

Evidently

The vast majority of evidence used to ascertain the effect of race discrimination on the success of blacks and the effect of sex discrimination on the success of women is, in a word, irrelevant. Not only is the evidence irrelevant to whether discrimination matters for blacks and women, but also the evidence is necessarily silent on the important question of whether whites and males gain or lose through the operation of antiblack and antiwoman discrimination.

Because blacks and women are disadvantaged in many areas, any suggestion that whites and men might lose through antiblack and antifemale discrimination may appear ludicrous to many. And to suggest that silence characterizes any part of public attention to these issues may seem equally absurd given that scholars, politicians, and citizens across the political spectrum engage in raucous debates about the merits of policies purported to address prior and present discrimination. In these debates, the well-known facts of inequality often form the empirical basis for theoretical assertions of the essential or trivial nature of racial and sexual status, for substantive claims concerning the significance or nonexistence of discrimination, and for political demands to end or extend allegedly aggressive ameliorative strategies.

Yet, despite their constant invocation, the oft-cited facts of race and gender inequality are irrelevant to whether discrimination matters; their invocation signals not clarity but, instead, the conflation of racial and

sexual inequality with the effect of antiblack and antifemale discrimination. The conflating of inequality and discrimination is just one of the consequences of the prevailing understanding of race and sex discrimination.¹

In order to treat discrimination systematically, analysts must ask three important questions. First, what is discrimination? Second, what are the effects of discrimination? Third, what is to be done about discrimination? Three volumes address each of these questions in turn. In the process I detail why the existing definition of discrimination falls short, why the existing evidence of discrimination is irrelevant to the questions it is marshaled to answer, what the effect of discrimination on targets and nontargets of discrimination actually is, and how new approaches to addressing the social dislocations that follow in the wake of discrimination may be developed and enacted.

However, in studying discrimination in the United States, we encounter particular socioemotional challenges, some of which hound the effort throughout, often threatening to derail the effort before it can even begin. Therefore, before proceeding, it is useful briefly to identify the primary source of these challenges and the ramifications for the enterprise pursued here. The hope is that, by identifying the source explicitly, we can, together, neutralize the threat it poses to our effort.

History, Biography, and Self-Consciousness: Facing the External Challenge

In a well-known passage, C. Wright Mills calls on the field of sociology to nurture the sociological imagination, a capacity that “enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. . . . By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues” (1959: 5).

Discrimination is one of the most difficult phenomena for people in the United States to discuss. Sadly, scholars of all stripes, sexes, statuses, ethnicities, and persuasions are no more immune to that difficulty than anyone else. With all due respect to C. Wright Mills, however, one of the reasons discrimination is most difficult to discuss is that too many persons appear to bring too much of a sociological imagination to the discussion—that is, as they consider the society or the institutions in which they live, they are too

¹ In the 1970s, analysts regarded sex as an immutable biological construct and gender as a mutable social construct. However, more recent theorizing has revealed the weaknesses of this approach, such that now even the existence of a distinction between the two terms is questioned by some analysts. Because of this development in social theory, and because sometimes the term *sex* may be jarring or confusing, I use the terms *sex* and *gender* interchangeably.

aware of their own biographies, too focused on their own stations, such that they often cannot suspend awareness of their own stories long enough to allow the inquiry to proceed. Instead, they endanger the inquiry by their intense aim, in heart if not in mind, of confirming a fact of great interest to themselves. And what is this key fact that seeks confirmation in such discussions? To put the matter bluntly, if given voice, that fact would scream: “*I am a good person!*”

This need for reassurance certainly is understandable, and one can be very sympathetic to the concern; that someone involved in a discussion of discrimination might be troubled by the prospect of being judged harshly certainly is sensible given this country’s painful history of racial oppression, sexual subjugation, and the smoldering hostility regarding these issues that characterizes the current period. However, this concern with how one may be judged constitutes what I call the *external* challenge for discrimination research and antidiscrimination activism, so labeled because it is not inherent in the actual enterprise but, instead, is imported into the process by some or many of those involved. The importers of this external challenge may be black, white, Asian, Latino/a, “multiracial,” “other,” male, female, gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, transgender, and of any religious, cultural, or otherwise identifiable group. No sector has a monopoly on this import.

