Black Advantage Vision: Flipping the Script on Racial Inequality Research

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ABSTRACT:

This article proposes a new research agenda for the study of racial inequality: Black Advantage Vision. Black Advantage Vision turns racial inequality and stratification research on its head by actively looking for domains in which Black people outperform White people, and conducting studies that show this outcome. Black Advantage Vision builds on two premises: first, that sociology—and the social sciences more generally—reproduces stigma in our research and teaching, which then perpetuates negative information about Black people that permeates U.S. and world culture; and, second, that Black people internalize the stigma of Black disadvantage research and start believing that we are cursed. Black Advantage Vision reminds Black people of our worth, strengths, resilience, care, and accomplishments, while also letting White people know that they are not supreme. In this article, I define and elaborate on the concept of Black Advantage Vision; acknowledge existing statements that challenge anti-Black frameworks in sociology; review empirical studies that find Black advantage; outline how to deploy Black Advantage Vision in new research; and raise and critique the normative assumptions on which Black Advantage Vision rests. This essay is meant to be a provocative invitation to a new approach to research.

Keywords: Black Advantage, Racial Inequality, Research Methods, Asset-Based Approach, Strengths-Based Approach

> This is us.
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> We saw your news trucks and cameras here recently and we read the articles, "Six shot in South Shore laundromat" and "Another mass shooting in Terror Town." We saw the reporters with fancy suits in front of our laundromat. You spent less than 24 hours here, but you don't really know us.
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> —Fifth-grade students at the Bradwell School of Excellence in Chicago (2014)

This is the beginning of a 2014 poem written collectively by the 5th grade class at a predominately Black elementary school in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago. This poem begins with a deficit perspective on Black neighborhoods as dangerous and desperate, and then abruptly switches gears. The children then write:

> We want you to know us. We aren't afraid. We know that man on the corner. He works at the store and gives us free Lemonheads. Those girls jumping rope are Precious, Aniya and Nivia. The people in the suits are people not going to funerals, but to church. That little, creepy dog is Saianis, Lamaur's dog. We are the kids who find crates so we can shoot hoops. When the sun shines here, it's not God saying he wants to burn us; he sees us all with bright futures. Those who know us look at the ones who want to go to college, not the ones who dropped out of school. If you listen, you'll hear the laughter and the chattering from the group of girls on the corner who are best friends and really care about each other. Do you see the smile on the cashier's face when the kids walk in? Why? Because this neighborhood is filled with love. This isn't Chi-raq. This is home. This is us.

The poets know what many sociologists do not. That being Black is marvelous!

In this essay I follow the process of these child poets by briefly recognizing the deficits gaze and then proposing a new approach to counter it: Black Advantage Vision. Black Advantage Vision turns racial inequality and stratification research on its head by actively looking for domains in which Black people outperform White people, and by conducting studies that show this outcome. The purpose of Black Advantage Vision is to combat, in sociology and the social sciences more generally, one of the core mechanisms that lead to negative outcomes for Black people, namely, stigma (Fleming, Lamont, and Welburn 2012; Loury 2009).[1] The deficit perspective is saturated with stigma. Whether we call it condemnation (Muhammad 2019), social death (Patterson 2018), Slaveness (Wilderson 2020:42), or subjection (Hartman 1997), the story is the same. The tarnished, disreputable, spoiled identity of Black people in the eyes of White people leads to all manner of violence, exclusion, dispossession, harassment, erasure, objectification, theft, and more. Reproducing that stigma in our research and teaching piles on to the unrelenting barrage of negative information about Black people that permeates U.S. and world culture, and further feeds White people's need for the pathological Black Other. We are partially the reason for W.E.B. Du Bois's most poignant question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (2008:7) Perhaps the worst part of Black disadvantage research is that Black people internalize the stigma and start believing that we are cursed. Black Advantage Vision reminds Black people of our worth, strengths, resilience, care, and accomplishments (e.g., Hernandez, Silverman, and Destin 2021), while also letting White people know that they are not supreme.

The Blackness-as-a-problem paradigm has always been a problem for me. I was educated as a sociologist on William Julius Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which was published the year I entered college. It was assigned in probably every sociology class I took. It was transformative. It taught me so much about how the neighborhoods I had traversed growing up in Milwaukee came to be as they were. Reading *The Truly Disadvantaged* taught me how "structural forces" work, and made it clear that telling the story of Black disadvantage requires

attention to history and forces far outside of Black communities. I am not arguing that we throw out research on Black disadvantage. Studies of disproportionate Black incarceration or school expulsion or lead poisoning are critical for making demands of the state, and so some sociologists must continue to conduct them. The problem, however, is that the world depicted in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and other such work is just one slice of Black life. Indeed, the title says as much. But in the classrooms where I was reading it, it seemed to stand in for the whole of Black existence. I have endeavored to tell other stories about Black people in my career (Pattillo 2007, 2013), but I have not fully broken free of the Black disadvantage paradigm. This essay is the first step toward doing so.

