GIVING THEM SOMETHING THEY CAN FEEL: ON THE STRATEGY OF SCIENTIZING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RACE AND RACISM

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ABSTRACT. There is an expansion of empirical research that at its core is an attempt to quantify the "feely" aspects of living in raced (and other stigmatized) bodies. This research is offered as part concession, part insistence on the reality of the "special" circumstances of living in raced bodies. While this move has the potential of making headway in debates about the character of racism and the unique nature of the harms of contemporary racism – through an analysis of stereotype threat research, micro-aggression research, and the reception of both discourses – I will argue that this scientization of the phenomenology of race and racism also stalls progress on the most significant challenges for the current conversation about race and racism: how to listen and how to be heard.

Keywords: race; racism; stereotype threat; microaggressions;
            epistemologies of ignorance

In the aftermath of George Zimmerman's acquittal for both second-degree murder and manslaughter in the death of black teenager Trayvon Martin, Questlove – percussionist for The Roots and bandleader for *The Tonight Show* Band – wrote the poignant and aptly named piece, "Trayvon Martin and I Ain't Shit" (Thompson 2013) expressing just how bad racism feels:

> I often tell cute, self-deprecating celebrity run-in stories that end with my own 'pie in the face' moment. But rarely do I share stories of a more serious nature, another genre of 'pie in the face' moments, mostly because in the age of social media, most people are quick to dismiss my tales as #FirstWorldProblems. But I can't tell you how many times a year I'm in a serious situation, only to hear the magic words 'Oh, wait … Questlove?' Hey guys, it's Questlove. 'We're so sorry, you can go!' Like, five to seven times a year, a

> night ending in the words 'Thank God for that Afro or we'd never have recognized you' happens to me.
>
> I'm in scenarios all the time in which primitive, exotic-looking me – six-foot-two, 300 pounds, uncivilized Afro, for starters – finds himself in places where people who look like me aren't normally found. I mean, what can I do? I have to be somewhere on Earth, correct? In the beginning – let's say 2002, when the gates of 'Hey, Ahmir, would you like to come to [swanky elitist place]?' opened – I'd say 'no,' mostly because it's been hammered in my DNA to not 'rock the boat,' which means not making 'certain people' feel uncomfortable.
>
> I mean, that is a crazy way to live. Seriously, imagine a life in which you think of other people's safety and comfort first, before your own. You're programmed and taught that from the gate. It's like the opposite of entitlement.

Here, he apologetically details the burden of managing what Erving Goffman (1986) calls a spoiled identity. His is what Paul Taylor (2004) would identify as one of the persistent narratives that unifies black folk: the story of how racism hunts you, haunts you, no matter what you do. In the time after the verdict, the internet spawned a number of these sorts of narratives[1] – black men and women articulating the pervasive sense that they were both objectified and invisible, the profound sense that they really didn't count or at least counted less, and experiences of a mainstay of contemporary racism: official and unofficial racial profiling. "Brave" celebrities like Questlove often had their narratives met with thanks and endearments, but like those from the less famous, these narratives were just as often met with combinations of doubt and minimization.

Folks positioned in the social structure to be beneficiaries of white supremacy unapologetically question or flat out deny the claims that the way some black man was treated (even in a scenario where the black man was present and the interlocutor was not) was racist. Specific subtle instances of racism, of the sort Questlove alludes to, are dismissed as oversensitivity or paranoia on the person of color's part. The less strident responses don't deny the charge of racism or the experience of the victim, but rather suggest that "this type of thing" – indications, expressions, and manifestations of racial hatred and scorn – is no longer a "real" problem in society but instead just the undertakings of a fringe set of wackadoos, those so far outside the statistical norm that we can't be expected to be accountable for them. Thus, the expression of outrage and frustration is an appropriate plea but directed to the *wrong* audience – "We're the good guys, you're preaching to the choir here; you should squelch that and save it for the bad guys." The persistence of this experience – the experience of black testimony about the systematic nature and excruciating painfulness of racism being dismissed, denied, and

minimized even when that testimony comes from recognized experts[2] – has led to the creation of a counteroffensive pathway for the discourse on race and racism: the scientization of the phenomenology[3] of racism.

