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Alford A. Young Jr.

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The power of respect in (and for) the study of stigma and discrimination

Alford A. Young, Jr.

Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

ABSTRACT

This review essay of Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination explores how the politics of respectability is employed in vastly different ways as a response to encounters with stigma and discrimination. For such victimized people, the manner and timing of its employment rests in the particular nature of the social and political contexts circumscribing their lives. Differences remain in whether people interpret certain interactions as validating responses as well as in the kinds of responses they ultimately produce. Taking these and other factors into account, the employment of the politics of respectability should not be regarded solely as the self-affirmation of the moral legitimacy of the victimized. Rather, that form of response is predicated on the recognition of the kinds of agency that may (or may not) be available given the large-scale social power dynamics that circumscribe micro-level acts of discrimination and stigmatization.

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On the evening of 25 July 2016, Michelle Obama gave with many observers believed to have been the signature address at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. During her remarks, the First Lady of the United States explained the advice that she and her husband, Barack Obama, gave to their daughters when faced with bullies and cruel people, “(Y)ou don’t stoop to their level”, she said, “No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high.”

Among the other objectives driving her speech that evening, Michelle Obama’s effort was to advance a claim about the politics of respectability. She did so by effectively arguing for the maintenance of grace and dignity in the face of personal transgressions and insults. However, Michelle Obama’s comment does much more than demonstrate the moral fibre of America’s First Family. It is also indicates how the appropriation of a discourse can enable the president, his spouse, and their family – members of a minority
community in the United States – to foster a lucid image of legitimacy in the face of continued questioning by some members of that country’s majority group of whether that minority community merits regard as morally legitimate.

To be sure, the Obamas are not the first African-American family to embrace a politics of respectability as a tool for navigating public life. In fact, the project of garnering legitimacy through respectability claims has been an historic one for African Americans. More specifically, that approach has been an especially common one for many upwardly mobile African Americans in their quest to survive and sustain in mainstream American society. Historians and sociologists have told the story quite well of how African Americans have employed respectability politics as a means of allowing them to assert their humanity and make legitimate their claims about their moral worth to white America (but also sometimes in comparison to less socio-economically privileged African Americans as well; see Feagin and Sikes 1994; Gaines 1996; Lacy 2007).

The experience of black people in fostering a politics of respectability to deal with racial discrimination is certainly not restricted to the case of black Americans. For many critical observers one example that conveys the global dimension of such politics is Nelson Mandela’s effort after becoming the president of South Africa. A significant part of Mandela’s legacy rests is his successful quest to negotiate a peaceful political transition in South Africa; one that was rooted in social policies of forgiveness and reconciliation. His enacting such an agenda was all the more remarkable precisely because his having served a lengthy and exacting prison term seemingly prepared him to be anything but reconciliatory upon his release (this being the case even if Mandela’s efforts were at least as much a pragmatic attempt to ensure a future for a nation steeped in extreme racial strife and potential retaliation against white South Africans). Whatever other aims were at stake in their efforts, luminaries such as Nelson Mandela and Michelle Obama share with Martin Luther King, Jr. (and other leaders for racial and social justice) the goal of promoting a particular public response in the face of racial oppression. That response explicitly or implicitly calls for the validation of the humanity of the people so victimized.

For those curious about the discriminated against, whether they have been treated as such due to their racial classification to some other form of stigmatized identity, a remaining analytical project at hand is to discern why and how such victims determine to respond to such discrimination as they do. Especially intriguing is the matter of why and how such responses may occur in the course of face-to-face interaction, where transgressions are often more immediate, vivid, and visible to their subjects. Most importantly, any witnesses to or victims of such occurrences realize that the behavioural choices of the victims do not necessarily rest in trying to maintain or
promote respectability – that is, in going high rather than low. Instead, great nuance and variability remains in the choices that victims of such transgressions have in determining and executing their responses.

In Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel, authors Michèle Lamont, Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica S. Welburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrachi, Hanna Herzog, and Elisa Reis give readers an opportunity to consider how people have chosen to respond to acts of discrimination. Their work opens up a range of considerations that extend far beyond the binary of going low or high. Essentially, the authors aspire to explore and explain how “ordinary” people both understand and respond to stigma and discrimination. Their selections of ordinary people are drawn from groups that comprise some of the most highly marginalized in the three countries of concern in their work: African Americans (the United States), black Brazilians (Brazil), and Arab Palestinians, Jewish migrants from Ethiopia, and Mizrahim, or Jewish immigrants from Arab and north African countries (Israel).

