

Research Questions, Research Designs and Explanations: Lessons from *Getting Respect*

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Social scientists and humanists alike are fond to state that race is a social construction, but they often assume that racism is experienced similarly across different social contexts. With the goal of examining this topic empirically, the three of us jumped, with four other colleagues, into what turned out to be a ten-year adventure to produce an ambitious book titled *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil and Israel*, which was published in 2016 at Princeton University Press.¹ Based on over 400 in-depth interviews with working-class and middle-class African Americans, Black Brazilians, and Arab Palestinian, Ethiopian and Mizrahi² citizens of Israel, this book seeks to systematically compare how each group experiences and responds to racism—conceptualized as experiences of assaults on worth and discrimination— and how these are shaped by the strength of their “groupness,” the availability of various types of cultural repertoires and the broader socioeconomic and institutional structure of their society.

Such a “clean” description of our project is deceptive, as it suggests that developing our project and writing our book followed a straightforward course, defined by a clear path getting us from start to finish. The actual route had many detours that led us to tell a very different (and more interesting) story from the one we envisioned at the start. But that’s how research usually works in practice: initial questions often evolve over time through the interplay between theory and evidence. This back-and-forth is what the sociologist Kristin Luker refers to as the “salsa dancing” of the social sciences in her textbook that is widely used for teaching qualitative and mixed methods at the graduate and undergraduate levels.³

The initial research question driving what became *Getting Respect* was a rather broad one: we were interested in understanding why members of stigmatized groups experience and respond to racism and discrimination in such different ways across different contexts. We started with a rather straightforward hypothesis: we proposed that the more salient the symbolic boundaries surrounding a particular group (or to put it differently, the more a group is stigmatized), the more strategies they mobilize to respond to it.

To assess this hypothesis, we proceeded by casting a wide net in order to identify cases with different types of racial boundaries that varied in their degree of salience. We convened an initial exploratory meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2006, to which we invited scholars who are experts of various societies such as Ireland, Canada, France,

¹ Lamont, Michèle, Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica Welburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrahi, Hanna Herzog, and Elisa Reis. 2016. *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*. Princeton University Press. Paperback 2018. 377 pp.

² Jews from North Africa and Arab countries.

³ Luker, Kristin. 2008. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brazil and Israel, with the goal of comparing a broad mixture of groups ranging from strong socioeconomic and symbolic boundaries (e.g., Palestinians in Israel) to groups with weak socioeconomic but strong symbolic boundaries (e.g., Quebecois in Canada).

Given individual proclivities and interests, the availability of funding, and logistics, the final research team was composed of three groups and focused on Brazil, the United States and Israel - with a mix of more senior and junior researchers in each case. This combination of country seemed optimal given the existence of a strong and well-developed literature comparing race relations in the United States and Brazil. Bringing in the Israeli case seemed like an original and promising contribution.

Even then, the decision of which Israeli group was best suited for a comparison with blacks in Brazil and African Americans was far from straightforward. After careful consideration, we decided to include three groups from Israel: Ethiopians (who are phenotypically similar to the groups in the US and Brazil), Palestinian citizens of Israel (the primary victim of discrimination in Israel), and Mizrahim (who have been discriminated against but generally think of themselves as well-integrated to Israeli society). Adding these three groups to the traditional comparison between black Brazilians and African Americans allowed us to put traditional conceptions of race, largely based on phenotype, in dialogue with other forms of racialization based on ethnicity, national identity and religion. We hypothesized that these various bases of discrimination affect the way racism is interpreted and resisted by stigmatized groups

Exclusion through blackness—as in the case of African Americans, black Brazilians and Ethiopian citizens of Israel—has a long history and relies on a vast, largely global repertoire of interpretation and resistance. In contrast, exclusion through ethnic culture or identity may be described as more localized or naturalized through the often elusive goal of national integration, as illustrated by the case of Mizrahi Israelis. The case of Palestinian citizens of Israel is one in which ethno-racial boundaries are perceived as more rigid and hard to cross or question. The growing importance of nationality and religion coupled with a context of growing securitization of national borders and restriction of citizenship makes the Palestinian case particularly illustrative of new forms of exclusionary racialization.

Comparison was the driving force of our research endeavour all along. But while our initial goal was to compare how groups dealt with boundaries, we became increasingly aware that we could not simply compare groups without a better understanding of how groupness itself was experienced by our interviewees. This became increasingly clear in our discussions about how to approach our interviewees across the three countries: while in the US, sending letters inviting African American interviewees to describe experiences of racism and discrimination was a straightforward process, mentioning racism in the invitations to black Brazilian and Mizrahim would have been a mistake, as members of these groups did not necessarily perceive themselves as victims of exclusion. So, as we discuss in the methodological appendix of our book, we adopted different strategies for reaching out to each group and increasingly became interested in how they perceived their own groupness. Thus, we tweaked our interview schedule accordingly to accommodate local differences while trying to maintain comparability and reliability across the three sites.

Conducting and coding so many interviews across three countries and three languages was a time-consuming and arduous process. In such a long-term collaboration, each team had to adapt to the constraints experienced by collaborators. Ten years is a long time, and during this period, several co-authors in turn completed dissertations, moved on to new jobs and new countries, got married and had babies, while others retired. Sharing the happiness of these moments and accepting that each team member had different priorities over time was par for the course and certainly essential to the success of the project.

