



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Episode #9: Systemic Racism with Phia Salter

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Andy Luttrell:

George Floyd died on May 25th as a group of police officers held him face down in the street and one of those officers knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes, despite his clear inability to breathe. His death was and is tragic, and it's not the only one like it. Cases of police killing nonviolent black people have been happening for ages. When these cases make it to national news, there's widespread discussion about the realities of race in America, opinions fly, and then the national media coverage fades until another case makes it to the news.

Andy Luttrell:

Now, listen, I'm a tall white guy from the Midwest. For me to say I understand what it means to be black in the United States would be insane. And honestly, as someone who is white, it would be way more comfortable for me to just deny that there's really any problem. When a system benefits you, it's certainly nicer to think that that system is fine. And that's what we're going to explore today. The idea that racism is baked into the larger system.

Andy Luttrell:

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from and how they change. And the ironic thing is that today we're not really talking about opinions because that may have been at least somewhat of a red herring all along. In psychology, a major focus has been on how prejudice is an individual person's feelings or beliefs about other groups. And so things like discrimination seem to be easily explained by the prejudices that live inside of people. And if we could just change each other's opinions about marginalized racial groups, reduce people's implicit biases, we could simply and efficiently eradicate inequalities.

Andy Luttrell:

It's the idea that racism can be attributed to a few bad apples with problematic beliefs. But my guest today has a different perspective. Dr. Phia Salter is an associate professor of psychology at Davidson College where she integrates perspectives from cultural psychology and critical race theory to understand important social issues. We talked about her research and writing about systemic racism, including how historical knowledge is important for understanding racism in the modern world.

Andy Luttrell:

The thing about your work that I sort of started thinking about as being both related to the conversations people are having across the country or across the world and the topic of this show, which is opinions and

sort of personal feelings and opinions, is that you have taken, and very nicely sort of throughout all the work that you've done. I did a bit of a dive on on the stuff that you've written, a very clear through line to suggest that for things like racism, thinking of it as a personal opinion or the opinion of a handful of people who use that as a way to frame their choices maybe has some amount of value, but surely isn't the whole story. I thought we could start out if you would be able to just sort of give some background on how psychologists or the public have often talked about prejudice and racism and how you might suggest we think about it a little differently.

Phia Salter:

Yeah, thanks. Psychology I think has honestly taken its cues from mainstream society in how they think about racism. And so, if you were to go to a Webster's dictionary, it's most likely to start with something like racism is a belief that someone has, or racism is a prejudice, or they'll even use prejudice to define racism itself. And from my perspective and from my research, that really limits what you would include in the scope of what might constitute racism and what doesn't, right? If you can kind of limit it to individual action or individual bias, then that puts a certain set of behaviors in your para view of what might constitute racism. And so I think psychology is very much in line with that perspective sort of thinking about racism as a belief or as some sort of individual prejudice or bias.

Andy Luttrell:

But instead, sort of could you expand on how we might think of it if it's not that.

Phia Salter:

Yeah, sure. I guess when you're starting off with a definition dovetailing away from racism as a belief, you might start with racism as a system. And once you think about racism as a system and all of the different variables that might go into supporting that system or maintaining that system, then it ultimately widens your scope in terms of what might or might not constitute racism. So yeah, the real shift is from racism as a belief to racism as a system.

Andy Luttrell:

And what would it mean for racism to be a system? Because part of also the reason that I'm interested in talking to you in this way that people can listen in on is because what I see is that people talking about systemic racism in a way that's become a little buzzwordy in progressive circles and in people who are skeptical sort of saying, what are you talking about? They're sort of deriding this idea of systemic racism. But I don't always get the sense that people actually realize what they're saying when they say that. So in what ways would we say a system is a racist system?

Phia Salter:

Right. That's a great question. It's going to clarify what I mean by saying racism is a system. And what I mean is racism is a system of advantages and disadvantages; and that institutions, practices, our actions, artifacts, everything that makes up our world, our every day, can all contribute to this system of advantages and disadvantages. That could be from the, I don't want to say the small end, but on the small end you can think about ideas can contribute to that system by our cultural systems, our social systems. But then they can also be on the larger scale in like institutions or right now people are focused on policing as a system or our criminal justice system. But you could also look at these issues as they relate to the educational system or our healthcare system as well.

