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When You Forget to Whistle Vivaldi

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Last week Jonathan Ferrell had a horrible car crash. He broke out the back window to escape and walked, injured, to the nearest home hoping for help. Ferrell may have been too hurt, too in shock to remember to whistle Vivaldi. Ferrell is dead.¹

Social psychologist Claude Steele revolutionized our understanding of the daily context and cognitive effects of stereotypes and bias. The title of his book alludes to a story his friend, *New York Times* writer Brent Staples, once shared.² An African American man, Staples, recounts how his physical presence terrified whites as he moved about Chicago as a free citizen and graduate student. To counter the negative effects of white fear he took to whistling a classical music piece by Italian composer Vivaldi. It was a signal to the victimless victims of his blackness that he was safe. Dangerous

black men do not listen to classical music, or so the hope goes. The incongruence between Staples' musical choices and the stereotype of him as a predator was meant to disrupt the implicit, unexamined racist assumptions of him. It seems trite perhaps, an attempt to make whites feel at ease unless we recall the potential consequences of white dis-ease for black lives.

I do not know many black people who do not have a similar coping mechanism. I have been known to wear university branded clothing when I am shopping for real estate. A friend straightens her hair when she is job seeking. Another friend, a Hispanic male, told me that he shaves all his facial hair when entertaining white clients to signal that he is respectable. While stereotype threat can occur to any member of any group, it occurs most frequently and with more dangerous consequences for groups for whom there are more and stronger negative beliefs.

Of course, the oft-quoted idiom that respectability politics will not save you is true. Just as wearing long johns is not a preventative measure against rape for women, affecting middle class white behaviors is not a protective measure but a talisman. In exerting any measure of control over signaling that we are not dangerous or violent or criminal we are mostly assuaging the cognitive stress that constant management of social situations causes.

That stress has real consequences. Steele inspired an entire body of research on those effects. When the object of a stereotype is aware

of the negative perception of her, that awareness constrains all manner of ability and performance. From testing scores of women who know the others in the room believe women cannot do math to missing a sports play when one is reminded that Asians don't have hops, the effects of stereotype threat are real.

Perhaps more interesting to me is what Steele described as the constant background processing that stereotyped people engage. It's like running too many programs in the background of your computer as you try to play a YouTube video. Just as the extra processing, invisible to the naked eye, impacts the video experience, the cognitive version compromises the functioning of our most sophisticated machines: human bodies.

I mentioned just today to a colleague that for all we social scientists like to talk about structural privilege it might be this social-psychological privilege that is the most valuable. Imagine the productivity of your laptop when all background programs are closed. Now imagine your life when those background processes are rarely, if ever, activated because of the social position your genetic characteristics afford you.

Of course, privilege is sometimes structural. But the murder of Jonathan Ferrell reminds us that activation of stereotype threat in daily interactions can be aided and abetted by organizational processes like the characterization of a police call to 911 and structural legitimacy like the authority of the police to shoot first

and ask questions later. I am choosing to ignore how that process was set in motion. Perhaps better feminist scholars than myself can explore the historical, cultural gendered fear that legitimizes the unconscious bias of black men as sexual and criminal predators. I find I do not have the stomach for it today.

I just read an article that quotes Ferrell's family at length. His family's attorney did not just want us to know that Ferrell was a friend and son but that: "He's engaged to be married, he has a dog and a cat, he was driving a Toyota Camry, he survived an accident, had 3.7 GPA, a chemistry major. This is not someone who posed a threat to the officers or anyone else, this is an everyday American."

A 3.7 GPA.

They want us to know that their murdered friend, son, brother and cousin had a 3.7 GPA.

Ferrell may have been too injured, too shocked to whistle Vivaldi to all he encountered the night he was shot. It may not have helped if he had through slammed doors, over police sirens, and gunfire. But even in death his family cannot help but signal to us all that he was a student and, by extension, a human being whose death should matter.

Whistling Vivaldi in tribute, a talisman and hope that justice will hear what its executioners did not.

Notes

1. Lee, T. (2013, September 25). “The 911 call that led to Jonathan Ferrell’s death.”

<http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/the-911-call-led-jonathan-ferrells>

2. Pronin, E. (2010, May 1). “Not Just Whistling Vivaldi.”

<https://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2010/05/01/emily-pronin-reviews-whistling-vivaldi/>