Some might say it is an inopportune moment to claim that there are any advantages to being Black as Black people die by the thousands from COVID-19 and suffocate under the literal and figurative knee of White supremacy. These things represent the violent anti-Blackness that has characterized this nation since before its inception, and they are not going away soon. So now is as important as ever to answer the loop of Black death with a reminder about Black life. Once again, I take my lead from the poets. It is at precisely this moment that they write to remind us of our powers. In her poem "Dear Black America," Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith writes: "We are lucky to be who we are, and we know it" (2020). Black Advantage Vision invites sociology to better explore the confidence that Blackness creates.

This essay proceeds in five sections. Section I acknowledges some of the work that has already challenged anti-Black frameworks in sociology. Section II elaborates on Black Advantage Vision and raises important caveats. Section III reviews existing literature that finds Black advantage. Section IV sketches out how to deploy Black Advantage Vision in new research. Section V concludes with final thoughts. These sections are no more than introductions to the idea, and invitations for readers to write the rest of the story.

I. PAYING RESPECTS

In 1973, Joyce Ladner wrote in *The Death of White Sociology*:

> Traditional sociological analyses have failed to explore the unique experiences and culture of Blacks when they were the subject of investigation, and have excluded Blacks from the general framework of American sociology. The refusal to address Black culture and experience has caused the distortion that we see today in sociological literature. Historically, sociologists have portrayed Blacks as disorganized, pathological, and an aberrant group. ([1973]1998:xxi)

Those lines could have been written in 1933, 1953, or 2003. Dare I say they will still be applicable in 2023. The White sociology that Ladner and her colleagues critiqued was that of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's proposition that so-called matriarchal Black families had become the cause of Black poverty, and Gunnar Myrdal's utter blindness to the possibility that "Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma" (Ellison 1998:94). Out of the rejection of White sociology came such books as Ladner's (1971) *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* and Robert Hill's (1972) *The Strengths of Black Families*, both of which depicted the kinship bonds, flexibility, mutual exchange, spirituality, and resilience of Black families in all of their configurations. Yet, and still, the victim-blaming studies of Black deviance and underachievement continued to be published.

In response, Patricia Hill Collins (1989) taught us how to do research using a Black feminist epistemology, which foregrounds wisdom based on experience, knowledge established through dialogue, an ethic of care, and personal integrity. A Black feminist approach listens to and walks alongside Black people to raise up our truths, and is always skeptical of positivist assumptions about objectivity. Collins named the outsiders' gaze for what it is, the creator of "controlling images" that perpetuates stigma and its negative consequences. Yet mainstream sociology did not listen.

Coming from a different methodological tradition, Zuberi (2001) revealed "how racial statistics lie." Many of the studies I cite in the section on the empirics of Black advantage use the methods that Zuberi challenges, but some also recognize and try to operationalize race and Blackness "as a dynamic characteristic dependent on other social circumstances" (124). Still, on the whole, we have not developed "better measures of cultural, social, biological, and economic processes" (142) for which "race" is often a wholly inadequate proxy.

Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) offer yet another call to resist the "White logic" and "White methods" that are the dominant thrust in the social sciences. Building on Collins's critique of positivism and knowledge production, the authors argue that White logic is "a context in which White supremacy has defined the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts. White logic assumes a historical posture that grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite Whites and condemns the views of non-Whites to perpetual subjectivity" (17). A call to actively look for outcomes on which Black people outperform White people will undoubtedly be judged as subjective and ideological, even though thousands of research proposals, dissertations, articles, and books started off with the opposite bias: hypothesizing about, looking for, and expecting Black disadvantage.

There are many other instances when Black sociologists have used our second sight to diagnose the infirmities of mainstream sociology, both in the early years of the discipline (Morris 2015; Wright 2020), and more contemporarily (Autry 2020; Barnes, Robinson, and Wright 2014; Brunsma and Wyse 2019; Ferguson 2004; Horton and Sykes 2001; Hunter 2002; Hunter 2018; Hunter et al. 2016; Seamster and Ray 2018; Sewell 2016). This essay builds on these interventions and takes specific aim at the subfield of racial stratification and inequality, which is dominated by findings of Black disadvantage when compared to White people across multiple domains. In proposing Black Advantage Vision, I am pushing us to ask new questions, collect new data, and advance new models of social change.

