

## The Problem of Culturally Normal Belief\*

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In this paper, I address an epistemological problem at the interface between an individual's mind and their cultural milieu. I call this problem the problem of culturally normal belief.

Schematically, the problem has the following structure. An individual casually absorbs a culturally entrenched presumption, and that presumption ends up operating in his or her mind as a belief.

This structure has three key ingredients: the individual, the culturally entrenched presumption, and the relationship between them whereby the individual casually, unreflectively, seemingly naturally absorbs the presumption and comes to recapitulate it in his or her own mind.

By itself, the structure does not generate the problem. The problem arises when we ask how reasonable it is for the individual to hold the attitude that results from this absorption, and when we find opposing pressures among the plausible answers. Not every instance of the structure yields a problematic opposition, but some do. Consider for instance two passages from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 19<sup>th</sup>-century American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Both concern the slave owner Mr. Shelby's decision to sell Tom and Harry, who are his slaves, in the face of economic pressures.

"I have agreed to sell Tom and Harry both; and I don't know why I am to be rated as if I were a monster for doing what everyone does every day." --Mr. Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

"Well, anyway, thar's wrong about it somewhar," said Aunt Chloe [talking to Uncle Tom], in whom a stubborn sense of justice was a predominant trait. "I can't jest make out whar 'tis, but thar's wrong somewhar, I'm *clar* o'that." – *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Here, Mr. Shelby is the individual afflicted by the problem. On the one hand, treating Tom and Harry as sellable is socially normal. The presumption that they are sellable fits with what "everyone does every day". These considerations can make his presumption seem well-founded. Many beliefs formed in the same way, through absorbing a socially normal outlook, are well-founded. For instance, when everyone in the neighborhood drinks water from the faucets, it is socially normal to believe that tap water is safe to drink. Someone who absorbed

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this belief from living in the neighborhood would seem to have formed the belief epistemically well.

On the other hand, there is a respect in which at a social level, the presumption that Tom and Harry are sellable is ultimately not well-founded. It is more like a post-hoc rationalization of chattel slavery than a presumption arising from epistemically proper premises about the nature of Tom and Harry. If the presumption at a social level is ill-founded, how can it be well-founded when it is absorbed by individuals such as Mr Shelby?

There are several possible responses to this problem. Some might deny that there is such a thing as epistemic ill-foundedness at the social level. Some might allow that there is such a thing, but hold that social-level ill-foundedness doesn't transmit to individuals' attitudes. And some might find the whole idea of "culturally entrenched presumptions" so murky that they neither deny nor allow them to be epistemically appraised at a social level, and instead struggle to make sense of the social-level phenomenon that poses the problem in the first place.

My response is that there is such a thing as social-level presumptions, they can be ill-founded, and their ill-foundedness can transmit to individual attitudes.

Any defense of this response would have quite a bit to explain. My strategy is to develop an example that both illustrates a culturally entrenched presumption, and helps guide us to a plausible account of how such presumptions can epistemically appraised, and how they can effect the epistemic situations of individuals who casually absorb those presumptions.

I develop the example in stages, starting with an exemplary culturally entrenched presumption, which is a type of racialized attitude found in many forms in the contemporary U.S.. After describing one of the marks that this cultural entrenchment can leave in the minds of individuals, I construct a hypothetical individual named "Whit", his social milieu, and his psychological profile. Not everyone with the attitudes Whit has comes to have them in the same way. The construction of Whit specifies how he comes to have his attitude, and that specification gives us the three ingredients needed to generate an instance of the problem: a culturally entrenched presumption that P, an individual who casually absorbs this presumption, and a conflicted sense that while such absorption in general seems epistemically innocuous (as Mr. Shelby emphasizes), the end result seems epistemically suspect (as Aunt Chloe observes). James Baldwin gives another pointed example when he describes racial beliefs held casually, or as he says 'helplessly', and alludes to their ill-founded status.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Chris Lebron for drawing my attention to Baldwin's notion of helpless belief in a 1965 debate with William F. Buckley, Jr., where Baldwin writes: "In the Deep South you are dealing with a sheriff or a landlord or a landlady or the girl at the Western Union desk. She doesn't know quite whom she is dealing with--by which I mean, if you are not part of a town and if you are a Northern nigger, it shows in millions of ways. She simply knows that it is an unknown quantity and she wants to have nothing to do with it. You have to wait a while to get your telegram. We have all been through it. By the time you get to be a man it is fairly easy to

The plan of action is as follows. To highlight the kind of epistemic appraisal at issue and how it figures in my ultimate solution, I compare the problem of culturally normal belief to a similar problem about perception in section 1. I introduce my exemplary culturally entrenched presumption in section 2, and discuss the structure of this attitude in individual minds in section 3. I introduce Whit and his background in section 4, and argue that his route to holding the attitude poses the problem of culturally normal belief sharply. In the rest of the paper (sections 5-7), I consider and reject several arguments that Whit's attitude must be well-founded, given how it is formed and maintained, and finally make the case that it is ill-founded. I conclude by highlighting the consequences of my solution for the scope of epistemic appraisals.

### **1. Epistemic appraisal and hijacked perception**

The kind of epistemic appraisal at issue in the problem of culturally normally belief is the kind that is most familiar from epistemology of individuals' beliefs. Beliefs are well-founded when they are formed and maintained epistemically well, and ill-founded when they are formed or maintained epistemically badly. (Notice that a belief can be true and ill-founded, or false and well-founded). Well-founding and ill-founding are explanatory notions. The factors that make a belief well-founded (or ill-founded) are drawn from the factors that explain why a person has and keeps their belief.

Ill-foundedness and well-foundedness track a dimension of rationality. The process by which a person forms a belief, for instance, redounds well or poorly on their rational standing. If a belief is ill-founded, then the person is not as rational as they could be, if they didn't have the belief. '

It might seem natural to assume that if an individual's having a belief redounds badly on her, then she is culpable and blameworthy for having that belief. (Begby 2019). I reject this assumption. Having a belief could redound poorly on your rational standing, even if you are not culpable or blameworthy for having that belief. If you solve a logic puzzle, your rational standing is greater than it would be if you had all the information you needed to solve the puzzle but reasoned poorly with that information. In the scenario where you reason poorly, you might be doing the best you can with the resources you have. But there is no point in blaming you, and it seems wrong to say that you're blameworthy. If we analyze poor rational standing in terms of blame, we won't be able to straightforwardly characterize your reasoning as poor.

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deal with. But what happens to the poor white man's, the poor white woman's, mind? It is this: they have been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible some of their lives may be and no matter what disaster overtakes them, there is one consolation like a heavenly revelation--at least they are not black". I leave it to the reader to consider how similar the beliefs Baldwin describes are to the ones discussed in this paper. I think they are very similar but I won't make the case here.

Ill-foundedness figures in an epistemological problem that occurs within the mind of an individual, and that is in some ways analogous to the problem of culturally normal belief. Here is an example.

**Angry Jack:** Before seeing Jack, Jill fears that Jack is angry at her. When she sees him, her fear causes her to perceive Jack as angry, creating a visual experience that presents him as angry. On the basis of her perceptual experience, Jill strengthens her fear and forms the belief that Jack is angry.

This intra-individual epistemological problem consists in a pair of opposing pressures: the pressure to say that if Jill believes her eyes, her belief is formed epistemically well (or equivalently, it is well-founded), and the pressure to say that such a belief is formed epistemically badly (or equivalently, it is ill-founded).

On the one hand, if Jack really does look angry to Jill when she sees him, and she has no indication that the experience is misleading, then what else could Jill reasonably believe about his emotional state, other than that he is angry? Isn't Jill just doing the best with the evidence that perception gives her? Her belief that Jack is angry seems to be based on her experience.

