Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Episode #10: Policing, Race, and Advocacy with Deion Hawkins

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[Audio from Columbus, Ohio Black Lives Matter Protests]

Andy Luttrell:

Over the last couple weeks, Black Lives Matter protests have flooded the streets of cities across the United States and in countries around the world. Even Muncie, Indiana—a relatively small city where I work, hosted a march that drew thousands of supporters. A local paper wrote that it was "perhaps one of the largest protests this city has ever seen, and almost certainly the largest in the last 20-30 years."

Major companies and organizations are issuing statements of support for the Black Lives Matter movement, committing to take action for racial justice. Media outlets went dark to show solidarity, and almost all of the books on Amazon's top-selling non-fiction list this week are about combatting racism in the modern world.

So, why now? How did we get here, what are issues at the root of these protests, and will this advocacy make a difference? Big questions. Giant questions. But if we take some time to listen, we might start to get a sense of the answers.

You're listening to Opinion Science—the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. You might have started listening to us because of last week's episode with Dr. Phia Salter on systemic racism. So thanks for sticking around, and I wanted to continue to explore these issues for another week, so I reached out to my friend, Deion Hawkins. He's an assistant professor of Communication Studies at Emerson College, and in his research, he interviews people to understand important human experiences. Recently this has taken the form of understanding the effects of police brutality on the Black community. And as a coach for Emerson's Speech and Debate program, he knows a thing or two about effective communication.

I first met Deion almost ten years ago when I started grad school at Ohio State. I had been on my college's speech team and volunteered to help coach OSU's team. Deion was a student on the team—and he sure didn't need my help. He was one of those rare people who was exceptionally talented both in the performing arts-type speech events and as a debater. So I was excited to catch up with him and hear more about the research he's done, which has clear ties to the conversations we're having…again…as a country.

[Music]

Andy Luttrell:

With something this, it's hard to know exactly where to get the ball rolling. So I guess maybe one way to start is just to have you summarize the work that you do and the perspective you come at it from, right. Would you be comfortable giving an overview of the work that you've done and are working on now?

Deion Hawkins:

So funny story, I got into police brutality research after the summer of 2016, which would have been the summer of Philando Castile and Eric Garner. Previously I had been doing HIV related research, but it was something about that summer that really struck a nerve, that within a three month span, we had watched two black men, literally die. And Philando is one of the most jarring examples that we have, because the wife was in the car and the daughter was in the backseat. So after that I was like, there has to be research about this. To my surprise, in my field of comm, there really was not, right. So there was research about perceptions of police after the LA race riots in the 92. There's sociology research about theories of policing and crime and things like that.

Deion Hawkins:

But there was a huge research void in the communication arena about police brutality in general. So I was like, okay, I'm going to make this my dissertation. My background was in health communication as well, so then I started to think to myself, or I started to recognize that viewing these videos was having an impact on my ability to go about literally life. It was so sad. I fear encounters with the police to this day. And it's something that I knew was a universal truth in the black community, but again, sometimes real world experiences are not always researched or backed up by data. And this was a textbook example of it.

Deion Hawkins:

So what my dissertation sought to start to answer was one, where do black Americans get information about police brutality? How is that knowledge communicated and circulated? And then the third part was, how was that impacting mental health? So that's holistically what my research seeks to answer. My current project I'm working on that I'm really excited is, how lessons from family members are passed down about policing, because my previous dissertation show that social media, personal experience and family members are the three main message and communication channels. So my longterm project is to research each of those three things to get a fuller picture of the issue.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm interested a little bit in the method that you use, because I think if a social psychologist from my world were to try to address the same question, we'd come at it in a different way. So could you describe that qualitative communication approach that you take and how you use that to get insights on how this works?