II. BLACK ADVANTAGE VISION

Black Advantage Vision is about both the act and object of seeing. The noun *vision* describes the act of seeing, as in "my vision is 20/20." Black Advantage Vision asks us to re-focus our vision. Black Advantage Vision asks scholars to use different eyes, to put on different glasses, and to tilt our heads in different directions in order for new things to come into view. Our act of seeing needs to be like that of the 5th grade poets from South Shore. Where outsiders saw violence and disorder those students saw friendships and hope. The noun *vision* is also the object of our sight. We need a *vision*, an imagination, an object of our vision that lays beyond the results of the questions we typically ask. We must have a *vision* of Black joy in order to study it. We must have a *vision* of Black health in order to find it. We must have a *vision* of Black wealth in order to measure it. These visions may not accord with how these variables have been defined in previous research. Black wealth, for example, might be measured not as net financial assets, but rather as how to make $100 stretch for the month (Barnes 2005), or the development of collective lending circles (Wherry, Seefeldt, and Alvarez 2019), or conscious selection of jobs that offer retirement pensions (Chiteji, Gouskova, and Stafford 2006). Having a Black Advantage Vision—call it a hunch, a dream, a haunting, or a catching (Sorett 2016)—launches the pursuit of questions that have not been asked before. Practically and purposefully, the vision to see things differently and a vision of new things to look for, is in service of actively looking for domains in which Black people outperform White people.

Aside from the usual bemoaning that ideology and identity have seeped into the supposedly objective practice of science—which the scholars I reviewed above have already roundly defanged—I anticipate two primary critiques of Black Advantage Vision. First, is the question that rapper Ice Cube posed in his song "True to the Game." As he parodied various versions of Black people wanting to be White, Ice Cube charged: "But ask yourself, who are they to be equal to?" James Baldwin made a similar point in *The Fire Next Time*, writing:

> White people cannot, in the generality, be taken as models of how to live. Rather, the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being. (1993:96-97)

And going back one more step in time, Du Bois (2008:7) said it first in his elaboration of double consciousness. Being Black in America, Du Bois argued, requires a constant "measuring [of] one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." By working within a racial stratification framework, Black Advantage Vision requires comparing Black people to White people, as if White people are the appropriate or ideal benchmark for Black people's humanity. The problem is that this yields too quickly to the White racial frame (Feagin 2009).

My response to this potential critique is that flexing our muscles of imagination will generate new measuring tapes that are not already tainted by the scorn of the White gaze. Instead of comparing Black people to White people, Black Advantage Vision can compare White people to Black people, so that Black people are the standard for comparison. What the racial stratification approach illustrates—and what Ice Cube, Baldwin, and Du Bois all highlight—is that comparisons inevitably require normative statements about what constitutes good outcomes and success. More than just looking in the usual places for moments when Black people do comparatively well—as the research reviewed in the next section does—Black Advantage Vision will also need to put forth new normative claims—a point I elaborate in Section IV.

The second possible critique builds from the first. In addition to questioning what we consider to be good or successful outcomes, we should ask if these outcomes forward freedom, liberation, love, and other values that are distinct from equality. Studies of racial stratification and inequality begin from the premise of hierarchy and disparity, usually within the confines

of some geographic boundary, like the nation or the metropolitan area. But achieving racial equality within the U.S. context is predicated on the distribution of ill-gotten riches—lands stolen from Native peoples, natural resources extracted from countries with fewer guns, and people worked tirelessly for low wages in places outside of the United States. We should be leery if Black advantage or equality is garnered from the oppression of someone else, near or far. Thus, a reasonable critique of Black Advantage Vision is that it operates on too small a scale and within parochial boundaries, and that what is really needed is a global vision of justice, life, love, and peace. Finding that Black people outperform White people in the United States might make us feel good, but is it really a good thing? I return to this question again in the conclusion.

For now, I defend Black Advantage Vision on two grounds. First, it's just true that Black folks outperform White folks in some areas, and so we should study that just as frequently and vigorously as we do the reverse. Second, the incessant and excessive production of social science findings about Black disadvantage creates a kind of essentialist connection between Blackness and failure that feeds White contempt and pity, and doesn't do Black people any favors either. And since it's just not true that Black people are always failing relative to White people (point #1), then we need to jump start a social science that recognizes that fact.

III. STUDIES OF BLACK ADVANTAGE

The idea for this article came from a class I was teaching called the Social Meaning of Race. We had a week in which we methodically walked through the Black/White wealth gap, starting from when Black people constituted the wealth of White people to the present day when Black people live in redlined neighborhoods, until they are greenlined for "predatory inclusion" (Taylor 2019). After that heavy day of recounting over four hundred years of theft and the resulting disadvantages, I dedicated a day to the empirically documented benefits of being Black. It wasn't easy because

the findings of such benefits are overwhelmed by research on Black disadvantage. Search algorithms are also trained or accustomed to finding Black disadvantage. When I typed into Google "diseases less common in Black people" the first result I got was: "Why 7 Deadly Diseases Strike Blacks Most – WebMD." Black disadvantage leads. The same was true when trying to find the empirical work on Black advantage in other domains. Although it took a lot of digging, I was able to put together a solid lecture for the class. At the end, I asked my students: What is it about Black culture, Black families, Black neighborhoods, and Black institutions that yield these positive results? And conversely, what is lacking in White spaces or in Whiteness that disadvantages them (Malat, Mayorga-Gallo, and Williams 2018)?