On the other hand, if perceptual experiences retained its usual epistemic power in this case, then it would rationally support Jill in strengthening her fear. Suppose Jill takes her experience to confirm her suspicion that Jack is angry with her ("just look at his face!", she tells herself). She seems to have moved illicitly from her starting suspicion to a strengthening of it, via her experience. From Jill's point of view, she seems to be gaining additional evidence from this experience for her belief that Jack is angry at her, elevating the epistemic status of that belief. But is it that easy to confirm a suspicion?

I call this problem the problem of hijacked experience. I call it that, because in the example, it is as if Jill's perceptual experience is hijacked by her fear.<sup>2</sup>

This problem has several similarities to the problem of culturally normal belief. Both problems concern the epistemic impact of a kind of psychological influence (from within the mind, or from a culturally entrenched presumption in the mind's social context) on an individual's state (Jill's perception, Mr. Shelby's belief). Both problems feature individuals to whom the ways things appear (either in perception or belief) are congruent with their outlook (Jill's fear, Shelby's view that slaves as sellable), which they regard as well-founded. And in both problems, these individuals' perspectives seem a poor guide to their full epistemic situation; and yet the epistemically bad-making features of that situation, if there are any, are hard to identify.

In the case of Jill's fear of Jack's anger, the concepts of blame and culpability have no clear application. Blame implies that the person doing the blaming can rightfully ask the blamed

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of hijacked experience is my main focus in *The Rationality of Perception* (2017), where I argue for the solution mentioned here.

person do something differently, such as change their beliefs, or apologize, or compensate anyone they may have harmed. Culpability is the flip-side of blame. These normative notions are made for appraising and regulating social relationships. In this respect, they belong with other epistemic normative notions designed to help shape social relationships, such as the notions that determine when it is reasonable to trust another person or social entity, or the notions of immanent critique and external critique that figure in the theory of social criticism.

By contrast, the purpose of the normative notions of ill-foundedness and well-foundedness is to describe the normative contours of the situation, rather than to devise ways to improve them.

Both the problem of perceptual hijacking and the problem of culturally normal belief have many potential solutions. My solutions extend the scope of epistemic appraisability. They allow that something like an epistemic basing relation can hold both within an individual's mind (between Jill's fear and the perceptual experience it influences), and between a culturally entrenched presumption and an individual's attitude.<sup>3</sup> I return to these solutions at the end of the paper, to highlight a consequence they have for interpreting reasonable person standards in self-defense law.

## 2. A culturally entrenched racialized attitude

My example of a culturally entrenched presumption is a kind of racialized outlook that will be familiar to anyone with casual acquaintance with the history and contemporary culture in the US. The outlook includes the generalization that black men are dangerous. It combines two parameters: race and gender. Much research in psychology designed to probe the nature and extent of what they call "racial bias" operates with black men or boys as characters in vignettes, or figures or faces in experiments, excluding black women. The experiments discussed next fit this pattern.<sup>4</sup>

An attitude with this content is plausibly the cognitive underpinning of the results in a cluster of psychological experiments that were designed to activate racial attitudes, and to test their prevalence in contemporary US populations. Here are five such results.

**Weapon categorization:** Participants in an experiment are shown an object quickly and are asked to press a button designated for "gun" if it is a gun, and a different button if it is a hand tool—pliers, wrench, or drill. Before they see the object, they are quickly shown a man's face. The man is either black or white. Participants frequently indicate

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<sup>3</sup> In the problem of hijacked experience, this solution entails that perceptual experiences can be appraised as well-founded or ill-founded. This consequence is defended in *The Rationality of Perception* as well as in Siegel (2016).

<sup>4</sup> The ways in which black women are backgrounded in discussions of race in the US is a longstanding theme in black feminism, such as Cooper (1892). The fact of this backgrounding is part of what makes the example I'm using so recognizable and so readily described by the label 'racial bias' which can obscure its gendered aspects by backgrounding them.

“gun” when shown a tool, but make this error more frequently following a black prime, compared with a white prime. (Payne 2001)

**The shooter task:** Participants in an experiment play a video game. They are supposed to press either a button designated for “shoot” or “don’t shoot,” depending on whether the person they see on the screen (the target) is holding a gun or an innocuous object—such as a cell phone or wallet. The targets are men. Sometimes the men are black, sometimes white. Participants more frequently press “shoot” when shown an unarmed black target than they do when shown an unarmed white target. (Correll et al. 2002)<sup>5</sup>

**Crime-suggestive acuity:** After being shown a man’s face in a subliminal prime, participants are shown a sequence of progressively less degraded images, beginning with visual noise and ending with a clear image of an object and asked to indicate when they can recognize the object. They identify crime-relevant objects (guns or knives) at lower thresholds than crime-irrelevant objects, after being shown a black man’s face, compared to crime-irrelevant objects, and compared to crime-relevant objects after being shown a white man’s face. (Eberhardt et al. 2004)

**Age overestimation:** Participants are shown a picture of a boy aged 10–17, paired with a description of a crime that the boy is said to have committed. They are asked to estimate the boy’s age. Across subjects, the pictures of boys and their names change, but the crime descriptions stay the same. Both police officers and college-age laypersons overestimate the age of black boys by at least four years when the crime is a felony, but overestimate ages of white and latino boys by only two years, for the same crime. On a scale of culpability, black boys are rated more culpable than white or latino boys for the same crime. (Goff et al. 2014)

**Looking deathworthy:** Defendants in capital crimes whose victims are white are more likely to be sentenced by juries to death, the more stereotypically black their faces appear. (Eberhardt et al. 2006)

One could see the experiments as recreating a fragment of a one-sided reaction. The reactions are on the part of the observer (the experimental participant) to a man or a boy, and they differ depending on whether the man or boy is black. (In the case of Looking Deathworthy, the reaction is inferred from past behavior, and in place of an experimental situation, there is just analysis of data.) The patterns of behavior elicited by the experiments do not, on their own, reveal the cognitive states underlying those patterns. But a plausible hypothesis, and indeed the hypothesis the studies were designed to test, is that the reactions occur because the

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<sup>6</sup> Correll’s (2002) study spawned a series of follow-up studies, designed to test whether there are differences between lay persons and police officers, often using different paradigms, as well as Correll’s original paradigm (Correll et al. 2007, Plant and Peruche 2005, Glaser and Knowles 2008, James et al. 2013).

participants link a concept at least as specific as blackness—and quite probably a more determinate concept—to one or more concepts in a cluster that includes ‘danger’ or ‘crime’ (I use single quotes around a word to denote a concept). These concepts are importantly different: something is a crime only relative to a legal institution, whereas what’s dangerous for X depends on X’s vulnerabilities. But for now we can ignore these differences.

To say that two concepts are linked leaves open how they are linked. An initial hypothesis is that they are linked in a way that attributes dangerousness, criminality, or both to people thought to belong to a racial category. This hypothesis is strengthened by the prevalence of narratives that depict reactions to black men of the sort elicited by (or depicted in) the experiments. Depicting a reaction can be a way of endorsing it, but of course it need not be—any more than a novel with a villain has to endorse or encourage villainy. Sometimes the reactions are depicted from the point of view of the recipients of the reactions. For instance, George Yancy (2008) describes a type of micro-interaction between strangers, in a narrative that is easy to recognize:

When followed by white security personnel as I walk through department stores, when a white salesperson avoids touching my hand, when a white woman looks with suspicion as I enter the elevator, I feel that in their eyes I am this indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a rapist, a criminal, a burden. . .

