Confrontation Vs Conflict Avoidance: how minorities across international borders deal with racism

Jean-Philippe Dedieu interviews Harvard scholar Michèle Lamont about her latest book, ***Responses to Stigmatization in Comparative Perspective*** *co-authored with Nissim Mizrachi.*

The increasing expansion and diversification of migratory flows from the African continent since the 1960s has led to a significant renewal of scholarship on ethnic and racial studies. In a pioneering cross-continent survey, Michèle Lamont, Professor of Sociology and African and African American Studies at Harvard University and Nissim Mizrachi, Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University looked at discrimination and stigmatisation faced by members of the African diaspora worldwide and uncovered its strategies in dealing with racial prejudice. In this exclusive interview by Jean-Philippe Dedieu, Michèle Lamont details the intellectual genesis, the main scientific findings and the potential impact of this original and very resourceful project supported by the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

How do black Brazilians deal with racism?

What is the intellectual continuity between your first comparative book, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*[1] and this new large-scale international survey, the initial findings of which have just been published in a co-edited book *Responses to Stigmatization in Comparative Perspective*[2]?

While working on the book *The Dignity of Working Men* in 2000, I interviewed both black and white American workers, French workers, French citizens and North African immigrants asking to what kind of people they felt inferior and superior. The aim of the interviews was to have respondents describe how they categorised different individuals based on their perceived relative worth. I quickly discovered that they used mostly moral criteria to draw boundaries for the other racial group, or for the poor, or for the upper-middle class. This was therefore both an analysis of their classification system and of the impact of applying those categories to various groups of individuals. While gathering the data, I asked them to give differences between blacks and whites. In responding, they would often use the same criteria to explain why some racial groups are equal or unequal. I was quite struck by the evidence they used in their explanations.

After my book was published in 2000, I felt that this was a question that really called for further analysis. I was interested not only in how people conceptualise race and the racial notion of similarities and differences between groups, but also their experiences of racism, how they respond to it, and how these responses vary between societies in which intra-group boundaries are very fluid and contexts are not. Along with a student, Christopher Bail, I wrote a paper published in France that compared different countries in terms of group boundaries[3]. The analysis initially included Ireland, Quebec and France, but we ended up with only the United States, Brazil and Israel, largely because we found excellent collaborators in those countries. We systematically gathered data on 150 people in each country. Half of the respondents were from the middle class and half from the working class; half were male and the other half female. They were given a set of questions which overlapped ninety per cent across countries. The goal was to compare the variation between experiences of discrimination and the responses to stigmatisation.

How would you sum up the main findings of your study? Are there any significant similarities between the countries you surveyed?

There are a lot. What mostly transpires from this survey is that African Americans feel that when they face racism, they have no other choice but to confront it. We argue that this attitude is very much connected to the relative success of the Civil Rights Movement. There is an acknowledgment that America has a racist past and that African American citizens are due full respect, so African Americans are ready to challenge discrimination.

My colleagues and collaborators in Brazil have argued that a predominant response is the celebration of being racially mixed. Black Brazilians challenge the racist by asking “Who is your grandmother? We are all black. So who do you think you are?” which is really the kind of response we will never find in USA due to the “one drop” rule. The notion that “we are all blacks” simply does not make sense in USA context.

For their part, my colleagues in Israel developed this concept of participatory destigmatisation to describe the responses to stigmatisation that are prevalent in the groups they studied: Ethiopian Jews who are black, and Mizrahis (oriental Jews who emigrated from Iraq and Iran) are looked down upon because they are viewed as less modern. Both respond by saying, “Well, we are Jewish. We are like the Russian immigrants. In the Zionist state, we are fully accepted.” So they downplay the stigmatisation experience.

In all three cases, the response is connected to the country’s dominant political ideology: in Brazil, racial democracy; in Israel, Zionism; and, in USA, the American dream and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. This is one of the study’s major findings.

Could you please elaborate the main types of strategies or responses you identify?

We categorised the responses into several groups.

The main and predominant response is that of confrontation.

Another category is what we call the “management of the self” exemplified by “I decided not to be upset because I don’t want to be the angry black, I want to be the competent lawyer.” Deploying this strategy may involve extensive calculation in order to evaluate what is happening and decide to not react. We call it “conflict avoidance”.

Another group simply does not respond “because I was shocked, because of the circumstances,” or “I did not respond because of a number of things,” so this is different from actually managing the self.

We are now getting results on the links between the different types of responses and health outcomes, that is, subjective well-being. We have found that those who do not resort to

confrontation are those with the best mental well-being. This is a very interesting finding: those who spend too much time dealing with stigmatisation may become more and more anxious and increasingly discontent.

Our study has brought much more specificity to our understanding of the range and salience of responses used across contexts, which favours various types of responses, and of their effects on well-being. In this sense, we build upon and go beyond the previous literature on the topic in very significant ways. Our analysis is more detailed than what others have produced as we base it on the detailed content-analysis of our interviews.

You have been a consultant for the World Bank, Unesco, and for the Open Society. In terms of applied research, how can your research have impact?

There was a conference in Hangzhou, China in May 2013 on how culture can contribute to sustainable development. They wanted to revise the human development index to include a cultural dimension. I propose that the key to doing this will be to compare how societies perform based on their capacity to integrate or give recognition to large segments of a diverse population. This is measured, for instance, by the multi-cultural index which compares countries in terms of whether they have policies for the integration of migrants. So I pushed for that at the conference in China.

I am deeply committed to thinking very systematically about identifying the best policy tools that can be implemented to strongly affirm the value of diversity.

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[1] Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration.* Cambridge, Harvard University Press & the Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2000.

[2] Michèle Lamont, Nissim Mizrachi (eds), *Responses to Stigmatization in Comparative Perspective*, New York, Routledge, 2013.

[3] Michèle Lamont, Christopher A. Bail, « Sur les frontières de la reconnaissance », *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, 21(2), 2005, pp. 61-90.

September 20th, 2013 | International Affairs, Migration | 0 Comments