Deion Hawkins:

Absolutely. So as you said, I definitely do qualitative, so I've done focus groups, but now my current method is definitely interview. In depth interviews, and it's actually really important that you ask this question, because what research we do know in comm about black expression, is that black people are inherently more expressive, and a lot of times more, and this is from slavery, right? Because stories had to be passed down orally, that we couldn't read, or we couldn't write. So there's well-documented research that black people are, like I said, more expressive. So with that knowledge, I knew that I would be able to get way more representative quotations and rich data and that sort of thing.

Deion Hawkins:

And again, just because I was a part of the community, I just had an instinct that I was like, this needs to be qualitative, right? People need to read this. They need to read that black men are terrified of their phone dying when they're in a car, because they need to Facebook live an encounter with the police. Right. They need to read, that black moms are sitting down right now telling their children, five-year-old children. All right, we need to have a talk. The world does not see you as a child. Right. So it's those things that I think that the quantitative methods aren't going to capture, right? It's capturing a different thing. Right. And I was really steadfast on capturing the experience and the perception of that experience and what that experience means. And I just felt qualitative interviewing was the best avenue for that.

Andy Luttrell:

And to read those excerpts, as someone who doesn't read a lot of that kind of research, I totally see the usefulness of putting those experiences in that way. Right. Because in the quantitative realm, you see a chart with an average number, which is informative, but I think maybe especially this project, or maybe lots of different things, I totally now see the value of this qualitative approach.

Deion Hawkins:

Even the quantitative stuff. There's tons of research about media portrayals of blackness and how it has slowly made people afraid of violent black men, the angry black woman, black children are viewed as adults quicker. But again, a lot of that is based off of a scale and I'm like, this is not capturing, I don't think what's really happening. Right. So, like you said, I just think for me it was about specifically what I wanted to do. And it was like, I realized that no one else was really giving the black community a place to have it be validated in a way that the general public would view as acceptable. So I was like, okay, then I need to be the person to do that then.

Andy Luttrell:

It also makes the issues harder to ignore, in reading those pull quotes from those interviews, because I worry that there's a tendency to, if we think about the quantitative data, it becomes abstract and numbers and we can easily go, well, is this really as big of a problem as well? We can whittle down the numbers however we want. But when you read those excerpts, you go, I cannot counter-argue that experience.

Deion Hawkins:

And I say this to people all the time, because people say like, you have such jarring quotations. I'm like, the scary thing is, there's dozens, hundreds of more of quotations that I could have used. Right. That was one of the beauties of my data, but then also one of the most disheartening things as someone that does constantly engage in the interviews, it's like, it's great from a research perspective that I'm able to reach saturation and rich data, but I'm as a researcher, when you consistently hear people saying, Oh yeah, I can't let my phone die because I'm afraid that then no one will ever know what happens to me. That's rough. Right. I completely agree.

Deion Hawkins:

And even with police brutality, it's really important for me too, is that we're consistently making sure that we keep the victims or the experience center, because there's a very easy way for conversations to happen that lose sight of the fact that, okay, people are dead, people are dying and black people are afraid to die. And I just don't know if surveys capture that experience.

Andy Luttrell:

If I'm remembering right, you talked a little bit too about the media frames. So what you just said reminded me that, part of the problem with this specific issue, is that we don't get to have interviews from some people that are at the center of these things.

Deion Hawkins:

Bingo. Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:

Is there a way to account for that or like...?

Deion Hawkins:

I think social media has completely morphed the way that media framing works. Our media frame as a theory, to be honest, is because, especially for the black community. My research indicates that especially black millennials, we're going to Twitter and Facebook for news. We're not going to CNN. We're not going to local news channels, because we don't feel they're capturing what's actually happening. Right. They're going to spend the information. They're not going to highlight what's actually happening. And I think right now is a perfect example, it's weird though. The media has been, I will give the media credit for their coverage of what's happening right now.

Deion Hawkins:

I think they've been pretty transparent and honest and vocal about the level of police brutality that has been happening. But I think that it's telling that they have chosen to show this now, that we're seeing more white victims of it. And I think that's also very important. I don't think they magically decided to start showing more police brutality footage. It's the demographic is, clearly black people are still killed more by police, we know that the research, that's true, but we have not seen this amount of police brutality recorded and broadcast, inflicted on white Americans. And I think that is subconsciously driving a lot of the media coverage.

