

Poverty, ethics and discrimination: How culture plays into cognitive research

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Cognitive psychology examines how people view the world and what drives them to behave a certain way. These everyday decisions are shaped by countless factors. However, research on cognition often leaves out a key consideration—the cultural context.

In a new paper, scientists look at how cognitive research on poverty, ethics and discrimination would be enriched by engaging more with cultural sociology. CIFAR Successful Societies Program Co-Director Michèle Lamont is the lead author of the piece published in *Nature Human Behaviour* this week.

"Inequality and racism do not exist separate from culture. As such, cognitive research on these critical issues and ways to confront them must not either," says Lamont, who is Professor of Sociology and of African and African American Studies and the Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies at Harvard University.

Lamont and her colleagues examine three of the most prominent cognitive research models: studies of poverty focused on scarcity and cognitive bandwidth, studies of dual-process morality, and studies of biases using the implicit association test. Their paper outlines the limitations of these approaches and how to advance research by incorporating cultural references.

The cognitive bandwidth model explains why low-income people make decisions that extend their poverty: When people have very little of

something (money, food, time etc.), they focus on that scarce resource and don't have the "bandwidth" to think about long-term concerns. The authors suggest that this model should consider the cultural influences that shape perceptions of scarcity and the prioritization of resources. For example, Lamont's research has shown that people in the United States are more likely to measure value against economic criteria, while in France, civic solidarity and aesthetics are important factors.

Dual-process morality and the [implicit association test](#) face similar limitations. Both could benefit from deeper cultural analysis of people's responses through either an explanation for a choice or by understanding the meaning of a delayed response time.

The paper also notes that social problems cannot be resolved through cognitive methods alone.

"Reducing poverty requires that public policies enhance material redistribution and social recognition. Promoting ethical decision-making and resolving moral conflicts will require changes in repertoires about morality, rather than shifting modes of cognition. Finally, we are more likely to address discrimination by gradually changing cultural narratives that stigmatize particular groups than by simply sensitizing individuals to their own subconscious biases," the authors write.

Above all, the paper calls for researchers to bridge their research and engage in interdisciplinary discussions. Cultural sociologists should also seek insights from their colleagues in [cognitive psychology](#), the authors write.

The interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches presented in this paper are emblematic of Lamont's career. In 2002, she founded CIFAR's Successful Societies program alongside Harvard University professor Peter A. Hall. The program has brought together sociologists, political

scientists, economists, historians and psychologists over the last 15 years.

On Tuesday, Nov. 28, Lamont was presented with the 2017 Erasmus Prize during a ceremony at the Royal Palace of Amsterdam. The prestigious European prize recognizes an exceptional contribution to the humanities, social sciences or arts.

More information: Michèle Lamont et al, Bridging cultural sociology and cognitive psychology in three contemporary research programmes, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-017-0242-y](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0242-y)

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