The central claim of this essay is this: there is an expansion of empirical research that at its core is an attempt to recapture the feely aspects of living in raced (and other stigmatized) bodies in a form that has the possibility of being understood as credible in virtue of how it reflects standards for empirical science.[4] This research is offered as part concession, part insistence on the reality of the "special" circumstances of living in raced bodies. It reflects a tipping point in the conversation[5] about race, hastened by social networking and its mobilization of marginalized groups. While this research has the potential to make headway in debates about the character of racism and the unique nature of the harms of contemporary racism, it does so in a way that is ambivalent about its own project. It explicitly invests in the quantifying of the harms of racism, while implicitly insisting upon the fact that racism hurts as well as harms and that this fact *must* matter.[6]

This essay will proceed, in section I, by analyzing the discourse on stereotype threat and highlighting its strengths as credible "evidence" of the harms of racism. To illustrate its value as a translator of the experience of racism, I will use it as a clarifying lens through which to view Questlove's narrative of his experience. Next, in section II, I do a similar analysis of microaggressions research, noting how its perceived weakness as a discourse has resulted in a very different reception. In contrast to the fairly universal embracing of stereotype threat research, microaggression research has met with significant resistance despite the fact that it too provides a useful lens of analysis for experiences like Questlove's. In section III, I will argue that the difference in how stereotype threat and microaggression research are received reveals a flaw in the strategy of trying to translate or reframe the testimony of folks of color into more "credible" forms. Specifically, this strategy concedes to what Kristie Dotson (2012) has called a "culture of justification." I will argue that making that concession disguises the "inverted epistemology" that prevents any testimony to the hurts (and by extension the harms) of racism from ever being credible enough (Mills 1997). Stereotype threat and microaggressions will ultimately still be treated as special pleading ("See, we told you racism was hurting us") until we address the inverted epistemology head on. Finally, I will suggest that despite the value of stereotype threat and microaggression research in making the testimony of people of color credible, they have an equally important value that has nothing to do with credibility.

The last twenty years has seen an explosion of analysis aimed at chronicling and quantifying the more subtle aspects of the experience of racism. I will focus on two of the most influential approaches in this genre: stereotype threat and microaggression research. Each perspective is experiencing a peak in popularity and influence as evidenced by each having spawned focused websites aimed at dynamically cataloging the phenomena and the ongoing analysis of the phenomena[7] and by an explosion of recent research on each that includes noteworthy books by prominent leading figures.[8] While their paths are superficially similar, the reception of the claims made by research on microaggressions is profoundly different than to those made by stereotype threat research. While stereotype threat is all but universally well-received as a model theoretical posit, microaggressions are found to have severe limitations; the difference in the reception of these two approaches is symptomatic of the ongoing resistance to people of color's testimony about the hurt and harms of racism. I will proceed, in this section and the next, by comparing stereotype threat and microaggression research, highlighting the strengths (or weaknesses) that lend them (or steal from them) their credibility. I will then test each discourse's ability to successfully incorporate a narrative like the one offered by Questlove.

Stereotype threat was first documented by Claude Steele and Josh Aronson (1995) in a series of studies that showed that a lower performance on the verbal portion of the GRE could be induced in a subject group of black undergraduates at University of Michigan when the test was characterized as an intelligence test. Since that original study, hundreds of additional studies have examined and revealed the dynamics of stereotype threat.[9] Stereotype threat experiments have a typical form: Some test group (usually defined by social demographics, e.g. women, blacks, Asians, or more specifically, white men, homosexual men etc.) is tested on some skill. Social group identification is invoked – sometimes subtly, other times stereotypes are fully articulated. Finally, the skill performance of the test group and some control group – that either has a different social identity or has not been subjected to the invocation – are compared. Stereotype threat is confirmed when the test group is shown to have performed less well than the control group. In short, a negative stereotype made manifest to its targets at crucial moments causes them to conform to the stereotype, hence the name. One favorite explanation for stereotype threat is that the additional cognitive effort – managing aroused stress, additional monitoring of performance, and suppressing negative thoughts and emotions – inhibits performance on the task.[10] Stereotype threat research is, thus, evidence that the products of racism – negative stereotypes made salient explicitly or implicitly – create an additional obstacle to the success of people

of color. It proves that people of color are not just hurt but also substantially harmed by racism even when it is not violent, even when it is subtle, even when the harm is unintended.

The hundreds of studies that have been done on stereotype threat have revealed the phenomenon to be a model in its potential to provide credible proof of the impact of racism. Two qualities in particular stand out in explaining how stereotype threat is exemplary evidence for the injury of racism. Research on stereotype threat has proven it to be *robust* and its applications have been quite *targeted*. When I say that stereotype threat is robust, I mean to point to the fact that a variety of demographic groups (including white men) have been shown to be subject to stereotype threat on a variety of skills tasks.[11] One just need locate the right stereotype. Aronson et al. (1999) were able to provoke a threat response on a difficult math test in white males with high SAT scores in math by pointing to the tendency of Asians to score higher on math tests. Stone et al. (2002) were able to provoke a threat response on a golf skills task by framing the test as a test of natural athletic ability. Women have been made to demonstrate reduced negotiation skills; gay men have been made to demonstrate reduced childcare skills; people with mental illness were made to perform poorly on tests of analytic ability; people with lower socioeconomic status (SES), Hispanics, and women have been made to demonstrate reduced math skills.[12] This robustness plays a crucial role in defining stereotype threat data as *evidence* rather than anecdote, *viable testimony* as opposed to "whining."