Andy Luttrell:

There's a little bit of a worrying, like, well now, hey, wait a minute.

Deion Hawkins:

Right. Right. It's like, this really does happen. And us, we in the black community are like, well welcome. We're so glad that you finally have joined the fight. Glad you're here. But we've known this for centuries now. They're shocked. And to be fair, there are some very jarring videos, the old man being pushed to the ground by Buffalo PD, even as someone who researches this and have read countless stories, like that one, I'm like, Oh my God, that is, there's no defense. And then for the response to be that the Union told the police officers to all resign. I'm like, Oh, so you've learned nothing in the past week and a half. I'm like, okay, great. And this is why people are still protesting, because there's still no accountability.

Andy Luttrell:

Just to pull back a little bit, to get back to the media frames thing. Could you define what that means? Media framing, for people who haven't heard of it.

Deion Hawkins:

Absolutely. So it's how media portrays or chooses to cover certain issues. Right. And so I'm not a rhetorician, but a rhetorician will be more interested in the language used. Right. So are they protesters, are they using looters? Are they using rioters? Right. So that is all a subconscious thing. What pictures of the protests are they choosing to show? Are they going to show white people throwing bricks through a window or are they only showing black people throwing bricks through a window? How it covered? How often? So it's all how the media chooses, what language they use. It's just all about how the media is portraying or showing whatever is happening.

Andy Luttrell:

To that point. Actually just a couple of days ago, I gave a talk on some of the stuff that I do for a local group on Zoom. And I was looking for images from protests in the last week to use as examples, to show the kinds of messages people are trying to communicate with science and stuff. And I was struck that what I kept finding were predominantly pictures of white hands holding signs, which, you could interpret and say, well, maybe this protest is different and it's recruiting more people, but there's a media framing account of that too, of saying, well, which are the images that are now so striking that they're going to show up on the front page.

Deion Hawkins:

I will say that, I do think from someone that, so I teach social movements as well. So from someone that understands movements and understands the subject at hand and from someone who's been boot on the ground protesting, there are more white people out, there are. I don't know if that's because people that have nothing else to do, but protest, because COVID, I do think that's something that people are not talking about. I don't think there's magically, well, I do think there are more white people appalled. I do. But I think that no, one's talking about the fact that these people may have protested before they didn't have the ability to, the time or anything. I think this is a perfect storm that has created a world where everyone is like, okay, no, this is inhumane.

Deion Hawkins:

But again, I agree that media framing, I think that when white people have seen other white people doing this work. It's either an internal guilt or it's I think I should go out there and I should also do it. Or it's, I didn't know they felt strongly about this issue. We've never talked about it, because we've never had to talk about it as friends. So I'm going to text them and say, hey, can I join you? Right. And so I definitely think that that's changing. The media framing of these protests are definitely different than let's say the Baltimore uprising, for sure.

Andy Luttrell:

Can we talk a little bit about impressions of police? In another interview, I heard you talk about, you framed it very nicely as people living in two different worlds. I will acknowledge that was not something that I have really grappled with until very recently and feeling when I think about what the police meant growing up, it was very, Rosie white picket fence, manicured lawn, the police come to make sure that you're safe, but there are other impressions of that.

Deion Hawkins:

So, yes, absolutely. So the first thing is, we're socialized completely differently. It's two different worlds. I was raised very early on, I'll never forget, five years old, my father sat me down and said, you can not do the same things as your white friends, if you're ever in a car with me and I am pulled over by a police officer, this is what you do. You put your hands up, you put your hands on a dashboard, he was like, don't

move. You cannot give them a reason to escalate the situation. And again, remember, we're talking about, like I said, five. So we in the black community are socialized to avoid police at all costs, period. Growing up, I realized that my white friends didn't feel that way. And in my research even reinforced that idea, it's literally two different worlds.