Andy Luttrell:

If we were to say that a system is built on racism or is a racist system, are we saying the rules that have been made that are now in the books advantage certain groups over other groups? I'm just trying to get a more concrete handle on like how could someone imagine a system. Because I think we've used that word so often to talk about beliefs that it's hard to be like, well wait, but a system can't have intentions. That's what racism is, is having these bad intentions. So again, in what way might we say that like, "Oh, here I can pinpoint, I'm seeing an example of a racist system in action."

Phia Salter:

Yes. So that's-

Andy Luttrell:

Just to put you on the spot.

Phia Salter:

Yeah, yeah. On one hand, I would argue that systems are made up of intentions. I don't want to anthropomorphize the system. But our own beliefs, our own desires, our own attention are deposited into the systems every day with our choices, with our preferences, with our actions. And it's not as if those preferences and choices and beliefs come from nowhere, they're historically and culturally derived, right? It's kind of this push and pull of both you have... To say that a system is racist is not to absolutely absolve individuals in their participation and maintaining or perpetuating or building the different components of that system. But it's also to say that those ideas, those beliefs, they don't come from nowhere, right? They're historically and culturally derived.

Phia Salter:

I'm not 100% I answered your question, but I think the real trouble with this conversation is that it requires a lot of nuance and it's so much simpler just to say, or to point at someone and say, "Oh, they have a racist belief." And then we can sort of wipe our hands, we can maybe throw some consequences at that person and we can feel pretty good about ourselves because we don't have or we don't think we share that belief.

Phia Salter:

But it goes beyond beliefs in that we could be participating in everyday actions that uphold those same beliefs. So, when we think about the interaction between... oh, now I am forgetting his name. He was birdwatching in New York's park. And the woman who he asked her to put her dog on a leash and clearly she did not want to do this and felt, I don't know, felt upset that he had asked her to put her dog on the leash. And so, she calls the police and clearly says, "I'm going to tell them that you're an African-American and that you're harassing me."

Phia Salter:

In this dialogue, both people share this knowledge that there are associations with African-Americans with criminality and threats and danger, and that she could utilize this association to kind of protect herself in that scenario or to not, I don't know, to basically go on doing what she wanted to do, right? And so, the conversation we're having about racism in whether that was individual bias. Sure, individual bias on her part. But it's also part of a system that it doesn't reward. I don't say it rewards drawing upon those associations, but in that case she thought that it would, right? So they're participating in a system where both people share this knowledge of America's views and stereotypes about African-Americans and then she uses that to kind of, I would say she's trying to direct some violence at him, surely.

Andy Luttrell:

It seems like there's a resistance that you were even alluding to a little bit ago against seeing racism as systemic, right? And so could you talk a little bit more... in just sort of as you've read and embedded yourself in this perspective, are there ways in which you've found it difficult to open people to that perspective and why might that individual bias thing be more palatable for people?

Phia Salter:

Yeah. When I first got involved as a student in research, Hurricane Katrina had just happened. And so, my master's thesis ended up looking at perceptions of racism surrounding Hurricane Katrina because if you had read the news, people would say, "Well, a hurricane can't be racist, right? It has no racial animus associated with gale force winds." And so we asked people, essentially do you see racism in Hurricane Katrina? And we found the same kind of gap that we see in national polls is that white folks are less likely to say that these instances have anything to do with racism, and black folks are more likely to say that these instances have something to do with racism.

Phia Salter:

But what we found is something that kind of mediated that gap or filled in that gap is that African-Americans were drawing upon historical knowledge about how natural disasters can have a different racialized impact in their communities. And so we asked them about their knowledge, and to the extent that they knew more critical history knowledge, the more likely they were to say that racism played a role. But it was also true of white folks. Now, they didn't have as much knowledge of the instances we asked them about, but to the extent that those who did have knowledge, they were also more likely to say that these kinds of incidents were race relevant.