In the US, narratives resembling this one have long been found in many intellectual registers, such as memoir, fiction, film, music, poetry, ethnography, and social scientific studies, including psychological studies of stereotype threat and studies in political sciences of the effects on political attitudes of contact with the criminal justice system. Some renditions of this narrative detail what it is like to navigate public space when the possibility of being responded to as a threat or likely criminal is salient, including the often elaborate efforts and adjustments made to prevent that response, or reverse it, or negotiate it in some other way.<sup>6</sup> Other versions of the same narrative highlight, encourage, and enforce the point of view of the reactor, such as the high-profile Willie Horton ad in the 1988 US election, the political scientist’s John Dilulio introduction in the 1990s of the concept of a “superpredator” to describe black youth who were supposedly prone to crime, and around the same time, analytic philosopher Michael Levin’s defense of racialized fear.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Contemporary works that focus on these negotiations include Cadogan (2018) and Coates (2015) in the genre of memoir, psychological research on stereotype threat (Steele 2011), sociological studies of racial profiling (Glaser 2014) and disproportionate punishment in school of black children (Smith and Harper 2016), and studies in political science on the impact of frequent contact with the criminal justice system (Lerman and Weaver 2014).

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the Willie Horton ad, see Mendelberg (2001). The concept of a juvenile superpredator—a black youth supposedly prone to crime—was introduced by the political scientist J. Dilulio (1996), and its role in the development of crime policy is discussed by Hinton (2016). Levin (1992)’s explicit purpose is to argue that fear of

The wealth of cultural production of narratives casting black men in this role makes it plausible that the psychology experiments are eliciting the same racial attitude. In addition, the psychological experiments provide evidence that racial attitudes can operate even in the minds of people who would explicitly disown the hypothesis that black men is dangerous.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Are racial attitudes minimal associations?

Taken together, the cultural pattern and the experimental results suggest that the racial attitude often operate in individual minds as a belief would, influencing how one interprets what one sees, and how one is prepared to act. When an attitude operates as a belief would, then it is a good candidate for epistemic appraisal as well-founded or ill-founded.

But according to the psychologists who conducted the studies described in the previous section, the experimental tasks activate what they call a “stereotypical association” between the concepts ‘black man’ and ‘danger’ or ‘crime.’<sup>9</sup> When the experimenters say that participants make a “stereotypical association,” they are saying that the mind moves from one concept to another. Let us consider what kind of movement of the mind this could be.

It is useful first to identify different ways to associate concepts X and Y, such as ‘salt’ and ‘pepper.’

Minimal association between isolated concepts: transition from isolated concepts expressed by words: e.g., “drip” to “drop,” “salt” to “pepper,” “tic” and “tac” to “toe.”

This kind of movement between isolated concepts is a mental analog of the verbal phenomenon in which a person hears “salt” and (perhaps upon being prompted to report the word that first comes to mind) says “pepper.” Associative transitions can also be made between thoughts.

Minimal association between thoughts: transition from thought involving X (X-thoughts) to thoughts involving Y (Y-thoughts), with no constraints on which thoughts these are.

In a minimal association between thoughts, whenever one thinks a thought involving the concept ‘salt’—such as that the chips are salty, or that the soup needs more salt, or that salt on the roads prevents skidding—one is disposed to think a thought—any thought—involved the concept ‘pepper.’ A minimal association between thoughts is therefore a kind of association

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sharing public space with black men or boys is reasonable, while assuming that such fear is psychologically possible for all of his readers.

<sup>8</sup> A useful summary of such results is [Glaser \(2014\)](#), ch. 4.

<sup>9</sup> [Eberhardt et al. \(2004, 2006\)](#), [Correll et al. \(2002, 2007\)](#), and [Payne \(2006\)](#): “stereotypic association between African Americans and violence,” [Goff et al. \(2014\)](#): “stereotypical association with crime.” Similar assumptions are made by [Nosek et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Blair et al.](#)

between concepts. When it is used in a salt-thought, the concept 'salt' triggers a pepper-thought. But which thoughts are triggered is not constrained by the semantic relationships between them.

Both kinds of minimal associations leave entirely open what standing attitudes the subject has toward the things denoted by the concepts, such as salt and pepper. A subject with a minimal association may have zero further opinions about salt and pepper, if for her, the concepts are no more related than the words "tic," "tac," and "toe." If she does have further opinions, she may think that salt goes well with pepper, that salt and pepper should never be seen or tasted together, that where there is salt there tends to be pepper, that salt and pepper are exclusive seasonings, or any of an enormous variety of other thoughts. No standing outlook about how the things denoted by the concepts are related belongs to a minimal association.<sup>10</sup>

(2001). For many more examples of the assumption that implicit racial bias takes the form of associations, as well as detailed argument against it, see [Mandelbaum \(2015\)](#). Another possibility, explored in [Haslanger \(1995\)](#), is that there is a single concept that operates in the cultural milieu, and it is a concept of "threatening black male" (or perhaps an even more determinate concept). On the one-concept approach, there would be no need for an association between separate concepts 'black' and 'crime'. My criticisms of the idea that the attitudes that explain the experimental results are minimal associations suggest that if the one-concept approach is correct, then activating that concept activates a belief-like representation as well.

We can also distinguish between epistemic appraisability of a transition, and epistemic appraisability of the elements of the transition. Thoughts are things that can be true or false, and can be epistemically appraised in various ways. Their contents can be made more probable or less probable by other factors, and can receive better or worse evidential support. If the thoughts are beliefs, then they can be formed epistemically well or epistemically badly. These appraisals, however, are indifferent to whether the thought happens to be an element in an associative transition.

Turning from elements of associative transition to the transition itself, we can ask: Is the movement of the mind in minimal associations ever an epistemically appraisable transition? Many writers think that epistemically appraisable transitions are limited to inferences. This limitation would exclude minimal associations. Since there are good reasons to think when the prevalent racial attitude at issue operates in individual minds, it sometimes isn't a minimal association, we can leave this epistemological question aside. Just as a minimal association between the concepts 'salt' and 'pepper' leaves open whether salt is better than pepper, or

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<sup>10</sup> This point underlies [Mandelbaum's \(2013\)](#) criticism of [Gendler's](#) claim in her (2008) and (2011) that a new type of mental state, alief, is needed to explain a range of psychological phenomena, including implicit bias. For discussion of implicit bias and association, see [Levy \(2014\)](#), [Mandelbaum \(2015\)](#), and [Madva and Brownstein \(2018\)](#).

pepper is better than salt, or pepper is salty, or salt is peppery, a minimal association would leave open many possibilities, including the possibilities that black men dissipate crime, that they are wisest critics of crime policy, that they are the best protectors against crime, that they make more arrests than other people, and that you are unlikely to be in danger of crime when you are part of a group of black men. Minimal associations between the concepts 'black man' and 'danger' or 'crime' would leave these possibilities open, because they leave open the ways in which black men are supposedly related to danger or crime.

Of the experimental results listed earlier, at least one could be explained by a minimal association: crime-suggestive acuity, in which a black prime facilitates seeing a gun or another crime-related object at a lower threshold, compared to a white prime, or to no prime, and compared to a crime-irrelevant object. Whether it explains the weapon categorization task is less clear. In contrast, a minimal association could not explain the shooter task. Minimal associations do not predict one pattern of shooting error over any other. A minimal association between 'black' (or a more specific racial concept) and 'crime' could be an artifact of a presumption that black men are especially unlikely to be holding a crime-related object, and so do not explain why people are so ready to press "shoot" when target is black.<sup>11</sup> Nor do minimal associations predict the Looking Deathworthy result, or age overestimation.