The way stereotype research has been applied further cements its status as a credible account of the injuries to marginalized identities. The kind of careful and controlled studies in stereotype threat make very targeted predictions most of which are about performance on various kinds of intellectual tasks, especially on tests of math and analytic reasoning skills.[13] Not surprisingly, research on stereotype threat has had its greatest impact in the science of teaching and learning. Even Steele's narrative about how he came to discover stereotype threat lends itself to this use. Steele was interested in accounting for why the performance of black students at the University of Michigan – specifically their grade point averages – did not accord with what would be predicted by their performance on standardized tests like the ACT college readiness assessment and the SAT Reasoning Test. The problem Steele was looking for had to be something that was occurring as part of the educational setting at the university (Steele 2010). Much stereotype threat research is invested in various ways in monitoring and improving classroom conditions for vulnerable groups. Much of the earnest investigation into the mechanisms of stereotype threat and nearly all of the research that strategizes how to dissipate, undermine, and minimize stereotype threat are classroom oriented. One of the strategies that is taken to show the most promise –

emphasizing incremental views of intelligence – is especially (possibly only) suited for use in educational settings (Good et al. 2003, Good et al. 2008).

Though stereotype threat research demonstrates a broad scope – it affects a variety of skill domains including intellectual (math and analytic reasoning), emotional (social awareness, childcare, racial sensitivity), physical (athletic), and tasks that combine these domains like negotiation – the body of research as a whole largely concerns the domain of education, more precisely classroom contexts. Classroom contexts are more able to mimic the circumstances of controlled experiments: subjects are in the exact same physical context, somewhat isolated from external and uncontrolled circumstances, and what they are exposed to can be very scrupulously controlled. This means that action on the conclusions demonstrated in research settings can, with minimal controversy, be applied in "real world" contexts.

Combined with the ongoing critical projects – research that shows that there is worrisome variation in what is necessary to produce the effect or how pronounced the effect is, research that argues that the performance gap between blacks and whites or men and women cannot be accounted for by stereotype threat – the robust and targeted nature of the body of stereotype threat research make its conclusions seem highly credible. The remaining question is how effectively can it translate reports about the mental labor and anguish necessary for *being* as a person of color into empirical data. Can it capture Questlove's race-based suffering? Consider this:

> My friends know that I hate parking lots and elevators, not because they are places that danger could occur, but it's a prime place in which someone of my physical size can be seen as a dangerous element. One night, I get in the elevator, and just as the door closes this beautiful woman gets on. So I press my floor number, and I ask her, 'What floor, ma'am?' (Yes, I say 'ma'am,' because … sigh, anyway.) She says nothing, stands in the corner. Mind you, I just discovered the Candy Crush app, so if anything, I'm the rude one because I'm more obsessed with winning this particular level than anything else. *There's no way I can be a threat to a woman this fine if I'm buried deep in this game – so surely she feels safe….*
>
> I thought she was on my floor because she never acknowledged my floor request... So door opens and I flirt, 'Ladies first.' She says, 'This is not my floor.' Then I assume she is missing her building card, so I pulled my card out to try to press her floor yet again. She says, 'That's okay.' Then it hit me: 'Oh God, she purposely held that information back.' The door closed. I laughed at it. Sort of.

In this narrative, Questlove is clearly struggling to disconfirm the stereotypes that define him as a dangerous predator.[14] He focuses on signifiers of politeness ("ma'am," "Ladies first," offering assistance); he buries himself in his

game to appear uninterested. Of course, because he initially misses the cue that she doesn't want him to know what floor she lives on, he appears extra interested in that information when he inquires again. He has missed aspects of the context that his training in management of being a black man requires him to notice. He has failed to appear as an innocuous, helpful neighbor as he intended and instead appears suspiciously interested in knowing the location of an apparently vulnerable woman. Establishing that an experience like Questlove's falls into the domain of stereotype threat would lend his narrative considerable credibility. Before it can fall into such a domain, however, there is another credibility hurdle to overcome.