The exercise got me curious and so I set out to find other studies that found Black advantage. I initially endeavored to cover thirteen domains that are often studied by sociologists: family, attitudes, marriage, mental health, physical health, religion, drug use, the labor market, education, neighborhoods, civic engagement, friendships/social networks, and crime. I searched for the term "Black advantage" (inside and outside of quotation marks) in Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Sociological Abstracts. Many of the results pertained to the research on the "net Black advantage" in college-going, which shows that Black students are more likely to go to college than White students once academic and socioeconomic factors are controlled (Alexander, Holupka, and Pallas 1987; Bennett and Xie 2003; Bennett and Lutz 2009; Blake 2018; Merolla 2013). The payoff of a literal search for "Black advantage" was not great. So, I searched various phrases, such as "Blacks performed better," "Blacks had better outcomes," "Black people showed greater," or Black and paradox, since Black people doing better than White people is often presented as "surprising" or "unexpected." I also searched areas in which I already knew (from my course lecture) that Black people had an advantage, such as lower suicide rates, higher self-esteem, greater religiosity, and stronger intergenerational family ties, and updated my cache

of studies on those topics. Finally, I followed many leads using Google scholar's "Cited by" function. When I found an article on, say, the advantages of "ethnic density"—basically, living in a predominately Black neighborhood—I both looked at the bibliographies and explored what articles cited the original. I'm sure there are more studies that I did not find, and so I present Figure 1 and the following discussion as just a start.

Figure 1 presents the domains with the most developed literatures on Black advantage. I include a brief description of the finding and citation. The implicit comparison group is always White people. The studies listed here may seem like a lot, but it required sorting through hundreds (if not thousands) of other studies across the social sciences (epidemiology, anthropology, political science, etc.) that reported on Black disadvantage. Finding Black advantage is not conditioned on the race of the scholar; many of the scholars cited in Figure 1 are not Black. While these studies go against the academic grain by finding Black advantage, they are not broadly upending the social sciences by asking new questions, studying new outcomes, or using new methods. I invite the reader to explore these studies for the details of their findings. Here, I highlight one key finding, and then discuss what is not included.

The most robust literature on Black advantage is in the field of mental health. It is so robust that it has achieved a label: the Black-White mental health paradox (Erving, Thomas, and Frazier 2019; Mouzon 2014; Mouzon 2017). Black people have a lower incidence of most mental illnesses despite higher risk factors. The American Psychiatric Association (2017) reports that 19 percent of White Americans suffered from any mental illness in the previous twelve months, compared to 16.8 percent of Black Americans. For serious mental illness in the past year, the incidence was 4.8 percent for White people compared to 3.1 percent for Black people (American Psychological Association 2018). These are raw statistics; controlling for income and other factors shows even more of a Black advantage (Erving, Thomas, and Frazier 2019).[2] Many of

Figure 1. Studies that find Black advantage.

Family and Marriage	Religion
• Black people have more kin, including fictive kin, in their social networks, and they see them more often (Taylor et al. 2013).	• Black people are more likely to believe in God, state that religion is important in their lives, attend religious services, pray frequently, engage in religious study, read and interpret scripture, meditate, and feel at peace (Pew Research Center 2014).
• Black people live closer geographically to kin, especially siblings and extended family (Spring et al. 2017).	• Black people are more likely to believe in contingent standards for right and wrong (Pew Research Center 2014).
• Black families give more practical support to kin (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004).	• Black elderly people are more involved in activities with their church networks and more likely to give and receive assistance from church members (Krause 2002).
• Black people have a stronger sense of obligation to take care of their elders; take care of them moremore often, even when elders have complex health issues; and enjoy caring for their elders more (Bookman and Kimbrel 2011; Coleman, Ganong, and Rothrauff 2006; Roth et al. 2015; Sun et al. 2010; Heo and Koeske 2013).	• Black young people are less likely to experience declines in religiosity in situations of family disruption (Denton and Culver 2015).
• Black fathers in co-residential and in non-residential situations are more involved in childrearing (Hofferth 2003; Jones and Mosher 2013).	• Religiosity has a stronger effect on voting among Black people (Secret, Johnson, and Forrest 1990)
• Black people married to Black people don't experience the widowhood effect of dying soon after spouse as frequently (Elwert and Christakis 2006).	
• Black couples have more egalitarian attitudes and practices (Blee and Tickamyer 1995; Orbuch and Eyster 1997).	