Many of the experiments themselves therefore strengthen the idea that culturally prevalent attitudes sometimes operate in the minds of individuals, not as minimal associations, but in a way that recapitulates the prevalent attitudes. In the experimental circumstances described earlier, racial attitudes operate in the mind in ways that are typical of beliefs. They contribute to interpretation of information, they lead to inferences, and they guide action.

When considering the extent to which these attitudes shape behavior beyond experimental circumstances, it is reasonable expect variation of at least four kinds: first, people in whom the attitudes are absent; second, people in whom they operate implicitly and who explicitly endorse them; third, people in whom the attitudes implicitly operate but are at odds with their explicit avowals, other behavioral dispositions, or both, leading to felt internal conflict; and finally people in whom they implicitly operate without leading to much if any felt internal conflict. People in the last group have relatively little else in their minds or lives to pull against their implicit attitudes and the dispositions they have that are congruent with them. For an argument that individuals in these last two groups are not exceptional, see [Glaser \(2014\)](#), Chapter 4.

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<sup>11</sup> In subsequent experiments, the original results were replicated when participants wore an eye-tracker that indicated where they were foveating when they pressed the button. It was found that when the targets were black, participants tended to decide more quickly whether to shoot, compared to when targets were white, and in addition, when targets were black, participants tended to look at the targets' face more than at their hands, compared to looking at patterns with white targets, even though the task is to decide which button to press, depending on what the target is holding in their hand. [Correll et al. \(2015, Study 2\)](#).

It is the last group of people—the least internally conflicted kind—who pose the problem of culturally normal belief most sharply. The problem is clearest when there is an attitude absorbed casually from one’s milieu that seems ill-founded in light of one set of considerations, but well-founded in light of another set. And an attitude can seem well- founded, if someone absorbs it from their milieu without any felt need to actively maintain their outlook in the face of potential challenges, either from within one’s own mind or from their social surroundings. To make the problem vivid, I’ll describe a psychological profile and social background that such a person could have. Because this person is easiest to picture as being surrounded by people who are mainly white, I’ll call this person “Whit”. In the end, however, how Whit himself is racially categorized is not essential to his epistemic situation.

#### **4. Whit and his route to the racialized attitude**

Whit is eighteen years old. He has always lived in the same town, in the early-twenty-first-century United States. He inhabits a world of a white people. All of the people that he and his parents take themselves to depend on are white. White people are his neighbors, his teachers, his schoolmates, the professionals that regularly interact with his family (accountants, teachers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, local religious figures, and community leaders), his friends and his family’s friends, his local politicians, police officers, restaurant owners, and people he sees when he goes to restaurants.

Whit knows that elsewhere, not everyone is white. He knows there are black professionals of all kinds. He knows that in other places, distant from where he lives, there are neighborhoods where people are mainly black, where they tend to be much poorer than his family is, and where many people his age have a lot of contact with the criminal justice system. He doesn’t know personally anybody who lives there.

Whit has been a subject in all the experiments described earlier, and his responses mirror the trends in the data. His attitudes make him disposed to have interactions of the sort described by Yancy. Across a range of situations, Whit is obtuse in micro-situations like the one in the elevator. If Whit were asked to assess the productive capabilities or personal credibility of a boy or man who is black, he would tend to be disproportionately doubtful. And if he expressed or acted on his doubt, he would not face any challenges from the people within his usual social horizons. In this way, Whit has little in his mind or life to pull against his absorption of the attitude that black men are dangerous.

In the context of the prevalent narratives described earlier, Whit’s racial isolation is the kind that Allport (1954) predicted would make a person more likely to absorb the presumption depicted in the narratives, rather than contesting or discounting it. Of course like any individual’s outlook, Whit’s cannot be entirely predicted by social context. And conversely, Whit’s social situation is not the only route to the racial attitude he ends up with.

The fact that Whit’s attitude is normal worsens his society. But does his attitude worsen his own epistemic standing?

From the point of view of people on the receiving end of Whit's reactions, his attitude seems clearly ill-founded. Imagine stepping into a line at an automatic teller machine where Whit and his friends are waiting, and seeing their palpable discomfort as they look uneasy and make sure their wallets are deep inside their pockets. Or imagine asking Whit for directions, and finding him ill at ease in talking to you, seemingly suspicious of whether what you want is really directions, as opposed to something else. In these situations, you'd think Whit and his friends were in the grip of a fear that they were projecting onto you. There's nothing more you could do to manifest the ordinariness of your own behavior. Outside of Whit's world, many people would easily pick up on the ample cues that indicate innocuous everyday activity. Due to their racial attitudes, Whit and his friends are either blind to these cues, or they discount them.

If Whit's attitude is ill-founded, what makes it ill-founded? Ultimately, I'll argue that the epistemically bad-making feature is that Whit has absorbed an ill-founded presumption by testimony, and by testimony the ill-foundedness has been transmitted.

It is useful to distinguish this position from a distinct proposal about what makes Whit's attitude ill-founded. Whit's epistemic situation is shaped in part by what he doesn't know. He doesn't know (we can suppose) how neighborhoods came to be racially divided, and he doesn't know what keeps them that way. He lacks books, friends, and curiosity that would lead him to know about life beyond his current social horizons. If he learned more, it might create cognitive disharmony by pulling against the attitudes he has.

The things Whit doesn't know are in some sense an epistemic cost to him.<sup>12</sup> One might hold that it's the things Whit doesn't know – his ignorance - that makes his attitude ill-founded.

But it is not obvious that Whit's ignorance, and the possibly transformative effects on him of removing it, makes his actual attitudes epistemically bad. In many cases, we lack information that, if we had it, would complicate or fundamentally change our outlook. For instance, if you learned that your genetic background leaves you especially disposed to be struck with a certain kind of illness that your current customary copious consumption of cheese encourages, cheese-eating could switch from being a source of pleasure for you to a locus of threat. But so long as you lack this information, your unquestioned presumption that cheese is safe to eat seems well-founded. To you, it's just plain common sense that in every way, cheese is good to eat.

#### **4.1 Is Whit's racial attitude well-founded?**

Some theoretical considerations would favor the view that for all I've said about Whit's social and psychological context, his attitude could be well-founded. First, some psychologists have argued that the generalizations that inform perceptual judgment overwhelmingly tend to result from statistical learning, Bayesian updating, or other forms of inductive learning.<sup>13</sup> And these learning patterns are supposed to be reasonable. If it's in general true that the expectations we

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<sup>12</sup> A point emphasized by Mills (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Bar (2011), Hohwy (2013), Clark (2013, 2015).

use to help interpret what we see are by and large reasonable expectations to have, why should Whit's attitude be different? It might yield mistaken judgments once in a while, but if his prior assumptions are reasonable, then by and large one should expect inferences from them to be reasonable as well.

This consideration, however, does not support the conclusion that Whit's attitude is well-founded. Nor does it support the conclusions that attitudes like Whit's (as diagnosed by the experiments described earlier) are well-founded, when they are held by people whose social settings are not as thoroughly white as Whit's. It is both implausible and improbable that racial attitudes are formed by exposure to coincidences of danger and any racial category. It's implausible, because people who are too young to have undergone a pattern of exposure that would link those properties nonetheless have what are likely to be the same racial attitudes, or closely related precursors to them.<sup>14</sup> And it's improbable, because countless interactions between people whose attitudes are like Whit's (even if their socio-economic surroundings aren't) and the black men they react to are innocuous, and so an appeal to patterns of exposure cannot explain why some of these exposures coalesce into generalizations that go on to operate in the mind as beliefs while others don't.<sup>15</sup> Think of all the micro-interactions one has when one waits in line for the automatic teller, passes people on a sidewalk, buys stamps at a post office, congregates with others during a fire drill, buys a drink at a bar, or negotiates small spaces on an airplane. In interactions like these, rarely, if ever, is any palpable danger or threat in the picture at all. If someone operating in these contexts without the extreme racial isolation like Whit's, ends up with racial attitudes like Whit's, those attitudes do plausibly arise from any part of the cognitive system keeping accurate statistics about which people from among the ones he encountered are palpably dangerous.