Phia Salter:

I bring up Hurricane Katrina because that was one of the first areas that I started looking at. But you can look at more broadly. So whether people think American-Indian mascots are racist has to do with historical knowledge. And so, whether you believe that these police related acts of violence are due to racism or not for me is a testable hypothesis because I would suggest that those who have been engaging with these critical histories and understand that it's not just a singular time point now in which police have been using more aggression within black communities, that you would also more likely believe that these acts of violence aren't race neutral, but that they have something to do with racism.

Andy Luttrell:

And the history angle emphasizes that systemic part so much because you could say, well, racists come and go, right? People with these views come and go. They're moldable and shapeable. But if acknowledging history is so powerfully connected to understanding these things as racially biased even though you go, like you said, a hurricane wouldn't have a bias unto itself, it highlights that systemic nature of it. This is the Marley hypothesis?

Phia Salter:

Yes.

Andy Luttrell:

As an aside, almost perfectly reflecting what that hypothesis is about, when I first saw the title of Marley hypothesis I thought, well, this must be... I wonder if this is like a black scholar that I'm not familiar with, that I have no cultural knowledge of. And then as it turned out, the Marley in question was... Could you give some background on why it's called the Marley hypothesis?

Phia Salter:

Yeah. The scholar in question is Bob Marley, the infamous [inaudible 00:14:03]. As an aside, there's lots of knowledge and wisdom in black cultural knowledge built into his music in which I would say my former adviser collaborator, Clint Adams, likes to talk about how in the Buffalo Soldiers or in Bob Marley's work, part of what makes Bob Marley great is that lots of his work is political in conveying these messages. And so if you're really listening, then you're going to be changed and be moved by what he's saying. And so, part of the Marley hypothesis is also if you know your past and if you know where I'm coming from, then you also know why I'm essentially saying what I'm saying, why you know that I'm bringing this up, why I might see the world the way that I do.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm thinking about the way that systemic perspectives would shape how we advocate for change, right? In the wake of the last couple of weeks as many people are tuning into these conversations, but I mean, they didn't start a week and a half ago. In what ways might a systemic view change the way you think advocacy is most effective?

Phia Salter:

I can say something a bit more broad in terms of what I believe the implications of what we talked about earlier, an individual approach or individual bias perspective, kind of focusing on beliefs versus focusing on the system. If we focus on the individual and the beliefs, then the job of intervention becomes trying to change individual hearts and individual minds, trying to convince them of their wrongdoing and trying to bring them around to your perspective. There's some folks who do inter-racial dialogues, and doing that kind of work, that's really effective and that's awesome.

Phia Salter:

But what a systemic perspective suggests is that you could change the individual, but they're going to be right back in the cultural context or right back in the systemic context that facilitated those beliefs in the first place. So if you don't address what's going on in the system, then you could change the individual heart, change the individual mind, but what's to sort of sustain that mode of thinking or sustain that way of approaching.

Phia Salter:

And so in my classroom I like to talk about racism and race and those ideas as fish and fishbowls, right? When you think about the fish swimming around in the water, and let's say that in this case racism is the water, and we could all agree that racism is toxic. The solution to giving the fish the best chance of survival is not to take him out of the tank, clean him off, and then put him back into the tank, right? What you want to do is clean the fishbowl, right? You want to address all of the things that are happening in that fish's context or in that fish's environment so that they could have a healthy longer existence.

Phia Salter:

And so I think that's kind of how our approaches to racism has been, sort of thinking about taking the fish out of water, cleaning his off, trying to convince his little heart or his little mind, then putting him back into the toxic water. And so if you don't do some work to address what's going on in the environment, then that's not going to do. Now that's not to absolve individuals, because fish can also do some polluting of the water. And so, it's really a dynamic between making sure you're engaging both aspects of this dynamic.