Education	Mental Health and Drug Use
• Black students are more likely to attend college, once controlling for background (Blake 2018; Bennett and Xie 2003; Bennett and Lutz 2009; Merolla 2013).	• Alcohol use, heavy drinking, binge drinking, and opioid overdose are all lower among Black people (American Psychiatric Association 2017)
• Black children attain more education, once controlling for families and neighborhoods (Sharkey 2013).	• Black women and Black youth are less likely to smoke cigarettes, and Black women less likely to smoke while pregnant (American Lung Association 2020; Centers for Disease Control 2009)
• Black youth are more likely to graduate from high school, once controlling for socioeconomic background (Conley 1999), or for where they were born (LaVeist and McDonald 2002).	• Black youth have lower odds of developing substance use disorders (Wu et al. 2011)
• Black parents and students show more positive attitudes towards education and college (Blau 2003; Pew Research Center 2016).	• Majority Black schools have a lower prevalence of misuse of prescription painkillers (Ehntholt 2018).
• Low-income Black girls are more likely to graduate from high school (Clark and Shi 2020).	• Despite more risk factors, Black people have less mental illness (Erving, Thomas, and Frazier 2019; McGuire and Miranda 2008; Mouzon 2017) and more mental "flourishing" (Keyes 2009).
• Black teachers lower Black boys' dropout rates and increase their interest in school, practice less exclusionary discipline, and are less likely to negatively label Black students' behaviors (Bates and Glick 2013; Gershenson et al. 2018; Lindsay and Hart 2017).	• Black people have lower suicide rates (Curtin and Hedegaard 2019)
	• Black people have higher self-esteem (Bachman et al. 2011).
	• Poor Black people are more optimistic (Graham and Pinto 2018).
• HBCUs show many positive outcomes despite fewer resources (Kim and Conrad 2006; Mykerezi and Mills 2008; Wilson 2007; Owens et al. 2012).	• Black people raised in Blacker environments report better psychological well-being (Postmes and Branscombe 2002).

Figure 1, continued. Studies that find Black advantage.

Physical Health	Neighborhoods
• Black people are less likely to have skin cancer (Centers for Disease Control 2017). • Black people are less likely to have head lice (Centers for Disease Control 2019). • Black women are less likely to suffer from a premenstrual disorder (Pilver et al. 2011). • Black people have less cystic fibrosis (Sanders and Fink 2016). • Black people have less Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS) (Centers for Disease Control 2014). • Black people have less atrial fibrillation (Amponsah, Benjamin, and Magnani 2013). • Black dialysis patients have significantly lower mortality (Kovesdy 2013). • Black people have less inflammatory bowel disease (DeLisser et al. 2018). • Black people in Blacker counties report better health care experiences (Haas et al. 2004). • Black students in schools with fewer White students have better self-reported health (Goosby and Walsemann 2012)	• Blacker and more residentially stable neighborhoods lead to less internalizing behavior among Black adolescents (Hurd, Stoddard, and Zimmerman 2013). • Minority concentration lowers Black mortality in non-metropolitan areas (Blanchard, Cossman, and Levin 2004). • Black neighborhoods support strong Black electorates (Owens and Brown 2014). • Living in a Blacker neighborhood improves emotional well-being for Black people (Vogt Yuan 2007). • Predominately Black neighborhoods correlate with better Black mental health (Pickett and Wilkinson 2008; White and Lawrence 2019). • Black people are happier in Black neighborhoods (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2019). • Black people in Blacker areas have lower all-cause mortality (Fang et al. 1998; Inagami et al. 2006). • Black people in Black neighborhoods lose fewer years of life to heart disease (Franzini and Spears 2003). • Black people experience less discrimination in Black neighborhoods, which is related to less depression (English et al. 2014; Hunt et al. 2007).

the studies in Figure 1 find Black advantage in a certain domain only once controls for socioeconomic status or wealth or background characteristics are added. Such controls distort reality in some sense since Black people do generally have lower incomes, live in poorer neighborhoods, and are less likely to be married. But what these findings show is that Black people are much better at thriving—graduating from high school, going to college, avoiding drugs—than *similarly situated* White people.

This thriving is apparent in the mental health research. The opposite of mental illness is mental health, and Black people excel on this front as well. Measured by such indicators as having "warm, satisfying, trusting personal relationships," holding "positive attitudes toward oneself and past life," and accepting "positive and negative aspects of self," Keyes (2009) finds that the unadjusted incidence of what he calls "mental flourishing" is 20.7 percent for Black people and 16.3 percent for White people. The Black advantage grows when experiences of discrimination are controlled, illustrating that "Blacks would have even better mental health were it not for discrimination" (1677).

Despite the robustness of this finding, some researchers continue to express disbelief. McGuire and Miranda (2008) branded the Black mental health advantage as "startling." In an article on young people that found Black youth to score highest on self-esteem—another area with robust Black advantage—the authors were so incredulous that they truncated the responses to exclude "extreme response style," which "reduced but did not eliminate the subgroup differences" (Bachman et al. 2011:1). I interpret this incredulity to be partially our fault as social scientists. It is why we need Black Advantage Vision. We have not shown empirically and *repeatedly* where Black people shine. It reminds me of my first year in graduate school as I rode on a tour bus through Chicago guided by a decorated departmental faculty member. As we drove through a neighborhood with neatly trimmed lawns and well-kept houses, the professor said, "You all might think this is a White neighborhood, but actually it's a Black neighborhood." Now, why would we assume that White people lived there? Because it was

clean and looked safe? The fact that we sociologists could not *envision* an attractive Black neighborhood reflected the hegemony of research on Black disadvantage, which despite many valiant efforts we have still not managed to overthrow.