A second idea that might seem to make Whit's attitude well-founded, given his social context, is that according to a US Bureau of Justice report from 2011, blacks were responsible for 52% of homicides between 1980 and 2008 in the US, despite constituting only 13% of the population.<sup>16</sup> This statistical generalization is accurate (let's suppose), and presumably it is possible to believe it on good grounds. So a belief in this generalization could be well-founded. Could holding the

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<sup>14</sup> Dunham et al. (2013) found preferences in children aged 4–6 for in-groups, when and only when those groups are also socially dominant. The preferences are not measured with the IAT, but they show sensitivity to culturally contingent social hierarchies.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie's (2008) category of "striking property generics" can be seen as labeling the problem of identifying which generalizations one will form. According to her, in some cases, being dangerous is a striking property. For discussion of the limitations of the explanatory power of the category of strikingness, see Nickel (2016).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>. Munton (ms), who cites and discusses the same statistic, aims to characterize a type of epistemic flaw in beliefs in this statistical generalization and others she describes as ethically charged, such as "Men outperform women in math and science at the highest levels." According to Munton, the flaw consists in certain problematic patterns of reasoning that one is disposed to perform when one has the belief. I'm indebted to her for discussions of the issues in this section.

same racial attitude as Whit holds on the basis of believing the generalization result in a well-founded attitude?

This question is strictly orthogonal to the problem of culturally normal belief. That problem concerns an attitude acquired by absorbing it from a situation in which having the attitude is normal—not from learning a statistic. Learning statistics like this one need not come with the trappings of social reassurance. The problem of the culturally normal belief concerns the epistemic impact of those trappings.

The orthogonal question, however, is relevant to whether Whit's attitude is *close* to being well-founded. By hypothesis, Whit doesn't form his racial attitude in response to a well-founded belief in an accurate statistical generalization about homicide. But suppose someone did. Would that route to the racial attitude make it well-founded?

There's reason to think it wouldn't. For one thing, the statistical generalization does not justify the judgments reported in the Looking Deathworthy or Age Overestimation results (specifically, the culpability judgments about children). And whether other judgments in the other experiments are reasonable depends on whether the generalizations project from the circumstances of collection to the new contexts in which they are applied. They don't generalize to the kinds of micro-interactions described earlier that arise from attitudes like Whit's.

#### **4.2 Normality as testimony**

A much stronger route to the idea that Whit's attitude is well-founded takes Whit's route to his belief to be epistemically on par with testimony. Here, the position that Whit's attitude is well-founded may seem to be supported by both the psychology of stereotypes and the epistemology of testimony.

According to some prominent psychologists who study stereotypes, our beliefs about social groups are by and large accurate. If in general, within a society, beliefs about social groups tend to be accurate, then why should Whit's belief be an exception? In a book that synthesizes several decades of data from social psychology about stereotypes, Lee Jussim writes, "social reality has a systematic influence on individuals' beliefs about groups." His data concern a wide range of beliefs, including many beliefs about racial groups (though he does not offer data about the accuracy of beliefs in the specific racial stereotype we have been discussing). Jussim claims that, in many cases, this kind of influence produces accurate beliefs about groups.<sup>17</sup> The exceptions he cites are cases in which "there is some sort of organized effort (e.g., by some sort of governmental or other institution) to distort the truth about some group."

Since Jussim is interested in accuracy, rather than in well-foundedness, he does not address what might make individuals' attitudes well-founded when they are congruent with

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<sup>17</sup> Jussim (2012). The book's subtitle is "Why Accuracy Dominates Bias and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy."

stereotypes. But a natural idea is that such attitudes would be well-founded in roughly the same way that beliefs formed by testimony can be well-founded.

When everyone in the neighborhood drinks from the faucet without a second thought, one casually assumes that the water from faucets is safe to drink. That assumption is well-founded, as are many other beliefs acquired in the same casual way. By comparison, Whit's dispositions to be suspicious and distrustful of black men, to feel discomfort and sharing public spaces, are as natural to Whit and his friends as the presumption that their water is safe to drink.

It might be objected that whereas the social level presumption that the water is safe to drink is well-founded, the social level presumption that black men are dangerous isn't. To sustain this objection, the idea that social level presumptions could be epistemically appraised as well-founded or ill-founded would have to be defended. (I offer a defense in section 7.) But the power of the argument from testimony for the well-foundedness of Whit's attitude lies in the idea that even if the social level presumption is ill-founded, its ill-foundedness is epistemically irrelevant to Whit. It is irrelevant to Whit, on this view, because it is plausible to think that ill-foundedness does not in general transmit via testimony.

For example, suppose your mother fears that the water is unsafe to drink, and she comes to think that the water is as she fears it to be. Her fear is unreasonable, let's suppose, and so is her belief. When she warns you not to drink the water because it is toxic, you believe her. So now you believe that the water is unsafe to drink. Your belief may be false, but even so, it is, arguably, well-founded. It is reasonable for you to believe her—she's your mother. If your belief is well-founded, then the ill-foundedness of your mother's belief does not transmit to yours, even though you formed your belief on the basis of testimony from her.

The argument from testimony is powerful. Psychologically, one's beliefs are frequently formed on the basis of testimony. Epistemically, in many cases (such as the mother–water case) it seems intuitive that testimony does not transmit epistemically. The epistemic point might seem to scale up from testimony between individuals, to testimony inherent in social normality of practices and beliefs. Epistemically, the considerations that can make Whit's beliefs seem well-founded point to the many ways in which (speaking metaphorically) a cultural milieu seems to testify through the practices and representations that shape the milieu. So if Whit's racial attitude is ill-founded, then something must be wrong with the argument from testimony.

In defending my solution to the problem of culturally normal belief, I argue that ill-foundedness can transmit from the social-level testifier to individuals. My first step is to make the metaphor of a social level testifier more explicit.

## **5. The mind of the world**

Attributing a presumption to a cultural milieu is indispensable in characterizing it, even though the metaphysical structure of such attributions is hard to articulate. Who, exactly, is the bearer of a culturally entrenched presumption? Who does the presuming? These difficult questions

concern the metaphysics of culture can be sidestepped by using a helpful metaphor: the presumptions are made by the *mind of the world*.

Sometimes it is more illuminating to unpack a metaphor than it is to leave it intact. In this case, though, I am leaving the metaphor intact because it is difficult to unpack its metaphysical underpinnings in an illuminating way. What the mind of the world presumes clearly depends on the mental states of smaller individuals. But for the case we have been discussing, its entrenchment does not seem to consist exclusively of attitudes like Whit's. Some people, such as Whit, recapitulate the presumption in their minds. Other people negotiate the presumption, and it operates in their minds as a presumption that will guide other people's behavior and attitudes toward them. In these ways, the culturally entrenched presumption leaves different marks in the minds of different individuals. Exactly which attitudes of individuals constitute the presumption in the mind of the world? And in what ways is that social-level presumption constituted by practices and institutional arrangements that are congruent with it, such as racial profiling of black men, or other surveillance or policing practices organized by neighborhood (rather than by race) that put black men into frequent contact with the criminal justice system?