Deion Hawkins:

You were taught that police were on your side, you were taught that the police are the people you call when you need help, we were taught, never call the police, unless it is a last resort. And even at last resort, you run the risk of being a victim. And it's really important to hit the impression of policing. Every time I talk about this issue, I make it to hit home, these three points. One, is that the modern day framework of policing stems from slavery, right? So plantation owners, their skillsets was capturing, right? So when slavery was abolished, they didn't magically lose that skillset. So plantation owners literally became sheriffs and they hired other plantation owners. They hired white people who worked on their plantation.

Deion Hawkins:

So this idea that police were always there for the people, it's just not true, even up North. So I'm in Boston where the first police force are tax funded. Police force was established. And even here, it was never about crime, white, poor working class, black people and immigrants, realized that they had inhumane and unfair working conditions and they started to protest and they started to demand more fair wages and more fair working conditions. And then magically that we needed a police force, right. We needed someone to come in to curb the civil unrest, this social disorder. So again, when people have this idea that policing was a response to crime, it's not true. Third thing, and this is something that I've discovered over the past two weeks that I don't think people are talking about. So, we in the black community encounter police more, right. We encounter them more negatively. We have more stories circulating about policing, or we've had negative personal encounters with police, right.

Deion Hawkins:

White people almost never have this situation. Or if they do have encounter with the police officer, it's pleasant. So then I started to think, I'm like, okay, there has to be a larger disconnect here. Okay, so where are white people getting their information about police, pop culture? Every time that there's a media portrayal of law enforcement, it's always positive. Cops, Live PD, Law & Order, any of them. Right. Even if a cop messes up in these shows, they always have the ability to reconcile. They always have the ability to atone. So, as I talked to my black scholars, I'm like, we're not just combating personal experience. We're combating literally decades of pop culture, propaganda, pro cop propaganda.

Deion Hawkins:

And that's a conversation that no one is having, but I'm like, I do think that is one of the root causes, because if I've never had a negative encounter, if none of my friends, or family's never had a negative encounter, where else am I getting the information? Pop culture. And to this day, I cannot tell you a single program that I have watched that holds cops accountable. There's even instances on TV where cops are corrupt, but they're like, they did it for the right reason. It's like, okay, well, yeah.

Andy Luttrell:

Growing up to that point to, the officer friendly program, I imagine also is related to the same things, where it is, people will say that the intentions are to create a favorable image of police so that people feel comfortable with police. I never thought until recently about how widespread programs like those were. I don't know if this comes up at all.

Deion Hawkins:

I don't know. I'm trying to think back. Did I even encounter, not to say that I do remember having conversations about police officers coming in elementary school. But the thing is though, Andy, is that, before I encountered that cop, I've probably had a conversation. Right? So that's not my first talk about police. We've definitely been socialized with pro cop propaganda and it's brilliant. I will give whoever came up with Cops, that show, it was brilliant branding , because for so long that was white people's perception of police. And now there's Live PD, that show is wild. If you've never seen that show, it is, you literally see cops as they're patrolling. I'm like, why is this appropriate? Why are we watching cops ram into people's homes?

Deion Hawkins:

Do you get what I'm saying? It normalizes horrific behaviors. And it also creates this image that, cops are always the heroes and that's what we're fighting against in the black community. I always tell people to watch when they see us, because in a black community, that's what happens to us, right? White people watch Cops it's like, no, you need to watch 13th. And when they see us, because, you think cops is the reality and it may be for you, but for us when they see us, is a reality.

Andy Luttrell:

So these dual reality, we could maybe call it, of this. If we move that into the domain of advocacy. I think you do some work on political communication or have some background in it. So if we could talk about, what are the roads for effective communication about this? Because what I'm hearing is that one of the challenges will be, that it's easy to deny experience when it conflicts with your own. So that that's one roadblock, but even to open it up, what do you know there?