Understandable though the concern may be, however, the research on stereotype threat (e.g., Steele 1997), the psychology of optimal performance and flow (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1990), and basic common sense should tell us that it is very difficult to conduct any kind of systematic inquiry when one is distracted by doubt as to one’s own character, others’ presumed assessment of one’s character, or the legitimacy of one’s placement in the status that allows one to conduct the inquiry. In the present context, those distracted by such doubts may become subconsciously invested in steering the inquiry to confirm that key fact with which they are concerned, or in undermining the inquiry if it appears that fact may not be confirmed (which is not to say that the fact actually would be disconfirmed). I have seen this dynamic unfold in dozens of scholarly and not-so-scholarly venues—in committee meetings at my home institution, on national panels charged (in every sense of the word) with systematically considering discrimination, in political groups working to transcend discrimination, in classrooms focused on issues of inequality, as well as in living rooms, dining rooms, and other rooms of the domicile. When inquiry is so infected with such self-conscious, defensive energy, the most that one can hope to do is muddle through, repair relationships if possible, leave intact existing understandings rather than further damaged ones, and hope that those involved will someday deal with these issues privately.

That this dynamic occurs is, of course, no shame; few of us want to be a “bad” person. Further, each of us has our blind spots and little inconsistencies, which make each of us vulnerable to some charge or another. For these and other reasons I certainly would prefer to ignore or sidestep this uncomfortable issue. Yet, I am forced to raise it here because ignoring it only strengthens its capacity for harm and because, unfortunately, this dynamic stands in our way.

It stands in our way because, as we proceed, many of the largely taken-for-granted claims that have framed our understanding of discrimination will be called into question. And just as surely, therefore, this dynamic threatens to become unleashed. As we proceed, it may become difficult to resist the urge to evaluate the claims being made in this work in terms of their seeming implication for one’s own character. Indeed, to the extent the propositions that constitute the dominant perspective *on* discrimination have been uttered and popularized in part and through the same dynamics that are activated in public discussion *of* discrimination, it is quite possible that any question of those propositions is going to pose an existential challenge. But, that challenge must be resisted if we are to have any hope of communication, not to mention progress. Thus, I am making this uncomfortable plea: Please suspend the evaluation of what the project seems to mean for one’s own character.

I make this plea for at least two reasons. First, the dynamic I have described can lead persons (of whatever race, sex, ethnicity, class, religion, culture, or sexual preference) to become so preoccupied with confirming their goodness that they jump to conclusions that do not follow from the claims that are made at various (perhaps early) points in the unfolding inquiry. And, when persons jump to conclusions they may easily misunderstand and mischaracterize their interlocutors. Attempting to defend their goodness, they may lash out and imply or even directly state that their interlocutors are “bad” not to have realized how “good” they are. The tragedy, of course, is that by jumping to conclusions, they can so damage the discussion that they prevent a resolution from emerging that might actually end up both confirming the fact with which they are deeply concerned while *also* building and reinforcing the structures and camaraderie needed to improve matters for everyone. The antidote to this dynamic is to accept that the inquiry, no matter how painful or disquieting in a given moment, has to finish before one can even begin to evaluate whether the inquiry has any implications for one’s character, to say nothing of discerning what those implications might be. My plea seeks to prescribe this antidote.

Second, I make this plea because the task ahead is difficult enough. Any time an analyst proposes a rethinking of a phenomenon, it poses a serious challenge. Those evaluating a proposed reconceptualization must be able to

conduct the difficult task of suspending their current understanding enough to allow the reconfigured framework to take shape in their mind, while maintaining their critical faculties so they can evaluate the framework within its own terms. They must be comfortable with the unsettling prospect of what formerly were solid entities being broken into distinctly different phenomena, and the still more unsettling prospect of formerly distinct entities or concepts becoming fused, or perhaps being revealed to be merely different manifestations of phenomena formerly seen as unrelated. Thomas S. Kuhn (1962 [1970]) wrote eloquently of the anxiety, the visceral unease this can engender, and, highlighting the inherent difficulty of this task, he poignantly noted that often new approaches only win the day when devotees of the old approach, never able to be persuaded of the validity of the new conceptualization, eventually die off. Kuhn's observations in this regard should give us pause—evaluating a reconceptualization of a phenomenon is demanding. Questions one must address in the effort include: Does the reconceptualization hang together coherently, or might it hang together coherently or even elegantly should additional research ensue on its basis? Does the reconceptualization allow us to address questions we have not been able to address? Does it hold out promise for new inquiries we have yet to pursue, or even imagine? These are extremely difficult questions to answer without benefit of hindsight, as any cursory check of the history of natural or social science can attest. To those exceedingly difficult fundamental questions we need not add the distraction of wondering what the claims *seem* to mean for one's own character. Thus, I offer my uncomfortable plea.

Of course, at this juncture I cannot say assuredly that the approach I propose is an advance. But, I believe it well may be an advance; it needs time, the work of others on its basis, and serious scrutiny to reveal its promise. The only way this ever will occur is if we set aside distractions and consider the matter of discrimination as a sociological phenomenon rather than as a matter of personal character.