The difficulty of converting the metaphor into non-metaphorical description that would answer these questions does not detract from the metaphor's usefulness. In fact, leaving those questions unanswered may explain what makes the metaphor so apt. Here are three ways the metaphor earns its explanatory keep.

First, metaphor of a social mind does justice to the idea that a culture traffics in representations, and in that respect it is as if a cultural world such as Whit's milieu has a mind.

The word "the" in "the mind of the world" might suggest that there is only one locus of culturally entrenched presumptions. But hearing it that way would make the metaphor useless for describing culturally specific phenomena. It should instead be heard as the mind-of-the-world that is relevant to the cultural milieu at issue, such as Whit's milieu. Its meaning is therefore closer to "the book of the month" than "the book of the world," where the book of world purports to be a single definitive account of the universe's foundation.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, there are many books of the month, depending on both the month, and on the community.

Second, the metaphor faces up to the difficulty of pinning down exactly who or what does the representing, and doesn't give in to this difficulty by building in to the analysis that representations pervasive in a culture must fundamentally be a collection of representations with the same content in the minds of individuals. Something like that idea may or may not in the end be correct. But it's the kind of metaphysical question that deserves its own discussion and defense. In addition, it seems plain that a culturally entrenched presumption involving social hierarchies, like the hierarchies that figure in our example, will leave different marks in the minds of different individuals, depending both on how they are positioned in those

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<sup>18</sup> Sider (2012)

hierarchies, and on how they end up responding to their positions. The metaphor of the mind of the world keeps the level of social analysis in view, without assimilating a cultural mind to a group mind, where there is a clearly defined group.

Finally, a third and perhaps most important advantage of the metaphor is that it provides a language for analyzing the epistemic relationships between a culturally entrenched presumption and its recapitulation in the mind of an individual. No matter how the metaphor of the mind of the world is unpacked, the same question arises: what epistemic impact do culturally entrenched presumptions have on the minds of individuals?

This question crystallizes the problem of culturally normal belief. My solution to the problem begins by analyzing the notion of well-foundedness more closely.

### **5.1 The social frame**

As was noted earlier, well-foundedness is an explanatory notion. A belief is well-founded only if the factors that explain why the subject has it also bestow it with epistemically good-making features.

When we ask what factors explain why Whit has his racial attitude, we can address this question using a set of contrasts. Following [Garfinkel \(1981\)](#), I'll call the contrasts a *frame*.<sup>19</sup> If we want to focus on Whit's acculturation, we can ask:

#### **Individual frame**

Why does Whit (as opposed to someone else) absorb the presumption?

Why does Whit absorb the entrenched presumption, instead of denying it?

To answer these questions, we look to the history of Whit. According to the explanatory frames, one of the epistemically relevant processes seems to be: testimony.

We can also ask what factors explain why the racial attitudes Whit ends up with are available for him to form in the first place. Here we're asking for an explanation in what we might call a social frame, rather than an individual frame:

#### **Social frame**

Why does Whit end up with those presumptions, rather than other presumptions?

To answer this question, we look not to the history of Whit, but to the history of the world. Whit absorbs those presumptions because those presumptions, rather than other ones, are culturally entrenched. They are presumed by the mind of the world. And because they are so presumed, the mind of the world can testify to their truth. It is built in to the notion of

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<sup>19</sup> The contrastive approach to explanation is employed by [Garfinkel \(1981\)](#) to highlight the differences between social and individual-level explanations.

testimony from the mind of the world that it testifies only to presumptions that are already culturally entrenched. Such testimony therefore cannot explain why any such presumptions are culturally entrenched.

The social frame helps us see the role of the mind of the world in maintaining Whit's attitude once he has it. As a thought experiment, consider someone who duplicates Whit's attitudes and dispositions, psychological and otherwise, without having been acculturated. Like Donald Davidson's Swampman, SwampWhit pops into existence as the exact duplicate of someone else.<sup>20</sup>

Assuming that SwampWhit's lack of history wouldn't preclude him (in principle) from having contentful psychological states at all (and hence from duplicating Whit's), we can see how Whit's social surroundings would leave SwampWhit just as much at ease with his attitudes, as they leave Whit at ease with his.<sup>21</sup>

Here one might object that nothing from the mind of the world is needed to reassure Whit and SwampWhit in their beliefs. Instead, all that's needed is a belief in their own minds: the belief that it is socially normal to believe that black men are dangerous. That belief is arguably well-founded, unlike the presumption in the mind of the world. So when it comes to maintaining Whit's belief, the social frame drops out, according to the objection.

In reply to this objection, there are modes of maintaining beliefs in individuals that do not operate via any mediating beliefs of theirs. Suppose that in Whit's world a series of new laws are passed that establish surveillance and extend the apparatus of punishment, and that these laws are designed to apply specifically to neighborhoods where young people live who are black and poor. In order for such laws and defenses of them to reassure Whit in holding his attitude, he need not have a mediating belief. The laws and official public defenses of them could reasonably lead Whit to strengthen his mediating belief. But for them to contribute to the ease with which Whit holds his attitude, Whit would not need to have the mediating belief already, nor would he not need to acquire it. He might, for instance, fear that the attitudes are not normal or widespread. So their role in maintaining the belief is not screened off by Whit's mediating belief.

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<sup>20</sup> Davidson (1987).

<sup>21</sup> This assumption puts me on the side of *internalists* about mental content, who hold that Swampman could have at least some of the same contentful mental states as the man he duplicated, as opposed to *externalists* about mental content, who hold that there are at least some contentful mental states that the man Swampman duplicated had, but that Swampman can't have. Internalism about content is often said to fit naturally with epistemic internalism, which holds the factors that determine how rational a subject's mental state is supervene on that subject's brain. Since I am arguing that social factors beyond the brain make a difference to the epistemic status of some of those mental states, my assumption for the sake of argument only makes things easier for an opponent who holds that both Whit and SwampWhit's racial attitudes are well-founded.

To argue that the role of the mind of the world keeps Whit's attitude ill-founded, what's needed is a bridge principle between the maintenance and ill-founding. What might the bridge principle be, if there is one? We can formulate it as a premise of the following argument. It is premise P2 in the following argument.

## 6. The Argument from Maintenance

### The argument from maintenance

P1. The mind of world's presumption is the main factor that explains how Whit's attitude is maintained (rather than given up).

P2. If mental state M1 is the main factor that explains how mental state M2 is maintained, and M1 is ill-founded, then M2 is ill-founded.

P3. The mind of the world's presumption is ill-founded. Conclusion: Whit's attitude is ill-founded.

According to the argument from maintenance, an attitude is ill-founded if the culturally entrenched presumption that it largely maintains it is formed epistemically badly.

So far, I have made a case for premise P1 by describing a scenario in which P1 is plausible. In the rest of this section I argue for the bridge principle (premise P2) and premise P3.

Premise P2 resembles a principle about epistemic basing. If M2 is based on M1, then if M1 is ill-founded, M2 will be ill-founded as well, modulo washing out. In the paradigm cases of basing within an individual's mind, basing is in part an explanatory relationship. If M2 is based on M1, then the fact that a subject S is in M1 helps explain the fact that S is in M2, and this explanatory role also affects M2's epistemic status.