Deion Hawkins:

I'll hit the policy change first and then I'll go into what I think on the communication side is really important. So the problem with police brutality, data collection or research, is that, law enforcement offices are not required to publish any data about police violence. So we have no idea how many people are actually harmed by police officers, because they're not required to report it federally. There's not even an incentive right now to report it. Opposite is true though. So if I harm a police officer, you bet your bottom dollar, that has to be documented. But if a police officer harms me, it's not. So with that research void, a group came together and they did this huge project and they studied a hundred precincts across the country. And so from that, they have decided eight policies, it's called, 8 Can't Wait.

Deion Hawkins:

So it's a list and taken together of these eight policies. It has decreased police violence by 72%. I know for sure, one is to ban choke holds. Required de-escalation is another one. I could probably pull them up actually. So ban choke hold, require de-escalation, require warning without shooting, exhaust all other means before shooting. And this is one that's really important, because the conversations we're having in the black community is saying, okay, even if this person is a criminal, even if this person stole something, even if this person did this, why is the answer shooting? And again, that's not even protocol, right? Cops have a use of force continuum. There's no world where that should be the answer. So that's really important, Duty to intervene, so that's a really important one, is if there's a cop with you, they should be obligated to intervene, if they feel you're using excessive force.

Deion Hawkins:

No shooting at moving vehicles, require a use of force continuum and require comprehensive reporting. So those eight things together are what we're really pushing. Indianapolis, Indiana, where I'm from, the

mayor yesterday came out and said that he is going to mandate all of these, and this is happening. There's a small precinct in Pennsylvania, that's doing it. So on the policy side, there are luckily concrete things that we know. For me, what I am really interested in, on the communication side, long term is, as I talked about before, we know that the African American community is more expressive. So that means, more hand gestures, that means more elevations of tone, more elevation of volume, et cetera, white cops perceive all of that as violent, they will see a black woman raising her voice as inherently defiance, right?

Deion Hawkins:

And it's like, okay, well, no, it's a communication difference. What my research indicates, is that this is a very traumatic experience. So your body is literally going to have a different, literally there are different chemicals in your body that happens when your body encounters a traumatic encounter. So if my body perceived this encounter as traumatic, on top of my natural communicator behaviors as a black person, that is a recipe for disaster, because the cop is never going to understand that I'm not trying to be aggressive. It's just I'm trying to control and suppress a lot. And this is well documented too. Cops respond worse towards accents any kind, particularly Caribbean accents though. And even people with disabilities, right. Individuals with cerebral palsy have been reported of police brutality, because cops were like, I thought they were drunk. I'm like, okay, but, again, why is that lead to brutality though?

Deion Hawkins:

If someone is defying you, why do cops get complete reign and autonomy to decide, you've disrespected me enough, so I need to yank you out of your car. Part of hearing individuals, people with deafness, when they try to do sign language, cops escalate situations. And this is when I say the communication side of me is really interested in these things, because, sure, of course we need the policy changes. Absolutely, 8 Can't Wait, needs to wholeheartedly be the priority. But after that, there needs to be a talk about training and a talk about what competency looks like, and about if you're going to police people that are different than you, you need to understand that they're inherently communicative differences, because there's no world where cops should not be able to de-escalate situations verbally.

Andy Luttrell:

So that's a lot about the communication between people in these interactions, but in terms of communication for social change, these protests that we've been seeing in the last week, or so, do we feel those are road to change, or what has to happen for that to be a road to change?

Deion Hawkins:

I do think these protests are road to change. Absolutely. I think what's happening, like I said, I'm teaching right now. And I said, this feels like our civil rights movement, right? This feels like, something about the case right now, about George's case, is a bloody Sunday feel. People watched it and were like, enough is enough. We have to do something. So, again, I think what's happening is that demographic has changed a little bit, right? It's no longer just black people saying black lives matter, is no longer just black people, marching, it's coalitions of all types of people, all types of ages, all types of socioeconomic status. I think the message is more cohesive now. I think that 8 Can't Wait, does a brilliant job of telling people, okay, protesting is great. We've raised awareness, the lack of awareness wasn't never really the issue. It's, all right, what are the policy things that we can change?