Andy Luttrell:

The image that that is making me think of is those Dawn soap commercials where they have the little ducklings where it's like, oh, there was an oil spill, or whatever. Some awful thing, and they go, our soap cleans it off so nice. But everyone knows you don't throw the duck back in the water because that will have undone the careful... it makes a nice picture when you clean the duck off, in the same way that it sounds like these kinds of bias training sorts of initiatives feel very impactful and effective and you go, "Oh, super duper. I've changed all these minds." But what I'm hearing you say is that without addressing the root issues, it's like throwing those ducks or fish back into the water. I mean, we can springboard even beyond some of the things that you've written explicitly, but what are the kinds of things that would need to happen to address the systemic issue?

Phia Salter:

Yeah. I guess the big one is at the institutional policy change. Don't have all of those specific answers, but I know there are activists out doing that work and trying to radically re-imagine what our country could look like. Right now people are talking about what policing could look like, and the other sort of component... One is legislate it and do so with radical imagination. I'm just going to do a quick plug for, well, for one campaign that I've seen online, 8cantwait.org. There's some very concrete steps that policing precincts could take to try to reduce the amount of violence being experienced by citizens. And they also have a nice page up with research that backs their claims, so go check it out.

Phia Salter:

I guess another step. Now, education isn't the answer, particularly in the we need to change hearts and minds kind of response. But I would say that understanding the ways in which whose history is told and whose history is sanitized. I think we can ultimately, perhaps it's going to be a case study in the future, look at Nevada, which has instituted ethics studies as a requirement, versus Arizona which is trying to dismantle ethic studies as a requirement or as an area. To the extent that, at least some of my work shows that the more critical knowledge that people have, the more likely they're able to understand and perceive systemic racism, and the more likely they are also to support policy that would have an impact on systemic racism. It's not an answer to all of it by any stretch of imagination but I think these things have to go hand in hand. I don't know, your question was like, so how do you change the world?

Andy Luttrell:

I know. I should say that I know that this is complicated and nuanced, but what I worry is that those conversations aren't happening at the level at which they need to be to make this change. Some of this maybe is just raising questions or getting input from you who in your work has sort of thought through all the nooks and crannies through which we could think about these questions just to see, are there conversations that we should be having that we're not having. Because maybe you go, I don't know the answer, and of course, right? If we knew the answer, it would be done or at least closer to it. Are there questions that... From your vantage point as a cultural psychologist studying race, you say that some of this national conversation is missing an element that needs to be there. Does that ring true? Are there sorts of things that you would say, "These are the things we haven't been thinking about that we will need to."

Phia Salter:

Yeah. There is one thing that I want to maybe ask people to think about or think through, and it's around the conversation of implicit bias. I think the issue with racism is that it's nuanced and that it is adaptive and that it ages with context. And so, I know there has been lots of critiques around implicit bias training for police officers, specifically I think as it's been instituted as an answer to racism or racism in policing. But I also want folks to think about what implicit bias might also be signally not as a racist detector,

right? I think some folks kind of hear implicit bias and say, "Oh, okay, that's going to reveal whether I'm a racist or not." That's not how I interpret that kind of work.

Phia Salter:

What implicit bias tests and implicit associations kind of work can show are those associations that are built into our culture, right? So the idea that black is more readily associated with negativity or with criminality or with these different stereotypes. That's not something that those researchers made up. That stuff was already there, that stuff was already present. And so, now going through and just merely giving people implicit bias tests is not answer to policing in our society. But I would say that it does clearly show that we as a society do have these cultural associations that can be problematic and that could operate beyond our conscious awareness, and that we pick those things up in really subtle ways that we may not be aware of. And so for me, that's also a call to change the kind of associations that are built into our cultural context or into our environment.

Phia Salter:

The more representations that we can have that shows African-Americans beyond those stereotypes, no, that's not going to change the world, right? That's not going to be just the one answer you need. You need legislation, you need laws, you need there to be consequences for acting on racism or reproducing racism. But at the same time, I think what that research can do is allow us to understand that there are a lot of ideas that are pervasive in our society that we may not necessarily be thinking about consciously that are having an impact on how we see the world and we should address that.

