We are concerned with recognition, which is often overlooked as social scientists focus on distribution or production. We

think that this is very important because if you [only look at one] part of inequality, you cannot understand the phenomenon in its full complexity.

GAZETTE: The book observes that we're a long way from post-racial America and recalls that that was part of the conversation after Barack Obama was elected president. Is there a way toward post-racial America? Is it possible ever to get there?

LAMONT: One of the main theories about how to reduce interracial tension is contact theory. For it to work, the groups have to be equal, they have to engage in a common task. There are a number of conditions that are very rarely realized. But if you think about how gender relations have changed, a lot of it has been the doing of social movements, but a lot of it has been girls like me, when I was 16, telling my mother, "No, I'm not going to empty the dishwasher every day if my brother mows the lawn once a week." These micro, everyday contestations, I think, are really crucial.

Many people who study social change emphasize the institutional structure, the legal and political [changes], the role of social movements. But the role of everyday anti-racism has been overlooked. It's a multi-causal system, and you need to attack the problem at many levels, systematically connecting the micro, meso, and macro levels. This is the topic of a book in progress on which I am working with political scientist Paul Pierson, in collaboration with the Successful Societies program which I co-direct with Peter Hall in Harvard's Government Department.

African-Americans who are confronting are doing things right. Through these everyday exchanges, things change. That's also where social science research makes a difference. All this research on multiculturalism and social inclusion helps transform the discourse on race. I recently read that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been influenced by political philosophers such as Charles Taylor and

Will Kymlicka who have written a lot about broadening cultural membership. When he welcomed Syrian refugees to Canada by saying "You are home now," he was drawing on the work of these social scientists. Our work feeds the tools that policymakers, politicians, activists, and ordinary [people](#) mobilize to think about the way forward. We do make a difference every day, in small and big ways.

MORAES SILVA: Is it possible: a post-racial state? I think it doesn't exist so far. But I think the book points out that not to talk about race is not an option.

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