Scope Conditions and Clarifications

To aid that endeavor, I want to clarify three matters up front.

First, this project is not about race—it is about discrimination. Discrimination on the basis of race occurs, but so does discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual preference, religion, and other factors. This project focuses on race and sex because of data limitations. But, it is imperative that I convey that this is not a study of African Americans in the United States. It is, instead, the study of a social phenomenon: discrimination. Therefore, though the discussion highlights sex and race to the virtual exclusion of other dimensions of discrimination, one has to start somewhere, and I have chosen,

for various reasons having to do with my own skill set and available resources, to start here. However, the foundation established herein may be applied to other dimensions of discrimination, and I would think such work will be essential for the framework to reveal its promise over time.

Second, I do not use empirical research to validate the epistemological claims I make nor the measurement strategies that flow from those claims. Despite the existence of so-called “validity coefficients,” validity (as distinct from reliability) is a theoretical concern, not an empirical one. To establish that a measure is valid, one must ground the measure in a theoretical logic. This commitment is a general one, but it is extremely important in the case of discrimination. Of course, many scholars proceed in the opposite manner, using empirical research to confirm that their methods and measures are valid. This approach is most visibly, publicly championed in research purporting to measure intelligence. The obvious problem with this approach is that any method that is validated by confirming one’s expectations about the empirical world is a method that is unlikely to be regarded as accurate if instead it reveals a difference between what one expected to find and what one actually did find. Though the history of human inquiry is littered with the lab reports of those who failed to question their expectations in the face of anomalous information and thus failed to make the discovery we later came to regard as the foundation upon which subsequent knowledge would be built, this empiricist tendency remains strong. With such an empiricist approach, instead of presuming one’s expectations may be in error—a real possibility if one is conducting *research*—a measure is rejected as having been faulty. Because we use measures to tell us about the world, and need to be open to the possibility that the world is different than we believe it is, it is inappropriate in general to use empirical research to validate the method, and certainly so for areas imbued with confusion and contention. Thus, with a phenomenon as contentious as discrimination, using empirical research to validate the approach would be a colossal mistake. Hence, this volume lays out the theoretical, epistemological case, while later work will present an empirical analysis consistent with the epistemological claims. Those who do not find the theoretical case plausible need not be concerned with the findings from the empirical analysis. At the same time, if the empirical findings turn out to be surprising, well, sometimes the world is not as we believe it is.

Third, my plea for suspending the question of individuals’ character is a necessary requirement for the framework to have any chance of being considered on its own terms. What is ultimately more important, however, is that this plea is essential for the effort, also pursued in later work, to reconfigure our solutions for discrimination, as citizens and human beings. This aim presupposes that discrimination is not primarily about individuals. Thus, in order to accomplish this aim, at its core the analysis cannot be primarily

about the actions or character of individuals. Indeed, a major motivation for the framework proposed herein is the belief that we have created major problems by focusing on individuals. That focus has animated the legal analyses of discrimination and it has infected the social scientific analysis of the effects of discrimination. If we are to ever break the current impasse and craft promising analytic approaches, inclusive political strategies, and transformative public policies, we must free ourselves from this individualistic perspective. What follows is a systematic effort to do so; what follows now is a brief guide to that enterprise.

Plan of the Work

This volume describes the new era of race and gender relations that closed the twentieth century and has, so far, continued into the new millennium. I show how the old perspectives on discrimination were crafted for a reality that no longer exists, and how analysts' efforts to address the well-known problems with those perspectives systematically fall short. I then craft a definition of discrimination devised for social scientific analyses, and show how this definition is both consistent with the reality of discrimination and appropriate for social scientific research. This book concerns epistemology, focusing on theories through which discrimination has been seen, and constructing a strategy to estimate discrimination effects.

In later work I use the definition of discrimination developed in this volume to estimate the effects of race and sex discrimination in the United States. Titled *Just Who Loses?*, it presents empirical analyses of discrimination effects in education, labor force participation, job quality, earnings, and mortality. Thus, the analysis addresses every major phase of the socioeconomic lifecycle, as well as the important final outcome of death.

Also in future work, I use the vantage point afforded by the theorized view of discrimination and the findings on its effects to critique both existing public policy concerning discrimination, racial inequality, and gender inequality, as well as the political strategies adopted by many who seek to redress the historic and contemporary wrongs of discrimination. I offer new policy options, and discuss a range of strategies that might prove successful. That work, unapologetically normative in its focus, closes with reflections on building the just society.

Throughout the many pieces of the project the aforementioned plea remains relevant. Thus, I renew my request that we suspend the evaluation of what the project seems to mean for one's character. In my mind and heart, no one's character is at issue—the social world in which we live together is.