Andy Luttrell:

It speaks to the culture side. One of the things that I think is really cool about the way that you've written about these topics is it's from a very clear cultural psychology perspective. For you, where did that perspective come from? Sort of did you enter grad school thinking cultural psychology is the perspective, or was that sort of an unfolding perspective for you?

Phia Salter:

Well I'll just, I'll put in a plug for, my PhD is in social psychology, but from the beginning I was trained by someone whose theoretical perspective is cultural psychological, so I take a cultural psychological perspective to almost any topic. I think through things through that lens. And so, I did not have a framework for understanding that until I was in graduate school, but I was also obviously drawn to working with my advisor because that was the kind of work that he was doing.

Andy Luttrell:

So why is that framework important?

Phia Salter:

I think the framework... A cultural psychological framework is important because it's foundational in understanding how people in societies and cultures make each other up, how those interactions and how those dynamics really inform one another. I think it may be simpler to try to understand one versus the other, but I think you'd get a more nuanced picture when you're examining both.

Andy Luttrell:

Can we talk about your paper on Black History Month portrayal?

Phia Salter:

Sure.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm a big fan.

Phia Salter:

Thank you.

Andy Luttrell:

I read it for the first time last night, and I'm going to ask you to sort of walk us through it. But what I really liked about it was that it took, like Study 1 was a very ethnographic cultural, even just like anthropological approach to the question. And then it sort of became the kind of study that you see in sort of bread and butter social psychology. So, could you give us a little bit of background on where the idea for that set of studies came from and how it mixes sort of cultural approaches with classic experimental approaches?

Phia Salter:

Yeah. In that study, I went into Kansas City schools during February for Black History Month and essentially talked to folks and took pictures of their Black History Month displays. Kansas City, at least at that time, like many American cities, are highly racially segregated. And so the schools in those communities are highly racially segregated. And so, what I observed while being there is that Black History Month displays in predominantly black schools were doing something a little different than the Black History Month displays in predominantly white schools. In predominant black schools and in predominantly white schools, there were some similarities in that famous first.

Phia Salter:

There are certain African-American individuals that are often highlighted during Black History Month. You all could probably recite it with me, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, some famous inventors. Some schools would also do athletes. Oprah appeared a couple of times. But outside of those individual famous first African-American achievers, there were also some differences in whether or not the schools actually addressed racism or linked those folks to larger Civil Rights Movement, or even broached the topic of slavery, versus what happened in some white schools is in some cases they didn't even necessarily reference Black History Month at all. It was more of a let's celebrate all of our diversity during this time.

Phia Salter:

And so after documenting those differences, we wondered, what is the consequence of thinking or being exposed to one version of Black History Month where you might have some of that history embedded versus being exposed to a version of Black History Month where it's primarily celebratory, just African-American achievers? And what we found is when we brought those materials into the lab, that those folks who were exposed to Black History Month materials that were more critical and mentioned racism, for example, were more likely to facilitate perceiving racism, both individual and systemic racism in society versus those that were more celebratory and they're in the orientation.

Phia Salter:

What we also found though is that we asked people how much they liked those different kinds of displays. Our white American participants didn't really like the displays that talked about racism or

brought those issues up. They liked the let's celebrate our common humanity, let's celebrate diversity, let's maybe not even mention that it's Black History Month kind of representations. And so-

Andy Luttrell:

Can I interject a second? This is the one where you were showing actual photos from different schools, right?

Phia Salter:

Yes.

Andy Luttrell:

And so, just to be clear, these are white participants who don't realize that some of those pictures are from predominantly black schools and others are from predominantly white schools. And yet they're saying, "Well, these ones, I like these ones. I'm not as big of a fan of those other ones." And it just so happens that the ones that they're preferring are the ones that are from their own cultural context.

Phia Salter:

Yes. Thank you. Exactly. And so when I talk about racism being a system and how it's also embedded in our preferences and selections, right? So it's not only that they prefer the materials that come from their own cultural context, they're preferring the representations that don't necessarily increase or change their perceptions of racism itself. And then we do a later study where we look at, we kind of tease apart the celebratory versus critical history, look at perceptions of racism, and then look at support for policy. Participants who were in the condition where they were exposed to critical knowledge were more likely to perceive more racism and the more racism they perceived, the more likely they thought supporting anti-racist policies.