Questlove's experience while clearly modeling the features of stereotype threat – his race is made salient to him in a context where stereotypes predict certain behaviors from him and despite efforts not to, he nonetheless confirms those stereotypes – is far too dissimilar from experimental contexts; the context is too real. Without the restrictions of a controlled experiment (or a setting that is very much like one) we can't be sure what causes his difficulties. Maybe he is just bad at reading social cues; maybe, as his inner dialogue suggests, he just *is* a "walking rape nightmare" regardless of his best intentions. Part of the virtue of the targeted nature of stereotype threat research is that it focuses on what can be rigorously demonstrated empirically; it focuses on what is most credible. Questlove's experience doesn't quite fit that ideal mold.

II

Research on and conceptualization of *microaggressions* actually predates stereotype threat research: the term was first dubbed in 1977 by Chester M. Pierce and his colleagues in an experiment aimed at documenting proracist attitudes in commercials.[15] More recently, Derald Wing Sue (2010) has clarified and expanded the notion making clear that people can be subjected to microaggressions based on gender, sexual orientation, disability, class and religion as well as race. Microaggressions, according to Sue, are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities… intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue 2007, 273). He further clarifies by identifying three forms of microaggressions: *microassaults*, explicit, intentional verbal and nonverbal derogations; *microinsults*, more subtle communications of rudeness or insensitivity that demean racial heritage or identity and are often unintentional; and *microinvalidations*, communications that negate or nullify the thoughts and/or experiences of people of color (274). Sue's goal was to enlist the concept of microaggressions in the project of explicitly classifying the subtle and nebulous phenomena associated with the

covert racism that is particular to contemporary Western societies. Micro-aggressions are shown to cause mental and physical health problems as well as impeding the task performance of people of color (Sue et al. 2008; Clark et al. 1999). This is all in addition to the *experiences* of being excluded, unwanted, invalidated and rejected. Microaggression research catalogs the variety of subtle ways that people of color are derogated, demeaned, and dismissed. It also proves that these pervasive communications have lasting negative effects that are both material – foreclosing opportunities for people of color – and phenomenological – significantly impacting what it *feels* like to live as a person of color.

Let us again consider Questlove's experience and ask whether or not microaggressions can successfully capture it. Microaggressions abound in Questlove's narrative. What Sue (2007, 275) would call a microinvalidation in the category "alien in one's own land" is in effect. Who he thinks he is isn't relevant; that he's at home isn't relevant. As a man of color, Questlove isn't even free to *just be* in his own building. His earnest internal dialogue that reveals a sensitive, generous, and genuine person is not relevant to the issue of whether he can/should be read as "dangerous." The microinsult of "assumption of criminality" is also on display. Her withholding of information that would be used to be helpful clearly communicates that she believes that even giving him her floor number might put her in jeopardy, that he is something to be feared and avoided. Questlove's experience fits perfectly with much of the research on microaggressions. In fact, the research on microaggressions is full of stories just like this one. This feature of microaggressions – its apparently uncritical reception of the testimony of people of color – has been a source of controversy in this literature. If stereotype threat research is a model of *credible* evidence of the harms of contemporary racism, micro-aggression research is the red-headed stepchild.

The differences between how the research on stereotype threat and micro-aggression would integrate Questlove's narrative and how that alters each discourse's perceived credibility reveals the missing widget in the machine that is meant to turn the testimony of people of color into recognized credible evidence of the harms of racism. Let's now take a closer look at micro-aggression research's credibility problems.

Chester Pierce's own account of his initial study portends the struggles with credibility that current research on microaggressions faces (Pierce 1977). The experimenters attempted to predict how people of color were likely to be represented in commercials if those commercials reflected, reinforced, and/or promoted racist ideology. Using a practical theory of racism developed by Pierce as a theoretical foundation, the researchers then made predictions as to how blacks would be presented (that blacks would be seen less frequently than animals, seen to eat more frequently than whites, have less involvement

in family life, work for wages, etc.). Then two researchers (one black, one white), coded the commercials, compared their analyses, and resolved disputes between the two in order to determine if the predictions were confirmed or not. Pierce is sensitive to the subjective elements of this experiment and so begins the reporting on this research with this caveat,

> The first step in this sort of experiment is the elaboration of statements of expected behavior. The subtlety, accuracy, and meticulousness of these statements depends on both the perception and theory of the observer….The recognition of this concept, though seemingly *antiscientific* (emphasis added), is of special concern to the execution and interpretation of racial studies. From the view of the authors, an interracial team, almost all that is taught and believed by American citizens about racism suffers seriously because of the failure to do studies from the viewpoint and theory of minority members. The study to be described is based on a theory of racism by a black (Pierce 1977, 62).