As stated, the antecedent of the bridge principle P2 does not pin down the kind of explanations that would support its consequent. It is plain that there are some such explanatory relations—even if ultimately they cannot be specified without taking epistemic relevance as already understood.<sup>22</sup> For instance, suppose M1 is my belief that you'll cheerfully clean up any small mess I make this week, and M2 is my belief that you like to clean. It is easy to picture how M2 to could control M1, due to my sensitivity to the rational relationships between my beliefs. This sensitivity would explain why, when I sadly learn that you don't like to clean anymore, I give up my original belief that you'll cheerfully clean up any small mess that I make this week. And if my belief that you like to clean was the ill-founded product of wishful thinking, then my belief that you'll cheerfully clean up my small messes this week is ill-founded, too.

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<sup>22</sup> Useful discussions of the basing relation are [Evans \(2013\)](#) and [Korcz \(1997, 2015\)](#).

The argument from maintenance assumes that an analogous kind of sensitivity applies to the relationship between the mind of the world's presumptions, and the attitudes of smaller individuals such as Whit that recapitulate those presumptions. And it is easy to find an analogy. Just as my assumption that you like to clean reassures me that you'll cheerfully clean up, in ways that might show up to me only if I lost the assumption, the social normality of Whit's attitudes play a similarly reassuring role. If the social norms in their milieu changed, in any of the ways a political movement might endeavor to bring about, then Whit might start to see their attitudes and the behaviors that express them in a different light, and they would feel less normal.

If the epistemology of maintenance mirrors the epistemology of testimony by the mind of the world, one might object that if the mother's testimony doesn't transmit the ill-foundedness of the mother's belief, then the mind of the world's testimony doesn't transmit its ill-foundedness to Whit.

In reply, we should distinguish between two potential roles for testimony. First, testimony could be a model of the social mechanisms that enable individuals to absorb presumptions in the seamless way that Whit does. I think it's a poor model for that. To analyze the mechanisms that enable seamless absorption of outlooks, we have to look to social practices as well as to discursive "messages" in advertising, narratives, and other discursively structured cultural products (a point emphasized by Haslanger). If that stance is correct, then any objection that recommends treating testimony from the mind in the world the same way as interpersonal testimony will misfire.

Second, a different role for testimony is a model of the epistemic features of the interface between an individual and the mind of the world. This model is most directly subject to the objection that interpersonal testimony and testimony from the mind of the world should receive the same analysis, and that this analysis should follow the idea that interpersonal testimony does not transmit ill-foundedness.

In reply, there are major disanalogies between the epistemic features of interpersonal testimony and the epistemic features of the interface between individuals and the mind of the world. Suppose we grant for the sake of argument that in the interpersonal case, testimony does not transmit ill-foundedness. Even if this position is correct, the supposedly epistemic good-making features that bestow well-foundedness on the beliefs formed by accepting the mother's testimony do not carry over to the outlook Whit absorbs from the mind of the world.

First, the mother is making an assertion whose explicit purpose is to inform her children (indeed, she is concerned that they don't drink tainted water). In contrast, the mind of the world has no special concern for Whit. And its testimony takes many forms that are not well-modeled by assertion, such as advertising and fictional narratives that are meant to be realistic. And some modes of the acculturation are better modeled by directives than assertions, such as the institutions and practices related to criminal justice mentioned two paragraphs back.

Second, lies by individuals are typically easy to detect, and going with that, truth-telling by individuals is an engine of interpersonal cooperation. These features might be thought to bestow well-foundedness on beliefs that accept other people's testimony in many interpersonal contexts. In contrast, social distortions and inaccuracies such as those found in the rationalization of hierarchies often stabilize a social order and this stabilizing role prevents them from coming out into the open.

Putting these considerations together, even if accepting the mother's testimony that the tap water is unsafe to drink yields a well-founded belief, that conclusion does not weaken the argument from maintenance. If the epistemology of interpersonal testimony prevents the mother's testimony from transmitting ill-foundedness to the beliefs her children form when they believe their mother, the factors that plausibly prevent this transmission are not found in the interface between an individual and the mind of the world.

### **7. Are Presumptions in the Mind of the World Epistemically Appraisable?**

For Whit's attitude to inherit the ill-foundedness from the presumption in the mind of the world, that presumption has to be epistemically appraisable. I'm going to take it for granted that if the presumption in the mind of the world that Whit receives as testimony is epistemically appraisable, then it is ill-founded. So I won't argue that it is ill-founded from the ground up. The part of premise P3 that needs most defense is the idea that a culturally entrenched presumption could be epistemically appraisable at all. So I will focus there.

In defense of this idea, here are three types of examples of culturally entrenched presumptions, and the factors that seem to make them well-founded or ill-founded.

A first type of example involves concepts. Consider the concept of weight, according to which everything material has a weight (when it's on earth). Material things are things with mass. Because this concept of weight is the dominant concept of weight in modern cultures, there is in many places a culturally entrenched presumption that everything material has a weight. By the time one learns this fact in science class, it already rings true.

The culturally entrenched presumption that everything material has a weight seems well-founded. Arguably, what makes it well-founded includes the fact that the concept of weight formulated by Newton and Euler emerged because of discoveries that justifiably overturned previous conceptions of weight, according to which weight was an optional property of material things, and some things were too small or insignificant to have weight.<sup>23</sup>

A second type of example involves rationalizations. Max Weber in his 1918 essay "Politics as a Vocation" considers a war-weary soldier who becomes unable to fight anymore because of

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<sup>23</sup> For discussion of the process by which this concept of weight emerged, see Carey (1987).

exhaustion, but rationalizes his collapse by portraying it, to himself and to others, as the product of a reasoned and reasonable decision:

[S]omebody under the frightfulness of war collapses psychologically, and instead of saying it was just too much, he feels the need of legitimizing his war weariness to himself by saying "I could not bear it because I had to fight for a morally bad cause".

The exhausted war-weary individual ends up with a belief that the cause was morally bad, not because of a moral insight, but by a rationalization of his feeling. Whether his belief is true or false, it is formed epistemically badly.

Weber finds an analog of self-righteousness in nation-states. He describes rationalizations of defeat (on the part of the victor) in the form of beliefs that a defeated nation deserved to be defeated.

It is no different if after a victorious war the victor in undignified righteousness claims "I won because I was right" . . . A nation forgives if its interests have been damaged, but no nation forgives if its honor has been offended, especially by a bigoted self-righteousness.

The attribution to a political association of a reactive attitude such as self-righteousness is a metaphor. The metaphor is apt, as the phenomenon Weber describes is easily recognizable in international politics. Even without unpacking the metaphor's metaphysical underpinning, we can make sense of the idea that a culturally entrenched presumption is ill-founded.

A third type of example involves institutional practices. In many places in the world where there are water faucets, the presumption that the water is safe to drink from the faucet is entrenched. It is entrenched in social environments in which people regularly drink from the faucet, and do not go out of their way to brush their teeth or wash their fruit with bottled water.

Usually, when water is safe to drink from faucets, it is safe to drink by design, thanks to the system of water collection and filtering that was built on the basis of knowledge about how to make water safe to drink. In these cases, the presumption that it's safe to drink water from the faucets is culturally entrenched because of the normal practices of drinking tap water. And the presumption is well-founded, because that practice was established using knowledge of how to purify water.