Andy Luttrell:

Which the conclusion is not all that helpful, right? Because what you're saying is that it's a self-perpetuating machine where these communities are giving a nod to these sorts of issues and topics, but in a way that is, I think you might say sanitized or watered down, and that we now can show doesn't do much, right? But if you show those white participants the displays from predominantly black schools, then you're saying that that did move the needle more, right?

Phia Salter:

Yes.

Andy Luttrell:

It's just that the images they're seeing more don't do it.

Phia Salter:

Yeah. There's been a few conversations just, I guess, on Twitter or in social media talking about comfort and engaging with conversations that make you uncomfortable, or discussing topics that make you uncomfortable. And so, one lesson or one conclusion you might take from that work is like, "Oh, well, the Black History Month displays that addressed racism made folks uncomfortable. That's why they didn't like it." But we also suggest that you don't stop there. Just because it might make folks uncomfortable or that they may not like it doesn't mean you couldn't still have positive consequences downstream. And so just because something makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean that that's a bad thing.

Phia Salter:

I try to tell my students that it's in those places of discomfort where you experience growth, right? You're forced to re-examine and to challenge yourself, and you may come out thinking the same thing, but you may see things in a new light. And so, I think only reproducing things that make you comfortable or that you like, that that doesn't necessarily change the conversation or may not provide the same space for growth in the way that dealing with some of these uncomfortable topics or uncomfortable content might.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, you try to bring these questions up and people are happy to say, "This is yucky. I don't want to talk about it." And then if that happens, then what do you do? I'm curious where the idea for... this is a while ago. It sounds like that this study started, is there something about Black History Month portrayal that seemed like it was the road to talking about this? Because I think you probably said that it doesn't stop at Black History Month in schools, right? That this is really one reflection of a more general thing, but what is it about that... Where did the idea come from is really all I'm asking.

Phia Salter:

Yeah. Well, I will say that when I went into the schools, I didn't go in with the hypothesis that they would be different in this way. I didn't know. I honestly went in I suppose as a cultural psychologist to understand what was there. Now, there is a body of research and conversations that I'm involved in at this time that when we talk about the Marley hypothesis, for example, we have this history quiz, right? And I would say that the things that come from that history quiz are things or facts that I would have heard on black radio, right? It's the question of where might people get this knowledge that may be more critical or more sanitized or reference certain things or not discuss certain things. And so, thinking about those predominantly black spaces as sources of potential rich information was kind of one way of sort of thinking about it.

Phia Salter:

But yeah, I didn't go in in the same ways that maybe graduate students are trained in which you would have a hypothesis. That's not the kind of work that this is, and that's not the kind of work that came of that. It was really, I love that you said anthropological in that I think sometimes when you're doing the groundwork, you have to be open to what you might see and what you might find and that different cultural spaces can come with their knowledge. And to be honest, that kind of model isn't very different from some other cultural psychological work that you might find that happens to be in social psychology as well.

Andy Luttrell:

In some ways to that point, one of the other things I found striking about that paper is there's a point at which you acknowledge your identity and the identity of your coauthor and sort of call to task the conventions in publishing where you would only disclose information like that if it's atypical or non-dominant. Why was that important to you to do in that paper? And even just more broadly, if we think about who's doing the research in our fields, why does it matter?

Phia Salter:

Yeah, that's a great question. The first study is qualitative in nature, and so a qualitative empirical work. It's almost required that you would acknowledge your positionality because when you're making interpretations of a setting or a stimuli that there's not something inherent about your interpretations that are just truth, it's a perspective that you're taking. And so, acknowledging what informs that perspective helps people understand that they're looking at this community through those eyes, right? That they're not

necessarily just getting a snapshot. That it's been filtered through my own experiences and then I'm writing and sharing that with you.