In this statement, Pierce fingerposts the challenge facing microaggressions research and, by extension, the entire enterprise of trying to use empirical models to boost the credibility of the first person reports by people of color about the harms of racism. At the end of the day, whether or not this research will be perceived as credible will be determined by two things: 1) the degree to which it relies on testimony from people of color and 2) how credible the target audience finds such testimony independently of this research.

It turns out that microaggression research lacks both the robustness and the targetedness of stereotype threat research. These flaws correlate with the two criteria for perceived credibility above. I'll discuss the lack of robustness first. Like Pierce, Sue's initial focus was on racial microaggressions; for this reason, it was criticized as problematically narrow. It was only later – in his comprehensive analysis of microaggressions (Sue 2010) – that he began to discuss and analyze microaggressions based on gender, sexuality, disability, etc. While this analysis of microaggressions is clearly more robust than its predecessors, there is one noteworthy group whose experience seems to be excluded from the discourse: class privileged white men. Though the definition doesn't require it, microaggression research seems to presuppose an asymmetry in the capacity to perpetrate a microaggression; the victims of microaggressions are always members of socially disadvantaged groups and the perpetrators are always relatively privileged.[16] Outside the academy, the failure to theorize a symmetrical injury against those *with* race, class, gender, etc., privilege is a glaring exclusion. Microaggression research is found to be suspicious because, unlike stereotype threat research, it does not offer instances where men or white folk or the rich experience microaggressions qua their identities as men, white folk, or rich.

The Wikipedia page (and the related "Talk" page)[17] on microaggressions is revealing especially when compared to Wikipedia's page on stereotype threat. When I first viewed the Wikipedia page on microaggressions it was flagged for being biased (its "neutrality" was "disputed"). Upon reviewing the article, I agreed with the assessment. It was filled with uncited criticisms of microaggressions and subtle and not so subtle allusions to the invalidity of the entire enterprise. Upon reviewing the Talk page, however, those were not the reasons the article was flagged.[18] A large portion of the discussion of bias referred to the lack of a discussion of corresponding phenomenon to which white folk are subjected. It was also described as "ridiculous" and a "tool invented by white race-panderers for use by minority race-hustlers." My contention is *not* that there were no problems with the article. What interests me is the nature of the discussion of those problems. Compared to the stereotype threat page, the discussion was contentious, polemical, and populated by a much larger number of unsigned comments. The heart of my concern is captured by this comment (Wikipedia 2014a):

> **Wikipedian 1:** This whole article comes across as ludicrous to me. It seems to have no credibility to me primarily because it is completely one-sided. I am on the receiving end of both personal and institutional 'microaggressive treatment' all the time. I think that at least half if not more of the people you talked to would think that this is a ridiculous article – whether or not there are studies – which are notoriously manipulable – [sic] support them. Could it be that some people, dare I say blacks or Hispanics, might be more than a little hypersensitive?
> **Wikipedian 2:** Could it be that some people, dare I say straight white cisgendered men, might be more than a little insensitive to the experiences of people unlike themselves.

The "robustness" that marks stereotype threat research as credible but that microaggression research cannot quite achieve is of a particular sort. Up to now, microaggression research fails to theorize microaggressions *against* those who are generally or relatively privileged. The credibility earned by being robust requires not just a generally broad and inclusive explanatory scope; it requires inclusions that reflect (or are at least commensurate with) the perspectives and viewpoints of very particular groups: those at the top of the social hierarchy. Without this particular robustness, one is forced to rely on testimony from people of color.

Microaggression research is also not targeted in the same way that stereotype threat research is. Stereotype threat research is able to impose the structure of experimental conditions onto the real world and thereby contain racism and its effects. It gives us specific tools to address specific conditions. Microaggression research seems to work in the opposite way. The research is

infected by the loose unstructured nature of reality, of painful human experience. It seems that almost anything is a potential posit of microaggression research and that makes the credibility of the source – the testimony of people of color – that much more important. Without the kind of targeted applications you find in stereotype threat research, one is forced to *trust* the testimony of people of color.

<center>III</center>

In his *The Racial Contract* (1997), Charles Mills articulates an "epistemology of ignorance" that is a function of participation in a racially structured hierarchy that systematically makes and maintains racial groups and the material advantages and disadvantages that go along with membership within them. This is an advance on previous arguments that beneficiaries of racism are willfully ignorant of the ways that they have unjustly benefitted at the expense of others.[19] The notion of willful ignorance seems to run afoul of the logic of knowing. In *trying* not to know something, it seems you are hopelessly connected to and aware of the very knowing that you are trying to avoid. An epistemology of ignorance resolves this incoherence. The problem is not with some particular bit of knowledge, but rather with one's *way* of knowing. A corrupted system of knowledge can produce semi-truths and falsehoods without thrusting the knower onto the dilemma of trying not to know.