Deion Hawkins:

I think the protests have disrupted enough and made enough people uncomfortable, to where now they're saying, okay, at least we got to bring these people to have a seat at the table, because before we weren't even invited to the table, right. We weren't invited to the damn build. It was like, your buildings over there, you can't come to the table. And none of this shit for you, I'm sorry [crosstalk 00:26:29], and none

of this stuff for you. Now, it's like, okay you all, we do have to reconcile that this country's systemically racist, which is a first step. Because the amount that I've seen about that is mind blowing. I can't express enough. So if we're talking about communicating to the public, right, Nickelodeon shutting off their programming for almost nine minutes and playing a black screen, that's huge.

Deion Hawkins:

I'm sure there were tons of children, like what the heck is happening? Sesame street, CNN having a town hall on systemic racism featuring Elmo today. Amazon having a black lives matter banner, Apple music, stopping streaming. You know what I mean? There was so much more happening this go round and this last week and a half publicly, conversations that we're having publicly, that were not being had. And again, I think what's happening too, is that white people are having conversations with colleagues, friends, and family, that they haven't had before, that they haven't had to have before, or they may not have known that their colleagues and friends had unconscious bias. Right.

Deion Hawkins:

Because again, you don't have to talk about race. So now that everything's in the forefront, let's say I'm white, and my brother says, "Those protesters blocked my way to the street." And I'm like, "Well, they should have." And he's like, "Well, wait a minute. That's probably the first time we've ever had that conversation."

Andy Luttrell:

You mentioned the Nickelodeon and Sesame street and how these messages are getting to kids. I've seen a lot of conversation on Twitter about white families being like, "Well, how do I talk to my kid about these things?" And the striking thing is how that butts up against what you find in those interviews that you have, about the common experience for black kids to face these sorts of things, at an age that white families would go, I would never talk to my child about race.

Deion Hawkins:

Never, we're right. It's like, I can't talk to my five year old about race. It's like, no, you can. When people say things like that, I'm like, you don't tell them the whole story. Right? You don't sit your kid down and be like, Oh, well let's start all the way back from the beginning. Right? But you absolutely can say, there was a time in this country where people took other people, and put it in a context that they understand, right? You can say like, don't mention that, don't use a black friend as the example. That's not a good thing. But you can say, okay, you know your friend, Sally, right. Sally has blue eyes, and eye color is a perfect example. Eye color or a hair color, kids understand that. And say, well, there used to be a time where we would take all people with certain skin color and they had to work for us.

Deion Hawkins:

That is a foundation you can say, and kids also are naturally inquisitive. So kids are going to ask, the opposite, I think is true. I think when kids see things and they're like, especially down in the world of social media and TV and YouTube, race conversations are happening. You're just not the one having it. Your child is learning about race somewhere. Trust me, they are definitely learning about it somewhere, whether or not you're having that conversation is up to you, but they're going to learn about it. And if people listen to this podcast, there are tons of resources now to indicate conversations that teachers have gathered, psychologists have gathered, to say, this is an appropriate conversation to have at this age. And I think for me, the thing that the white community has to understand, like you said, we're having the conversations in the black community, definitely before puberty.

Deion Hawkins:

Right? Because the whole thing is like, once puberty hits, the world's going to view you as a man and a woman, not as a boy or as a girl. So, you do need to be having these conversations earlier, because it's much easier to teach someone how to be anti-racist than to teach an adult how to unlearn racism.

Andy Luttrell:

This may be a little bit of a hard pivot, but I think it's relevant if we pull this into the realm of academia and how academics have thought about race historically. And so you draw on critical race theory in some of the work that you do, which frankly is not a perspective that I'm super familiar with. Would you mind just walking through what that is, where it came from and why we need it?