What domains are not represented in Figure 1? The hardest categories to fill were civic participation, crime, and social networks. Black people seem to be involved in slightly more community groups (Pew Research Center 2019) and do more community service (Smith 2005) than White people, but there isn't a lot of research on it. Black congregations are more likely to encourage voting behavior and are more committed to social justice projects (Brown 2009), but it's not clear if this should be categorized as a religious advantage or a civic advantage. On crime, the most likely perpetrator of a white-collar crime is a White, employed, middle-aged man (Klenowski and Dawson 2016), hence Black people seem to do better on this measure. If we consider drug use as part of crime, then Black people compare favorably for some outcomes (see Figure 1). On social networks, Black elderly people seem to be less socially isolated than similar White seniors (Taylor, Chatters, and Taylor 2019). The research on friendships—that is, quantity, quality, strength, and support of friends—seems fixated on cross-racial friendships. There is a literature on social support that generally finds parity across race (Taylor et al. 2013), and research on how social support might impact mental and physical health outcomes (e.g., Bell, Thorpe, and LaVeist 2010; Lincoln, Chatters, and Taylor 2003). Nothing in this field, however, stood out as a clear finding of Black advantage. These are all areas ripe for utilizing Black Advantage Vision.

Studies of the labor market are filled with information about Black higher unemployment, lower wages, and experiences of discrimination. What I found regarding Black advantage could be up for multiple interpretations. Black women, in general—and Black married women and Black mothers, in particular—have higher labor force participation rates (Department of Labor 2020). But is that a good thing? Maybe Black women need a break. Is this an advantage we want to embrace? In the other

direction, some studies show that Black men have higher reservation wages (i.e., the lowest wage a person will accept for a job) than White men given their skills and the prevailing wages being offered (Holzer 1986; Petterson 1998). While some scholars interpret this to be a problem, since it supposedly keeps Black men from taking low-wage work and thus keeps them jobless, an alternative interpretation is that Black men are more likely to refuse to participate in exploitative capitalism. This stance has its near-term disadvantages, of course, but insofar as Black Advantage Vision requires new ideas about the future, such refusal could be read as revolutionary. These issues of normative evaluations and interpretation of findings are things we must wrestle with as we execute Black Advantage Vision.

SECTION IV. PUTTING BLACK ADVANTAGE VISION TO WORK

What does research with Black Advantage Vision look like? In this section I plant seeds for moving from theory to dissemination.

Theories and Assumptions: Research using Black Advantage Vision must actively reject a deficit framework. The perils of the deficit model have been well-explicated going back to early Black sociologists, and reiterated in the texts cited previously (also see Brown 2011; Tuck 2009; Yosso 2005). If we generally think Black people are universally downtrodden and desperate then we will set to find it. And if we don't find it where we look, we will be "startled" or label the finding a "paradox." Instead, Black Advantage Vision requires us to begin by recognizing the full humanity of Black folks, which obviously includes some mix of failure and triumph. Researchers can build hypotheses based on the work depicted in Figure 1, or instead might imagine new domains not yet explored. This is where being a Black scholar can itself be an advantage since Black scholars are more likely to be immersed in Black culture and institutions and thus have firsthand observations of Black assets. Such observations, however, do not automatically prove some characteristic is a strength that Black people

have over White people. Black Advantage Vision research must be comparative, either explicitly or against an established body of knowledge. In order to have a theory about Black advantage, one must spend time thinking about how a particular behavior, attribute, or trait might manifest (or not) among White people and why.

Posing the Question: In Black Advantage Vision the question must compare Black and White people. There is plenty of room in the discipline for the important research set wholly within the Black community. That's nearly all I've done my whole career. But it does not comply with Black Advantage Vision since the point under this framework is to empirically show an advantage over White people. For example, a finding not reported in Figure 1, but firmly within the mainstream study of the family, is that Black people have more cousins (and half-siblings) in their families than White people (Daw, Verdery, and Margolis 2016). This finding answered a rhetorical joke bandied about amongst my family and friends for years: Do White people have cousins? We had found ourselves frequently talking about our cousins (fictive and real) in interracial settings and never hearing White people do the same. Now I know we actually do have more cousins. But are questions about cousins routinely included in surveys or are they overlooked because White people have fewer of them and White people are, for the most part, designing the surveys? If we can get or collect the data, a Black Advantage Vision question might ask: Does the greater likelihood of having a cousin among Black people lead to less social isolation? Or better socioemotional development among only children? Or less social isolation in old age? Or greater access to childcare for single mothers? These types of questions grow from existing findings.