My contention is that despite best intentions and real contributions to clarifying the features of contemporary racism, both stereotype threat and microaggression research have become entangled in a corrupted system of knowledge that produces semi-truths while disguising its own corruption. Specifically, what superficially appears to be a neutral lens of analysis by which the discourse on racism can be improved – increasing the credibility of testimony about the hurts of racism by translating it into data on the harms of racism – actually serves to disguise and further entrench the idea that the people of colors' first-person accounts of the hurts and harms of racism are *not* credible.[20] In order to reveal this particular inverted epistemology, I will take advantage of insights about "cultures of justification" gleaned from Kristie Dotson's "How Is This Paper Philosophy?" (2012).

A culture of justification, according to Dotson, is one in which participation in the knowledge making practice requires that one's position be made congruent with acceptable norms (6). As a consequence, such a culture places high value on the endeavor to demonstrate legitimacy, the process of proving that your position is commensurate with the accepted norms. The ability to demonstrate legitimacy presupposes that there *are* commonly-held norms of acceptance and that those norms are relevant to any and all knowledge making projects (7). In such a culture, the project of proving that your

<center>101</center>

perspective accords with some "received" standard is valuable *in itself.* It isn't simply valuable as a means to the end of establishing a more secure knowledge base. Demonstrating the harmony of your beliefs becomes *the* project. With this demonstration of congruence foregrounded, made inherently valuable, the possibility that there is no set of commonly held norms that are relevant in every case slides far into the background. The criticism of the purported common norms becomes a project for another day.

Stereotype threat and microaggression research are legitimation projects. They are endeavors to demonstrate that narratives like Questlove's can be represented in a form that respects the community standards for credible knowledge claims. In this way, folks of color are not just asking to be trusted. They are willing to "prove" the truth of their claims. They will embed their narratives in respected scientific procedures and conform to the neutral standards of those practices. Stereotype threat and microaggression research will be evaluated in accord with independent, shared, always-pertinent standards – robustness and being targeted. In this way, sad stories will be transformed into science. If they can't be, they must be rejected as unconvincing.

Dotson goes on to articulate how cultures of justification can manifest, become informed by, and disguise systematic exclusions. Exclusions are positions that cannot or will not be legitimated; they may in fact be excluded from even the possibility of engaging in legitimation projects. Some perspectives are excluded as exceptional. These perspectives are excluded despite meeting supposed shared norms usually as a result of the historical privileging of a competing perspective (12). Some perspectives are excluded because they are incongruent; they do not share the "accepted norms" or those norms are not relevant to their project (13).

The analysis of stereotype threat and microaggression research shows that, at the end of the day, the testimonies of people of color to their experience of the hurts and harms of racism are still excluded perspectives. While it is sometimes possible to demonstrate the illegitimacy of that exclusion – to show that this testimony does at times accord with some shared norms – the commitment to the exclusion remains resilient despite the countervailing evidence. Still more difficult is the fact that in certain respects the testimony of people of color about their experience of racism is incongruent with the acceptable norms. I will unpack these two claims – that analysis of stereotype threat research shows that testimony about racism has been unfairly excluded and that analysis of microaggression research shows that to a certain degree testimony about racism is excluded in virtue of incongruity – in a little more detail.

Earlier, I suggested that one consequence of a culture of justification is that critical engagement with the specifics of the relevant culture and its *purported*

common norms is postponed indefinitely. To see how the testimony of people of color about how racism hurts and harms them has been excluded, one must engage in that critique. For the sake of argument, let's assume that racism testimony is being required to conform to the accepted norms of a culture that has engaged in a dynamic, multi-century white supremacy project that has created substantial disproportions in the distribution of wealth, other material goods, and nonmaterial goods. Let's assume that the unjust racial hierarchy is just one among a number of unjust hierarchies that ensures that the vast majority of resources have been bestowed on a ridiculously small segment of the population. Let's assume that over time these unjust hierarchies have been played against each other in ways that disguise this fact: the fact that the majority of both material and immaterial goods have been unjustly bestowed on a precious few. The standards for credibility "shared" by the members of this culture have grown up alongside this extended period of racial (and other) oppression. It's not surprising that historically testimony from people of color about the hurts and harms of racism has been excluded outright – at first because they didn't have standing to testify to anything (they were not persons), then because they didn't have the intellectual capacity to accurately interpret their own experience, and finally because they couldn't be trusted to honestly interpret their experience.