This book is a very necessary contribution to studies of race and ethnic relations. Despite the prevalence of literature like that cited earlier, both sociologists and lay audiences long for better insight into the systematic strategies people of colour employ to contend with, if not overtly combat, acts of discrimination and prejudice. Lamont and her colleagues not only provide insight into the systematic strategies for confronting stigma and discrimination at they are enacted different countries. They also make sense of why some people feel the need to tie their experiences to some vision of a collective project for people who share their identity category (which is common for African Americans) while others are more inclined to think of their experiences with discrimination as involving personal reactions to private occurrences (which is much more common for black Brazilians). Moreover, the ethnic and religious groups that make up the Israeli case reflect patterns of response that are shaped by whether a group has been identified by the polity as consistently victimized (Arab Palestinians), in civil society as holding valid membership in the citizenry (Ethiopian Jews), or as a vividly identifiable social group by other Israelis (Mizrahim Jews). Taken as a whole, the cases exhibit varied and complicated models of how and why responses become manifest.

The result of their research is a work that reflects a massive investment in explaining the logic underlying responses to stigma and discrimination. A key thesis of Getting Respect is that responses to stigma and discrimination cannot be thoroughly understood if analysed solely from the micro perspective of face-to-face interaction. For instance, the authors address quite thoroughly the roles that degrees of groupness and access to cultural repertoires play as critical background factors for the kinds of responses produced by members of each group. They affirm that the intensity of groupness that
members of these groups experience, and the kinds of cultural repertoires that they draw from to produce behaviour, are in part produced from the historical experiences of the groups as well as the social, cultural, and political characteristics of the societies in which each group exists (5). Ultimately, the analytical scaffolding applied in this work is foundation for making arguments about five kinds of responses to discrimination and stigma: confrontation (legal and otherwise), management of self, not responding, focusing on hard work and competence, and committing to self-isolation or autonomy (10).

After an introduction explaining the analytical framework, the first substantive chapter explores the case of black Americans in the United States, the second the case of black Brazilians, and the third the cases of three groups residing in Israel. A final chapter pulls together the overarching themes presented in the empirical chapters. Each of the substantive chapters begins with an historic overview of the social experiences of the group in question (although the chapter on the Israeli groups is further divided into sections that explore the respective situations of each of those groups). This is followed by a consideration of various themes and issues concerning responses to stigma and discrimination. Finally, each chapter provides its own concluding section.

There is quite a bit of analytical scaffolding in this book, and it extends beyond discussing the vast literature on group dynamics, boundary-making, and cultural approaches to agency and meaning-making. This level of scaffolding is necessary to effectively position the macro dynamics concerning responses to stigma and discrimination. That being said, the very purpose of this book requires the authors to collect and report on various incidents of perceived discrimination. Taking into account the reports of members of five different ethnic and racial minority groups in three different countries requires incorporation of a vast pool data (its collection the result of each of the author's having focused on collecting data from only one of the countries). However, the analysis is made all the more complex because it does not simply rest in dramaturgical nor symbolic interactionist-informed analyses of these occurrences. Instead, the authors bring in an array of tools and perspectives that shed an equivalent measure of light on the macro conditions that shape the micro-level dynamics.

In aspiring to bring such breadth into the analysis there is no elaborate development of any of the people presented in the book. Instead, the authors deliver focused excerpts. The participants are usually identified by their occupational statuses. The core of the empirical material consist of vignettes followed by the participants’ commentary about why they acted as they did (or else their explanation of why they did not take what presumably might seem to be common sense action in response to what happened to them). The reader is only rarely provided with any in depth portraits of individuals
or any sense of whether there is consistency between their manner of response and the events and circumstances that comprise their personal histories.

Ultimately, the objective of Getting Respect is not to illuminate how individual life histories allow people to determine their reactions. Yet, because this is the case the reader loses a sense of how further details about any individual's personal life experience may matter for the kind of behaviour they pursued. In making this claim, however, it hard to fault the authors for not investing in this kind of project. That is because the conclusion of the book delivers a compelling account of what is not explored, or at least not very thoroughly explored, in the prior pages as well as why it was not. There the authors make the point that a greater investment in individual narratives displaces attention to how patterns of response inform about the role of different political and cultural domains in shaping how acts of discrimination are faced.