Phia Salter:

And I think that happens, in most psychological research we just do not acknowledge it. How we're thinking about different questions of race, racism, what we think is the answer, that's going to be filtered through our experiences. I mean, people will say research is me-search all the time. And yet I will say for myself, I have faced challenges in which people have accused me of being biased because I'm a black person studying these issues. And they say it as if, as a white person, that they can be objective about these issues.

Phia Salter:

That's just not the case. That we're all approaching these different topics with our own perspectives and our experiences. What we're able to see and not see is informed by our experiences. So, part of the information that I shared in that paper was that I had attended schools that were both predominantly black and predominantly white. So, understanding or recognizing that to celebrate diversity, perhaps I would have understood that as a difference between black and white schools, but the work that that might be doing, I think was really informed by the fact that I had been in black spaces where the goal is to affirm. And so perhaps in the white space, the goal is also to affirm, but it's affirming a different identity. And I still, my both insider and outsider knowledge in those spaces I think was a strength and contributed to what I was able to see.

Phia Salter:

It also likely contributed to what I was not able to see or what I was not willing to or able to acknowledge. And that's supposed to be the kind of work that you do. Now, I suppose some would say those kind of things might come up in peer review, right? That once other people have their eyes on it, then maybe we can help you see what you're not seeing. But I honestly think that doing that work yourself at least gives you some insight into what your own motivations might be for studying that question and what results you're willing to talk about or not talk about, or what results might make you comfortable or uncomfortable. But if you don't think through that identity or think through your perspective, you might not even realize that you're framing it in a particular way because that frame makes you feel less uncomfortable.

Andy Luttrell:

There's part of that too that's also the questions you even think to ask, right? So part of the qualitative part that you're saying is you enter a space, you can't help but your eye get drawn to stuff that's motivated by your own experiences. But even those who go, "well, I do quantitative empirical research." You go, "well, what questions are you putting in the survey and what topics are you even thinking of studying to begin with?"

Phia Salter:

Yeah. And I'll just add on top of that. Like, what variables do you choose to put in? Some folks will say, "Oh, well, I just, I choose those variables based on the previous literature." Well, what literature are you engaging with? Whose work have you been reading? I think it's a long chain of different ways that our identities can intersect, even in the quantitative type of work.

Andy Luttrell:

In your work, I've seen references to critical race theory as a central component of that, which is not a perspective that I can say that I'm super familiar with. Could you take some time to talk about what critical race theory is and why it's important to include or incorporate?

Phia Salter:

Sure. Critical race theory is really a movement that started in legal studies where I would say scholars associated with critical theory are many, but Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Delgado, several folks in the legal profession, have taken a look at how legal studies does not interrogate race or racism in the way that they should when thinking about the law. Also very individual bias kind of perspective. If you think about bringing on a racial lawsuit, you got to prove intention, you got to prove some sort of negative animus, you got to identify a perpetrator, there's got to be a target. So all these things are associated with the sort of individual bias we're thinking about. Racism also applies in that domain as well.

Phia Salter:

And so, critical race theory not only wanted to interrogate the law in light of race, it was also part of a movement to diversify law schools to bring in black faculty. So it's all kind of intertwined both with the scholarship and activism. There are a couple of assumptions that critical race theorists have laid out in terms of thinking about racism, particularly in the United States though there are some versions of critical race theory that are global or think about different communities. Much of what I've read turn the focus on the black community.

Phia Salter:

One of those things is that we take racism as systemic as an assumption, we start there. People identify different key components anywhere from three components to like eight. But the idea is that racism is systemic. That one might only see racial change if it is also in the service of white folks. Derrick Bell writes about interest convergence as the idea that racism hasn't gotten better in this country because there's been some moral shift in how folks feel. It's just become less palatable and it makes us look bad.

Phia Salter:

And so, the idea that racial change might happen in the interest of white folks is one of the things that turns up. For a psychologist I might think about how focusing on diversity has become a way in which we can talk about racism because it makes white folks less comfortable. So we can talk about it because it is in this vein of a way of framing the conversation that doesn't make white folks uncomfortable. There's also talking about whiteness as a possessive investment or as profitable. That even though it's not always marked or named, that people might draw upon whiteness because it confers some positive benefits. I brought up the example of the man and the woman whose names I could not remember been on our conversation in the central park, right. She draws upon her whiteness.