Generating a research question is also the moment when scholars can most flex their imaginative muscles, can catch a vision and shape it into a question. It is the moment to possibly stake new normative claims about what constitutes healthy, productive, or well-adjusted behavior. Psychologist James Jones (2003) proposes the TRIOS model (Time, Rhythm, Improvisa-

tion, Orality, and Spirituality) to explain Black people's way of being in the world. Recent research finds that Black poor children heard more words per hour than children in all other race/socioeconomic status (SES) groups (Sperry, Sperry, and Miller 2019). How might we study this orality in education by redefining the usual dependent variables? Do Black children speak more, especially in the early grades before teachers begin to label it as misbehaving? Is the labeling of Black students' behavior as problematic a result of this orality? Does such orality (assuming it has not been stamped out in the early grades) correlate with better performance than White students on oral assignments, on debate teams, or in group presentations? Does it translate into advantage—defined as hiring, wage premiums, or job satisfaction—over White people in certain oral-heavy jobs like sales or teaching? Posing new questions can be scary, and might occasion a negative response from advisors, colleagues, and the field at large. The hopeful payoff is trailblazing a new field of research.

Study Design: While there are many new questions that can be asked of existing data, Black Advantage Vision may also require the collection of new data. But we can start small. The study cited above about poor Black children hearing more words was conducted on a total of forty-two families, and it was published in the premier journal *Child Development.* Granted, the authors coded over 157 hours of audio recordings with those families, but computational text analysis will make this kind of data processing more feasible. We can also design new interviews, ethnographies, and surveys that include new variables—such as access to cousins or self-rated ability to keep rhythm—and new outcomes—such as preferences for restorative versus punitive justice (Bobo and Johnson 2004). Again, the research must be comparative, so the same questions asked of Black people should be asked of White people. This might make for some awkward moments. For example, Higginbotham and Weber (1992:430) asked women in their study of upward mobility the following question: "Generally, do you feel you owe a lot for the help given to you by your family and relatives?" When they posed the question to White women, they

found that "many were perplexed and asked what the question meant" (430). Black women, on the other hand, understood the question easily and "tended to respond immediately that they felt a sense of obligation" (430). Black people are likely to do better on research instruments that have been designed with Black people in mind, in the same way that White people do better on many of the surveys and tests now in existence, which they designed.

    Data Analysis: Black Advantage Vision is especially important when working with existing data, be it census tract information, government documents, survey responses, or archival collections. Zuberi (2001) has already elucidated the problem with "racial statistics," both because the concepts and methods themselves are steeped in racism and because their application is characterized by undertheorizing and underspecifying what the variables "Black" and "White" are meant to capture. By denoting someone as Black or White in a statistical model, are we assuming the categories stand in for discrimination, socialization, genetics, childhood experiences, language dialect, political attitudes, or all or none of these? In addition to needing more data in order to be able to include these variables directly in a model, researchers should be more reflective about what classifications Black and White are capturing. No doubt doing so might find that neither Black people nor White people hold an advantage, but rather people with high self-esteem (of which Black people have more, but why?) or people from two-parent homes (which is more common among White people, but why?). A more precise specification of our statistical models will surely chip away at the grossly generalized findings of Black disadvantage.

    Data analysis outside of the world of statistics can also be enhanced by Black Advantage Vision because it will be driven by new questions. Our coding of documents or search for archival sources will be informed by our hunches about Black advantage. Rather than coding a trove of minutes from predominately Black and White homeowners' association meetings for discussions about crime or concern about property values or mort-

gage discrimination—which might yield Black disadvantage narratives—why not code for attention to positive youth racial socialization and development (e.g., Lacy 2007), or celebrations of college-going, or discussions of sponsoring needy beneficiaries. Every researcher makes decisions about analytical strategies. Black Advantage Vision encourages the selection of search terms, codes, and archives that might uncover Black advantage.

Writing: As with all research, our hypotheses are not always confirmed. I am not proposing that we discard contrary findings. Indeed, I wonder how frequently findings of Black advantage have been discarded because they were too "startling," or because the researcher (or their advisors or reviewers) thought something must be wrong with the data or analysis. We must write up what we find just as judiciously as if our theories had been proven correct. The special twist about writing with Black Advantage Vision is not in suppression but confession. Be up front about your theories, assumptions, methods, and analysis. Own the expectation and intent to find Black advantage as part of contributing to a body of counter-stigmatizing knowledge. Confess to the normative re-interpretations and quandaries. For example, Cheadle and Amato (2011) show that Black families are less likely than White families to practice "concerted cultivation," which entails intensive activities schedules for kids and strong parental involvement. However, Black Advantage Vision might construe this finding as an advantage under the theory that heavily scheduled children are less able to problem solve on their own, or that active participation exhausts or stresses parents. These normative claims are pretty tame. We might be more bold in confessing a normative position about the positive effects of cutting school, having grandparents raise grandchildren, speaking Black English, or refusing low-wage work, turning things that are often figured to be disadvantages into advantages for different outcomes (Cohen 2004; Kelley 1993). In the best-case scenario, our questions, data, and argumentation will be so innovative and tight that our research will get traction.