That being said, the use of data in this way makes the book feel a bit more like a report than a narrative. The authors' arrangement of the book in this way does allow for readers to compare and contrast its points of analysis with great ease (and which would be more easily suppressed in a formal that took the form of more story-telling). Accordingly, the emphasis on packaging a plethora of data in this way allows for the book's analytical points of consideration to appear quite lucidly and succinctly. This is a remarkable effort for a book co-written by seven authors.

The inclusion of countries other than the United States provides an important perspective for thinking about how victims of discrimination and prejudice react and respond to these phenomena in contexts that involve very different national histories and historic points of reference, national laws and policies, and style of response to victims by members of empowered groups. Indeed, one of the most insightful parts of the book is the material on the groups in Israel. For many American readers this material will provide an important explication of the diversity of experiences for racial and ethnic minority groups that rarely receive such substantive sociological analysis on the western side of the Atlantic.

Another compelling feature of Getting Respect is the way in which class is interwoven into the analysis. Too often in sociological research efforts are made to disentangle race and class in the course of exploring the nature of power and its effect upon the lives of individuals. Throughout this work the authors frequently delineate and assess how people of different class standing determine their response to stigma and discrimination. Not surprisingly people of more privileged class backgrounds (most often referred in this work as being of middle-class standing) feel a greater sense of efficacy in confronting discrimination. Those of lower socio-economic class standing often respond in ways that demonstrate their moral worth or their sense of self-respect. Such people do not have access to the material resources nor the
cultural repertoires to engage in a confrontational style response. The
strength of the analysis is that the authors do not stop at interweaving race
and class in the effort to interpret the effects of stigma and discrimination.
Instead, national histories, cultural repertoires, and contemporary political cli-
mates are given equal attention as factors that help determine precisely how
race and/or ethnicity connect with class to shape the context for behaviour.

Yet another virtue of the work is how it compels readers to reflect upon
how people who are subordinate in their respective countries make particular
and distinct arguments about their moral worth and sense of self-respect. The
contrast is especially acute one thinking about low income African Americans
in comparison to Arab Palestinians or Ethiopian Jews. In the case of the latter
two groups there is no recent tradition of formal legislation that makes legit-
imate that age group has been victimized by governmental policies and civic
society more generally. For black Americans the sense that racism has been
pervasive and systemic has been well documented as a part of the national
discourse on race (even if not all Americans actually believe that black Amer-
icans have been subjected to such conditions, at least to the extent that some
of the discourse has affirmed). This comparison highlights how the nature of
the state and of the public sphere partially determine whether people can
effectively present themselves as victims of systematic discrimination and
as agents who can act on their own behalf to address it.

The effort of the authors to pull so much into this rich analysis also calls
some questions into consideration. First, I desired to have a more thorough
exclamation of the implications of bringing these cases together in a single
publication. For instance, the chapters on the United States and Brazil move
the discussion of black racial identity and race-making into a different direc-
tion than is often been the case in prior research. Comparative sociological
investigation of race in these two countries has largely rested on what race,
and specifically blackness, means in each context, whether or how it is associ-
ated with collective identity, and how it may be associated with each country’s
social hierarchy (Marx 1997; Telles 2004; Bailey 2009). However, the authors of
Getting Respect invite readers to think more directly about the relationship of
individual and collective agency to perceptions of race because they present
to readers accounts of how some black Brazilians can embrace blackness as an
identity characteristic while thinking about discrimination so differently than
the black Americans who also strongly embrace it as such. Among various
macro level factors and conditions, those differences are rooted in the
degree to which strong group identity has endured over time for blacks in
each country, and how much the national political landscape of each
country has made race vivid in its imagery of social justice. Hence, the discus-
sion is moved from the manner by or degree to which race is perceived as
socially significant, to a more focused assessment of how agency is may be
enacted in regard to race.
Any emphasis on agency should directly implicate one or more notions of social power. Accordingly, although *Getting Respect* offers moments of intense discussion about how the victimized determined to preserve their sense of self-worth and promote notions of morality and decency, crucial attention is also placed on the relationship of power to the exemplification of this kind of behaviour. This vacancy is especially noticeable in discussions of the Israeli context where, in reference to Arab Palestinians in particular, the authors state that some of the effort of our Palestinians to focus on maintaining respect and dignity is discussed as a self-management strategy given that Arab Palestinians see little to no utility and trying to respond aggressively to affronts levied upon them by Israelites. After all, the authors indicate that Arab Palestinians do not benefit from any formal designation in that nation as victims. Hence, except for the most courageous or aggressive of this population, they feel resigned to the only exemplification of power that they feel they can demonstrate, which is to promote themselves as worthy of dignity and respect.