Andy Luttrell:

Like as a tool or as a currency. Is that kind of what you're saying here?

Phia Salter:

Yeah, George Lipsitz writes about how whiteness can be possessed or possessive. Both in I can't possess one, but also it's something that someone can hold or have, or like have as a possession. There are a few. My students, if they're listening to this, I am usually much more articulate about bringing out critical race theory. Today apparently is not the day.

Andy Luttrell:

No, but it's sort of a constellation. What I'm hearing is it's a constellation of ideas that often go unassumed or ignored in sort of dominant ways of addressing social questions. And that's the importance of it is it's sort of calling out important elements of what it means to live in a society, but things that at least sort of scholars historically have not acknowledged.

Phia Salter:

Yeah. And a really important point made by critical race theory is that people of color, through their experiences with racism, are the experts. They have a unique experience to tell you about that experience because they've lived it. And so above all, you should listen to their ways of articulating what's happening because they're living it. It's not to say that other folks can't have an understanding, but I hate to see conversations either in person or online where person of color says I've experienced this thing that is racist and then a white person or a non-black person tells them all the ways in which it might not have been racism. And so, all of their experience of dealing with racism in and of itself is trumped somehow by someone who will say that they've never experienced it themselves. And so, that's problematic.

Andy Luttrell:

It does. And like you said, this is someone who acknowledges, who's happy to say, "Of course I don't know what this would be. I've not lived that experience. And yet here are seven reasons why you're wrong about this." So what then, thinking to the future, what sort of work are you and your lab working on at the moment? Or what directions are you heading?

Phia Salter:

Yeah. A couple of different directions. I am both-- I've just started my first year here at Davidson College, wrapping up things at Texas A&M, but I have some fabulous students who are still at Texas A&M who are doing some incredible work. One student, even before these protests have started, is looking at the racialized nature of support for some forms of protest versus others. I have a student who's working on thinking about power, when you have it and you lose it, and how that's related to racial dynamics. And then I also have a student who is further thinking about racism in the educational system in terms of knowledge production.

Phia Salter:

Those things are ongoing. We have some work under review. I'm very excited about... I presented this work at a few conferences, so I feel safe that I can talk about it. Some of the work that I have looks at how narratives of personal responsibility and individualism are targeted or directed at people of color, particularly black folks. In one study that's published, I think it was 2015 or so, we show that participants like personal responsibility messages more when it's in front of a black audience versus in front of a white audience.

Phia Salter:

I mean, this is because participants believe that black folks need to hear personal responsibility messages in a way that white folks don't. And so, the narratives around just pull yourself up by your bootstraps or just work harder, it's interesting to think about how those narratives take on different meaning when you think about them in the context of race or racialized conversation. And so, we have some work that looks at how actual liberals and conservatives kind of converge on their appreciation for personal responsibility when it's, I won't say when it's directed at black folks, but when it is in the context of someone black saying it.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, I'm excited to keep an eye out for seeing those things come out and see what develops in the future. I just want to say thanks for being here and talking about the work that you've done.

Phia Salter:

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate being able to talk about the work and the ongoing issues. It's so important that we don't shy away from these conversations. And I think psychology in particular has much to contribute, but we also have much to learn. And so, I hope that your listeners move forward with taking these conversations seriously, taking the protestors seriously and doing their part to help really make our society better.

Andy Luttrell:

Thank you so much to Dr. Salter for sharing her work. For more about the work that she's done and the things that we talked about today, check out the show notes. And if you're someone who hasn't given much thought to the role of race in society, or if you've been confused about what the Black Lives Matter movement is so worked up about, don't let this podcast be the last time you grapple with these questions. I'll put a link in the show notes for books and resources to help you dive deeper. To learn more about this podcast, visit opinionsciencepodcast.com or follow us @OpinionSciPod on Facebook or Twitter. Subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, wherever you get podcasts, and keep up with our weekly episodes. And I look forward to seeing you next time on Opinion Science. Goodbye.