A different example involving institutional practices highlights an entrenched presumption that seems ill-founded, rather than well-founded. Consider one of Frederick Douglass's remarks about slavery made in 1881, during the era of Reconstruction after the US Civil War:

the slave master had a direct interest in discrediting the personality of those he held as property. Every man who had a thousand dollars so invested had a thousand reasons for

painting the black man as only fit for slavery. [. . .] The holders of twenty hundred million dollars' worth of property in human chattels procured the means of influencing press, pulpit, and politician, and through these instrumentalities, they belittled our virtues and magnified our vices, and have made us odious in the eyes of the world. . .<sup>24</sup>

The world has eyes, according to Douglass's metaphor, which complements the metaphor of the mind of the world. The presumption that "the black man is only fit for slavery," and the human hierarchies that go with it, became entrenched, Douglass suggests, because it was congruent with slavery. Alongside this political arrangement grew presumptions that painted those arrangements as justified by the nature of the people in the hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> The presumption is not prevalent because it is tracking the truth about human beings, or because it is the product of discoveries made (as Newton's and Euler's were) using methods that lead to well-founded beliefs. It became socially normal to believe that water from faucets was safe to drink, and it was socially normal under slavery to believe that blacks were only fit to be slaves.<sup>26</sup> Social normality is a poor guide to well-foundedness.

## 8. Conclusion: The scope of epistemic appraisal and reasonable-person standards

The problem of culturally normal belief arises when a culturally entrenched presumption is ill-founded, and it leaves its mark in an individual's mind in the form of a belief (or something that operates in the mind as a belief) that is not in any obvious way formed or maintained epistemically badly. I've argued that the epistemically bad-making features are not ultimately located in the individual's mind. Instead, those features are located where the social frame puts them: in the factors that account for the normality of what's presumed. If this solution is correct, epistemic norms of ill-foundedness and well-foundedness apply beyond individuals' beliefs.

This solution fits naturally with a solution to the problem of hijacked experience discussed earlier (section 1). Consider a defendant who attacks a man he believes is holding a gun. The man was holding something, and it looked to the defendant as if it was a gun. But suppose that the defendant's perceptual experience was influenced by an ill-founded unconscious presumption - at attitude like Whit's, for example - that men who in resemble the man the

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<sup>24</sup> Douglass (1881).

<sup>25</sup> Compare Stanton and Anthony (1848): "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her . . . He has created a false public sentiment, by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated but deemed of little account in man."

<sup>26</sup> The social normality is crystallized in the remarks of Mr Shelby, a character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe [1852]/1951): "I have agreed to sell Tom and Harry both; and I don't know why I am to be rated as if I were a monster for doing what everyone does every day." For discussion of presumptions about blacks that impacted free as well as enslaved blacks, see Kennedy, ch. 2.

defendant sees are dangerous. My solution to the problem of hijacked experience is that the perceptual experience can be irrational, and it can inherit this status from an irrational outlook.

Taken together, these solutions suggest that when reasonable person standards are used to adjudicate the legality of some forms of aggression, juries should consider more than just how well the aggressor responds to how things perceptually appear to them.

In US law and elsewhere, some forms of aggression, including lethal ones, are licensed both for citizens and for police, only if the defender reasonably believes that he or she is in imminent danger. Jurors are supposed to assess the reasonableness of the defendants' actions, in part by assessing the reasonableness of their beliefs. And to determine whether the belief is reasonable, they're supposed to consider what a reasonable person in the defendants' circumstances would believe about the imminence and the severity of the threat that they face. They are supposed to ask what would be reasonable to believe about those things, in those circumstances.

If the reasonableness of the person depended only on the interface between perception and subsequent belief, and not on psychological background of the perception, then the belief that the man is dangerous (because he is holding a gun) might seem to be reasonable. But if the gun-experience itself detracts from the subject's rational standing because it is inferred from an ill-founded presumption, then when we assess what a reasonable person under similar circumstances would believe, we need not hold constant their experience. A reasonable person in similar circumstances would not have an experience that they inferred from the ill-founded presumption. Just as a reasonable person's beliefs would be by and large shaped by reasonable presumptions, their perceptual experiences would be shaped that way as well.

This consequence is another way in which epistemic norms of ill-foundedness and well-foundedness apply beyond individuals' beliefs. Just as implicit attitudes may be the irrational extension of culturally entrenched distortions in how members of a society view one another, extending the distortion into perceptual experience can likewise extend its irrationality.

Both the problem of hijacked experience and the problem of culturally normal belief suggest new uses for the notions of ill-foundedness and well-foundedness. These notions help us locate the epistemic badness where it sometimes belongs: at the complicated interface between individuals and their cultural milieu.

To see how it illuminates the epistemic contours of this interface, consider the idea that Whit himself is epistemically fine, and only his environment is warped (Begby 2018). According to this position, all the epistemic badness in Whit's situation lies outside his own mind. This position has no resources to describe the epistemic impact on Whit of his social context.

Whit's friends and associates have the same racialized beliefs that Whit has. From their point of view, the ease with which Whit maintains his outlook, the utter lack of dissonance it causes in him, his unreflective comfort with in his outlook all belong to the trappings of reassurance by

which their beliefs are maintained. The workings of Whit's mind are part of the working of the cultural milieu, and they impact the minds of the people around him. They are not simply a landing pad on which social forces leave their mark. Similarly, the racialized presumption that Whit absorbs is entrenched in his milieu in part because other people's minds already operate the way his comes to operate. In these ways, what individual minds do is not epistemically separable from the bad-making features of his social environment.

Since Whit and his friends are in exactly the same epistemic situation when it comes to racialized beliefs, Begby's position entails that they are all thinking straight. The "warped environment" then has to be analyzed independently of the operation of their minds. This consequence robs us of the resources we need to analyze just what it is that's warped about the environment. Part of what's warped is that the outlook shared by Whit and his friends feels normal to them. It's part of their social habitus.

To study the epistemic impact of social contexts on individuals' minds, we need normative notions that can link the individual's mind with their social milieu. The normative notions of ill-foundedness and well-foundedness can draw this link, even though these notions have traditionally been employed in analytic epistemology only within the minds of individuals. My analysis of Whit's case takes an epistemic notion designed for analyzing belief-forming processes within an individual, and makes the case that it has a wider application to the interface between individuals' minds and their social context.

How does the notion of ill-foundedness extend to the interface between the individual's mind and her social milieu? When an individual's belief is ill-founded, it is formed or maintained epistemically badly. Ill-foundedness of a belief is distinct from failing to be supported by evidence – another dimension of justification. A person could have strong evidence for *p*, even when their belief that *p* is ill-founded. This could happen if the means by the belief is formed or maintained does not take account of the evidence. For instance, you might have strong evidence that I'm angry at you, and then your belief that I'm angry at you would be evidentially supported. But for all that, your belief could be ill-founded, because the reason you have it (and keep on having it) is that it's Wednesday, and every Wednesday you think that everyone is mad at you. Here, the factor that explains why you have the belief is independent of the evidence you have for it. The fact that ill-foundedness of a subject's belief is distinct from evidential support is one reason why we need more fine-grained set of notions than the term "justification" allows.

Similarly, Whit's racialized belief could be ill-founded, regardless of whether the evidence he has for it is good (because nothing in his social milieu pulls against it and some things seem to favor it), or bad (because it is spotty or misleading or impacted by moral factors), or some of each.

The point of the notion of ill-foundedness is to bring into focus the normative significance of the ways we have of forming and maintaining beliefs. At the level of cultural milieu, we can find a potential disconnect between evidence that counts in favor of a proposition, and the factors

that explain why that proposition is entrenched in a culture. It could have been part of a cultural myth that everything material has a weight, even before Euler and Newton made the discoveries that gave rise to our current concept of weight (on which nothing material is too small to be measured by weight). In that scenario, the culturally entrenched presumption could start out ill-founded, and end up well-founded.

So locating the epistemic badness entirely outside Whit removes resources we need to describe the epistemic impact on Whit of his social context. It's the difficulty of distinguishing the social from individual level in this type of case that makes the notions of blame and culpability so ill-suited as tools of normative analysis. The notion of ill-foundedness does better at connecting individuals to their social context.

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