Science – rigorous empirical investigation – establishes practices and norms that have the potential to work around the limitations that explained the outright exclusion. Stereotype threat research doesn't need to rely on people of color to testify to how they are harmed by racism; it allows those harms to be measured independently of their testimony. The cost of according with those standards – specifically of being targeted – is that efforts to apply the conclusions to real world settings are restricted to contexts that lack the loose, complex structure that characterizes most of the real world. Efforts to try to apply stereotype threat outside of places like classrooms can be rejected as unconvincing. Furthermore, microaggression research is found to be robust, but not sufficiently so because the standard for robustness is inappropriately balanced toward including the perspective of the privileged. Ultimately, microaggression research relies too much on testimony without working around the reasons for exclusion. It demands that people of color be viewed as credible – capable and earnest – witnesses to their own experience. Microaggression research rejects an accepted norm of our hypothetical culture: it refuses to believe that accounts of racism can only be made credible if they can work around the testimony of people of color or at least include the testimony of the privileged.

At the outset of this essay, I claimed that one goal of stereotype threat and microaggression research was to recapture testimony about the hurts and harms of racism. This "recapturing" was achieved by lending the credibility

of science to this testimony. My analysis argues that, while well intentioned, the scientization of the phenomenology of racism is a double-edged sword. Specifically, the differences in how microaggression research and stereotype threat research have been received reveal a persisting refusal to acknowledge the credibility of testimony by people of color. As I conclude this essay, I'd like to briefly explore the possibility that this new spate of empirical research aims at more than just making the testimony of people of color credible.

The difficulty exposed by my analysis is that though this new research avenue lends the credibility of science to testimony by people of color, it seems it must do so by tacitly endorsing ideology that silences people of color by casting them as always-already irrational or biased about racism. If just garnering credibility for those voices were the only goal, this result would be a tragic irony. I don't think that making that testimony credible is the only goal. I don't think *proving* that people of color have been hurt and harmed by racism is the *only* goal. Questlove writes this about the aftermath of realizing that after all his efforts, he has been perceived as a threat all along anyway:

> Inside I cried. But if I cried at every insensitive act that goes on in the name of safety, I'd have to be committed to a psych ward. I've just taught myself throughout the years to just accept it and maybe even see it as funny. But it kept eating at me (*Well, I guess she never watched the show ... My English was super clear ... I called her 'ma'am' like I was Webster ... Those that know you know that you're cool, but you definitely know that you are a walking rape nightmare – right, Ahmir? Of course she was justified in not saying her floor. That was her prerogative! You are kinda scary-looking, I guess?*). It's a bajillion thoughts, all of them self-depreciating voices slowly eating my soul away.
>   But my feelings don't count. I don't know why it's that way. Mostly I've come to the conclusion that people over six feet and over weight regulation or as dark as me…simply don't have feelings. Or it's assumed we don't have feelings.

What if the goal of testifying was not always to provide proof but also to give those voices the opportunity to be counted, to be heard?

The focus on quantifying the harm, ignores the significance of expressing the hurt. The burden of contemporary racism is to suffer the setback of interests in silence, to have your exclusion be reified in the supposedly neutral structures for evaluating your testimony, and to feel alienated from yourself and the world in the management of it all. By trying to scientize the testimony of people of color, stereotype threat and microaggression research attests to the value of the testimony. In trying to ensure that these traditionally silenced voices are heard, this body of research rejects the supposed shared norms of credibility while exploiting them. The continued development of stereotype threat and microaggression research is its own form of testimony.

It testifies to the central import of interpreting and experiencing one's life, including the pain, through sharing it with others, not to prove your injury, but instead to demonstrate your humanity. Furthermore, it places those efforts by people of color to interpret their selves and revel in their own humanity at the center of a discourse. They become the focus of the conversation. A few days after the Zimmerman verdict, Questlove received an email from a friend:

> [He] said, 'I am wrong about many things, but I want to apologize for taking that particular story you told me too lightly.' The one about the woman in the elevator. And it kinda touched me. My friend related to me.

While stereotype threat and microaggression research invests in the clarification and quantification of the harms of racism, at the same time, it demands that we get past all the discussion of proof and get down to the business of relating to each other, of telling our own stories and making sure that *everyone* is heard.

NOTES

1. Here are just a few examples of note. What interests me most is the discussion of these stories (the comments). No matter how egregious the incident some percentage of the population of readers has a counter-explanation. Academic Brittney Cooper discusses being referred to as the N-word by the woman adjacent to her on a plane (Cooper 2013); A white women walking with her two black sons is stopped by eleven officers (Balko 2013); Two black men bringing a young white girl to a dance competition are detained by police (Kemp 2013); and a female television correspondent is searched because she "matches a description" of an armed and dangerous black *man* (Pettis 2013).