At a more practical level, our collaborative research was greatly facilitated by regular meetings on skype - in addition to yearly face-to-face meetings. It was also aided by the possibility offered by the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.TI, to coordinate interview coding across the three teams. However, agreeing on the selection of codes and their meaning became a huge endeavour and a challenging task. After a first round of coding by two coders from each site (which involved a fair amount of translating), we came up with a nearly unmanageable 100-page coding book! Negotiating the meaning associated with these codes required much back and forth - for instance, concerning the form that the responses "management of self" or "conflict avoidance" take New Yorkers, Rio de Janeiro and Tel Aviv residents. Clarifying such points was crucial for achieving consistency in interpretation across disparate contexts. Eventually, we were able to shorten the codebook through collective decisions on mergers and recoding. We also developed a set of "meta-codes" to capture common experiences across the three sites. This process of data reduction allowed the flexibility needed to compare experiences and responses that were more common in one site but not in others.

After the coding was completed, we faced the daunting task of describing a great many findings in a cogent fashion. This was, again, far from straightforward and involved considerable back-and-forth between the three teams and many more decisions about which codes to group together as we tried to develop tables that highlighted the main points of difference and similarity. At the same time, we did not want to lose sight of the nuances offered by our respondents who shared with us painful memories and proud moments. Finding a balance between essential quantitative summaries and making space for the voices of our respondents was a particularly challenging task.

Once we formed a clear picture of our main findings, we faced yet another challenge, that of providing an explanation for the patterns we identified across our three countries and five groups. This required revisiting our original research question. While our initial focus was to explain differences in experiences and responses to stigmatization and discrimination across groups, again, we now understood that "*groupness*" itself played a crucial role in shaping their responses. This meant that we had to think hard about how to conceptualize groupness in a way that would encompass those dimensions that were most central to each case.

We came to conceptualize groupness as a multidimensional combination of social and symbolic boundaries that resulted from group contact (manifested in spatial and institutional boundaries and segregation), widely shared scripts and representations about groups (symbolic boundaries), and intra- and inter-personal identity (us/them dynamics as experienced in relationships). We argued that our five groups experienced different types of groupness - some being more strongly grouped (as is the case for Palestinian citizens of Israel and African Americans) and others being more loosely tied to

one another (in particular, Black Brazilians for whom class identity is often as or more salient than racial identity, and Mizrahim for whom ethnic identity may be less salient than religious and national identity). Each of the three substantive country-specific chapters not only provided a description of our findings, but also described how groupness expressed itself for each group, and how it contributed to the patterns we identified.

Finally, through an inductive and systematic comparison of narratives of groupness, stigmatization and discrimination experiences (which included both quantification and more content based analysis) ,we identified how these boundaries were shaped in turn by historical, socioeconomic, and institutional structures, and national and transnational cultural repertoires (such as national myths and empowering ideologies) in each country (as developed in Chapter 1). These three concepts (groupness; historical, socioeconomic and institutional structures; and cultural repertoires) became the cornerstones of our explanation for the variations we observed. This explanatory framework emerged inductively and quite late in the game, as we were grappling with making sense of our findings. Without our initial, rather broad question and research hypothesis as entry points in this story (that those who experience stronger boundaries have more responses), we never would have been able to develop such a specific and multi-level explanation that could integrate and make collective sense of our findings across three countries and five groups. Getting there was enormously challenging and required constant back and forth between the three teams (across continents and time zones!), to make sure that the explanation was truly adequate for making sense of the specifics of each case.

And then came the process of writing the book, which had to be accomplished with 14 hands by a group composed of a majority of non-native English speakers!! We debated whether to put more emphasis on the systematic empirical differences revealed in the tables or to adopt a more essayistic approach in describing trends and variations in each country. This corresponded to slight differences in intellectual culture between more scientific (largely U.S.) and more postmodern (mostly non-U.S.) intellectual cultures, epistemologies, and ways of approaching identity.

As the process of finishing the book neared to a close, we were lucky to be able to hire an editor to help us homogenize our writing styles and aim for a more unified voice. This process raised the bar, but also demanded that we pay close attention to the language used and the meaning of concepts, which often differed across national contexts and intellectual traditions. To give only one example, various exchanges led us to understand that the concept of dignity was interpreted quite differently in the Israeli context, against of background of intense debates about human rights, than in the American context, where sociologists have written on dignity without direct engagement with the broad philosophical tradition on the topic.

Now that the book has been out for four years, we remain proud of the original theoretical and empirical contributions that *Getting Respect* represents. We look back at this collective adventure with much satisfaction, not only for the substantive work we produced together, but also for the friendships and mutual respect that grew from the collaboration, and for how we all learned together. We certainly should have done more to raise public and scholarly awareness of the book, but we all had to move to other projects. Nevertheless, as *Getting Respect* is gaining recognition in the literature on comparative racism and becoming more widely cited, we remain confident that in the

long term, it will make a real impact on how sociologists and other social scientists think about and account for social processes of exclusion and about the panoply of responses to stigmatization and discrimination. The topic of racism remains more salient than ever as populism and xenophobia gain popularity across continents. Our hope remains that all our painstaking efforts will help academics and the public meet the enormous challenges ahead through a better and more detailed understanding of the varieties of experiences of stigma and discrimination.