The attention given to power in the analysis also calls for is a more thorough investigation of the nature of white and/or majority power as it exists in the different countries investigated here. Obviously, *Getting Respect* reveals much about how marginalized people respond to discrimination. Yet the emphasis on power is necessarily restricted to how forms of power in different contexts shape what these individuals considered to be possible ways of responding to discrimination. A project far beyond the scope of this book, but that clearly is motivated by it, is the exploration of how the power to silence, minimize, or shape the repertoire of responses to discrimination results in different national visions of racial morality. For instance, in a pre-civil rights era America, one could imagine explicit African-American racial docility and meekness as what many white Americans would accept as the proper moral disposition of black Americans. A post-civil rights era America – most currently exemplified by the Black Lives Matter movement – is one where black Americans viscerally reject the legitimacy of that older moral framing (the same transformation in social thought over time applies to blacks in South Africa). That is, black Americans may not yet be fully incorporated in the ways they desire to be, but they have voice about why they feel they are not that differs greatly from the kind of voice many of them had in the past. Hence, the contemporary moment raises new arguments about how majority (re: white) Americans take stock of others in that country as Americans, and this spills out into a larger discussion of what constitutes American identity.

The five cases brought into *Getting Respect* elucidate both subtle and vivid complexities concerning the possibilities for inclusion of people in a citizenry, and that ruptures any sense that inclusion can be reduced to a simple binary of acceptability or rejection. Accordingly, this work should inspire more
research and publication on what those in majority status or power think, why they do so, and what that means for the formation of a collective imagination of a nation.

In conclusion, I return to the account that I referred to at the opening of this essay. There I began by commenting about Michelle Obama and her explication of the importance of going high in the face of discrimination, and the effort of Nelson Mandela to promote dignity and grace when faced with the possibility of bloody socio-political transformation of South Africa. What we learn from *Getting Respect* is that we can think of both of these approaches, and many others that come from people who occupied positions of marginality or disadvantage, as profoundly more complicated than they might initially seem. While the efforts of Obama and Mandela appear to be about the preservation of a group’s (or selected individuals within that group’s) capacity to survive their conditions, it is also the case that each takes place in national contexts that are very differently situated in regard to issues of power and racial privilege.

Michelle Obama’s story is about the preservation of a positive image of blackness while also making a statement about the positive possibilities of white and black Americans to engage each other proactively in a post-civil rights era society. Nelson Mandela’s story is about the efforts to preserve a nation-state in order for black Africans to eventually have the ability to engage and entertain upward mobility in it. Obama seemingly had a range of behavioural options at her disposal, which is a reflection of the contemporary life situation of the black middle class in America. Mandela seemingly had only one option available, and it was sole option that he believed would ensure that survivability of his nation. Hence, responses to stigma and discrimination, which may result in the garnering of respect at the micro level, must never be thought of as simply the effort to promote or preserve oneself and one’s personal interest. Instead, and as the authors of *Getting Respect* give its readers the analytical tools to understand, the fate of collectives and of nations more generally may be contingent upon the patterns and styles of response that people make to discrimination. In drawing our attention to this phenomena they demonstrate that the understanding of reactions and responses to discrimination no longer should remain the province of Irving Goffman-influenced studies of micro-level social interaction, but rather call into the conversation a more complete sociological framework for understanding what behaviour seemingly in pursuit of respect means at a deeper level in social life. Ultimately, the work at hand is about much more than getting respect. It is, in the best case scenarios, about individual and collective future advancement. In the worst case, it is about ensuring that some kind of future at all may exist for people at the bottom of social hierarchies.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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