2. For an extreme example from recent history consider Henry Louis Gates arrest for disorderly conduct outside his own home (Thompson 2010) and the subsequent resistance to his claim that this treatment was at least partially motivated by race.

3. My use of the term phenomenology is bound to be disappointing to all parties. While no doubt influenced by the insights from the conception of phenomenology found in the continental traditions, particularly existentialism, it should also be understood as akin to the use of the term (and it's close cousin "phenomenal") in use in the analytic philosophy of mind. I mean to refer to the first-person, feely aspects of what it's like to be a person of color.

4. For examples, cf. Alfano 2014, Kozma and Schroer 2014, and MacKinnon 2014.

5. The "conversation" I have in mind is the one that tends to occupy territories like the United States that have both a history of being on the domination side of colonialism and are currently places where multiple races and ethnies are living in relatively close proximity as fellow citizens of what is ostensibly one nation.

6. Throughout this essay I will distinguish between "hurts" – the pain, suffering, and unpleasant feely aspects of the experience of racism (or any other form of oppression) – and "harms" – a measurable setback of interests. My point here is to

try to recognize and appreciate but not necessarily endorse a distinction that is often made.

7. Cf. www.reducingstereotypethreat.org and www.microaggressions.com.

8. Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi and Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* and Derald Wing Sue's *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* both from 2010.

9. Reducingstereotypethreat.org has cataloged a few hundred published studies on stereotype threat.

10. Cf. Blascovich et al. 2001, Croizet et al. 2004, Beilock et al, 2006.

11. Robustness is akin to the traditional scope criterion that is used to judge scientific theories. Theories that can explain a wider range of phenomena are superior; in this case, the criterion also suggests a minimum threshold for adequacy. Cf. Vaughn 2012, 355–6.

12. In Kray et al. 2002, Bosson et al. 2004, Quinn et al. 2004, Croizet and Claire 1998, Gonzales et al. 2002, and Good et al. 2008 respectively.

13. Being targeted is related to the traditional criterion of testability used to judge scientific theories. Superior theories have clear methods for determining whether or not they are true; in this case they can point to a specific criterion for including or excluding phenomena and will abide by such. Cf. Vaughn 2012, 355–6.

14. For a thoughtful analysis of the phenomenology of the "Elevator Effect," cf. Yancy 2008.

15. Ironically, for simplicity, the discussion of microaggressions in this essay will refer primarily to lead authors Chester Pierce and Derald Wing Sue despite the fact that much of their research was conducted and published by teams of thinkers. The failure to refer to the secondary authors, many of whom are women and people of color, is an instance of microinvalidation. So, special thanks goes to Jean V. Carew, Diane Pierce-Gonzalez, and Deborah Wills who worked on Pierce's original study and Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, Marta Esquilin, Annie I. Lin, and David P. Rivera who co-authored two of Sue's important papers on microaggressions.

16. The symmetry/asymmetry concern here is akin to the debate in racism: whether it makes more sense to construe racism symmetrically – an action that any member of any racial or ethnic community is equally able to commit against any member of any other racial or ethnic community – or asymmetrically – where the term "racism" is reserved for acts committed by people with a history of racial privilege against people with a history of racial disadvantage. Lawrence Blum (1999, 2002) argues for a symmetrical conception of racism while Marilyn Friedman (1999) articulates reasons to prefer asymmetry. Microaggression research seems to have sided with those who theorize racism asymmetrically viewing the "real work" to be on populations who are already socially disadvantage, marginalized, and/or oppressed.

17. Every Wikipedia entry includes a discussion of the subject matter (identified as the "Article") and a discussion of development of the Article (identified as "Talk"). Articles in particularly bad shape are flagged asking for assistance in resolving whatever issues the article has and directing one to the talk page for insights about how to do so.

18. It is necessary to note the much discussed demographics of Wikipedians – the editors of Wikipedia pages. They are disproportionately male, English speakers, from Europe or North America. There is reason to believe, because of these demographics, that their perspectives on microaggressions and stereotype threat are unrepresentative. I would argue that though their demographic is not representative of the various intellectual communities in which these topics might be discussed it *is* representative of the dominant discourse in those communities. The intellectual communities in which these issues are being discussed are burdened by the same cultural hegemony that burdens most communities in the Western world.

19. Cf. Frye 1983, 118.

20. A similar point is made in Yancy 2012.

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