Deion Hawkins:

Absolutely. So critical race theory actually has it's foundations in law and education, and to put it simply, it basically just makes the argument that especially when it comes to blackness in this country, if you're going to analyze any subject that has a black population, you have to understand that race is probably the center factor. From there it has expanded to kind of, talk about Asian populations and Hispanic and Latino population. So the intersection of ethnicity and racism is really key for white Latinos or Afro-Latinx individuals, critical race is starting to be applied really heavily there. It's just the idea that this country's built on race, to ignore that in research is to be doing whatever topic you're doing a disservice and to be doing the community a disservice, because we know that the country has been on racism. So why would we not take that into account, in everything that we're doing with our research?

Andy Luttrell:

It highlights issues of who's doing this research, right?

Deion Hawkins:

Who's doing the research? Why are you doing the research? So, here's the thing with me, is I'm going to be incredibly frustrated if there's... There are some great things about the academy. There are some things that I can not stand. I know that there's going to be a flood of police brutality research now. Right. And not because people have cared about it. No, they don't. It's because it's going to be the hot button issue. They know that publishers are going to want to be like, well, we need this.

Andy Luttrell:

And you can get grant money.

Deion Hawkins:

Bingo, you need grant money. Right. And again, it's who you're researching. And it's like, I don't know if a white person could do what I'm doing and is going to yield the same data. When you go into qualitative interviews, there's probing, there's rapport, there's cultural references. I cannot count the number of times that I've laughed at a joke or I've been able to probe with a cultural context that a white person's not going to have. And to be fair, if I were to be put in a different cultural setting, I also wouldn't be able to do that. Right.

Deion Hawkins:

If I wanted to research white suburban mom's perception of race, I may not be the best person to be the principal investigator. Right. I may need to find someone in that community that could... especially, like I said, qualitative interviewing, that's crucial. And so when I've been on projects with people, or I've

listened to interview transcripts, and I'm like, Oh dear, you let a lot slide there. That is not... I think that you hit something really important there, who's doing the research and who are they researching is really, really incredibly important.

Andy Luttrell:

It struck when you were talking about the critical race theory approach, is just that, if you're having people do this research, who have privileged identities, they are maybe less likely to think about race as a critical factor, and ignore that that's central to the experience.

Deion Hawkins:

Which to me, if you're going to research something like this, that is absolutely ludicrous, right? To research police brutality, without some aspect of a critical race component, you're not researching police brutality. You may be researching something, which is great, but you can't say you're researching police brutality, because you're not.

Andy Luttrell:

But are there domains where you would say, you don't need that critical race.

Deion Hawkins:

Not researching this. I don't.

Andy Luttrell:

This or any topic I'm saying, any topic about communication or experience.

Deion Hawkins:

I don't. But I'm a critical scholar, right? So that is a fundamental difference. A paradigm difference that I have, than a lot of colleagues, right? I'm those nuances are important. And so for me, that is something as a black scholar. I do think that race is a constant. It is not going away, as a black man. I can assure you that my race has impacted every aspect of my life, job, whatever, relationships. We know that race is a factor, to consistently ignore that in research is to be doing, again, a disservice to the community, and you're perpetuating the problem to be honest. If people are researching things that have racial components without a critical race component, you're complicit, right. Because you're not doing actively anti-racist work. Don't don't do the work, if you're not willing to put... Don't do it, why do it? Right?

Deion Hawkins:

Why do it? Because if it's to fulfill some white guilt or whatever, don't do it, because there's a black scholar that could be out there doing the same work or better yet, as white academics who are listening to this, if you do want to research these things, you might want to include black academics on your projects, because our view is going to be inherently different. And that's fine. It's just, our ship is making the space for other people. And this is a textbook example. So, you shouldn't say, I don't think that I need a critical race, because I thought that's not your determination. So I respect your opinion, but you're wrong.