Dissemination: The aim of Black Advantage Vision is to balance out the research in sociology and the social sciences. Textbooks for introductory courses on race should not be filled with narratives about Black disadvantage, but should instead include the advantages of being Black. Our op-eds, interviews with journalists, and talks to public audiences need to convey the fact that Black people outperform White people in many realms. The next time someone (Black or White) says that Black students do not value education, read them the quotes from Karolyn Tyson's book (2011, 39) when she interviews Black fourth graders whose "remarks reflect positive attitudes toward the gifted program in particular and academic achievement in general." Or show them the figures in Chapter 2 of Amanda Lewis and John Diamond's book (2015) that show that Black students are more likely than White students to aspire to a college education and are less likely to have not completed their homework because of peer distractions, once adjusting for SES.

But our most effective kingdom in which to disseminate Black advantage findings is the classroom. This whole exercise began out of a frustration with drowning my students in Black disadvantage, both because I knew it not to be true and because I would see them regurgitate it to me in their papers and it sounded so clichéd. It was as if they could have written the papers before even taking the class by just assuming that Black people trailed White people on everything. I also felt it damaged my Black students to sit in class after class where PowerPoint slide after slide showed their supposed inferiority. It was a real treat the day I taught the Black advantage module and I look forward to doing more of it. But we need to make it easier by producing more research.[3]

Other kinds of research: We can bring Black Advantage Vision to the study of our disciplines. We might ask: What is the true prevalence of Black advantage versus Black disadvantage research? My process for searching for studies on Black advantage was extensive but not especially systematic. How might we formally count the number of studies that show Black advantage

versus disadvantage in a certain domain such as educational outcomes? Moreover, once research on racial stratification is produced, is it taken up differently depending on the finding? In other words, are studies of Black disadvantage more highly cited than studies of Black advantage? What have been the career experiences of scholars who have done research on or had findings of Black advantage? Do they perceive greater barriers to publication, promotion, or prestige? What do funders think about research proposals that plainly hypothesize Black advantage? And, finally, how might we also study the other side of the Black advantage coin, namely White disadvantage? Why do 92 percent of White police officers (compared to 29 percent of Black officers) think that "our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites" (Pew Research Center 2020)? Why don't White people enroll in college at the same rate as Black people with similar background characteristics? Why can't White people dance and what are the consequences? The fact that we don't ask these questions is because of the unspoken assumption that there can't be anything wrong with White people since they generally have more money, live in bigger houses, and head up Fortune 500 companies. A Black Advantage Vision is equally open to findings of White disadvantage, not to bash Whiteness, but rather to accurately represent that empirical world in which White people can make bad choices, be lazy, or be blinded by their privilege.

CONCLUSION

I don't claim to be a card carrying Afrofuturist but when Eve Ewing (2017) writes "In the future, every child in Chicago has food and a safe place to sleep, and mothers laugh all day and eat Popsicles," I can't help but smile and agree (also see Iton 2010; Kelley 2002; Womack 2013). The young people leading today's Black protest organizations are imagining a new future. The Black Youth Project promotes its "Agenda to Build Black Futures" (BYP100 2016), and one of the founders of Black Lives Matter now runs the Black Futures Lab. All of these references to the future are

statements that the present is not acceptable; that the future must be different. It is in the spirit of such *visions* that I conclude with a recognition that today's activists may render a Black Advantage Vision already antiquated. In its policy statement, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL 2016) writes: "We reject false solutions and believe we can achieve a complete transformation of the current systems, which place profit over people and make it impossible for many of us to breathe." Such a revolution could abolish White and Black advantage and disadvantage. More deeply, it could challenge a focus on stratification and hierarchy, and reject comparisons with White people altogether. The goal of BYP100's "Agenda to Build Black Futures" is for "ALL Black people to be able to live in their dignity" (BYP100 2016:4). Does Black dignity require the wealth of White people, the homeownership rates of White people, the occupational attainment of White people? What will society look like when dignity—or justice, or freedom, or joy—is the normative aspiration? What kind of research does that require?

As I began, it is the poets who answer these questions best. Tracy K. Smith (2020) muses in her poem "Dear Black America":

> Once a friend told me, "I think we came to this earth to save it."

> Once, I wrote in a notebook, "Maybe we are operating at a heightened spiritual frequency."

For now, Black Advantage Vision can empirically document the higher frequency on which Black people are operating. For the future, once we have saved the earth, such research won't be necessary.

ENDNOTES

1 Stigma is an important mechanism but the root causes of Black disadvantage are the intertwined structures of White supremacy, systemic racism, and racial capitalism.

2 Behavioral health experts will rightly point out that Black people face many barriers to care when they do have mental health challenges, and while Black people suffer less from "disorders" we have higher rates of psychological "distress" (Barnes and Bates 2017), likely caused by stressful environments. These are important points, but the goal of this paper is not to identify all of the caveats to the findings of Black advantage, but rather to raise the awareness of these areas of advantage as possible levers to further promote Black life.

3 I am well aware that there is copious research on the strengths of Black people and communities across many social science fields. My focus here is specifically on research within the fields of stratification and inequality studies, not the broader world of research on Black people.

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