Andy Luttrell:

I've seen some conversation on Twitter about white academics, that the criticism being, that if you're a white scholar studying race and racism, it's not the same as activism.

Deion Hawkins:

It's not.

Andy Luttrell:

But it can feel, you go, wow, look how interested I am, and trying to push forward solutions. But you publish a paper at a journal and 50 people read, hard to say that that's the same thing.

Deion Hawkins:

Right. And the big difference too, I tell my academic friends too, I'm like, your difference is, is you never have to justify what you're researching. You are looked at as this beacon of social justice that is down to ride for the because. I want to uplift a community that's oppressed. I cannot tell you the amount of times I've told people I researched police brutality and it's a look, right? They're like, of course you do. Yeah, of course you do. And it's like, I know anything I submit, has to be 10 times better, because it's unorthodox, because it's controversial, because it makes people uncomfortable. Right. Academics, we need white allies. So let's be very clear, right? There has to be white allyship in order for there to be equality and progress in this country.

Deion Hawkins:

What we don't need, is white allies fulfilling, like I said, a social justice fantasy and saying, well, I wrote this paper, so I did the work. No, you did it. You didn't. And it's offensive us as black scholars, because we're like, okay, your work stops when you reached an impact factor. Right? You don't touch that again. You don't touch that article. You may not touch that topic ever again. You wrote about it, because it was in the news and you knew it would get to a pub. I don't have that luxury. Right. I am researching this, because it is life or death for my community. I am researching this because I've seen police brutality firsthand. So it's like, no, it's not the same. And as an ally, if you're a true ally, you should be willing to listen to why it's not the same and say, okay, I get it.

Deion Hawkins:

So sorry. How can I help? What could I be doing? In academia too, there's this idea that, once you reached a certain amount of publications or whatever, it's like, okay, my work is done. That is textbook privilege. Right? Your ability to say, I am done researching police brutality or racism, because I've moved on to another project, is an epitome of what privilege looks like. You can walk away from this whenever you want, and your check still cash the same, your life is not changed. I don't have that luxury. Right. So, I don't have the luxury of saying, police brutality research is exhausting. So I have to be done.

Deion Hawkins:

I don't. And a lot of black academics have entered the academy with research ideas that we're passionate about. Sure. But it's ideas that we're passionate about because it's our lived experience. No one else is going to do it. And for me, I would rather me do it than a white person decide that they've magically become this social justice awareness. I'm going to capture the black experience on police brutality. It's like, why are you doing it though? Right.

Andy Luttrell:

I worry a little bit too about the protests now, like you said, it's a perfect storm, and yes, it's great that we're seeing lots of allies stand up. But when the jobs come back, when the news moves onto something else, are we going to see this same level of continued support for change? Anyhow, well, just to get us to start wrapping up, I guess, I'm curious, what sort of research are you working on now? Can you give us some overview of where your research is going?

Deion Hawkins:

So, research wise, I'm currently working on the family communication about police brutality project. And then my project after that is I really want to capture black women's experience, because what I'm finding is, even through my interviews about family communication, moms are saying different things than dads. Wives are saying different things than husbands. And so I'm like, okay, a part of qualitative research is recognizing where difference lies and understanding why there is a difference, why you are experiencing that phenomenon differently. That is what I'm doing right now.

Andy Luttrell:

I have one more question, just curious, when you do qualitative research and you're giving quotations from people, you provide names for those people, but their pseudonyms, right?

Deion Hawkins:

Pseudonyms. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andy Luttrell:

How do you come up with the pseudonyms?

Deion Hawkins:

Usually it's family. So I'll either, it's so funny you say this, I will use people that I know in real life and just give a different name, but I have to make sure that those people are never anywhere in the study. Does that make sense? If I interview my brother or if I use my brother's name rather, I have to make sure that my brother wasn't actually interviewed.

Andy Luttrell:

So that no one could accidentally-

Deion Hawkins:

Exactly. So no one could accidentally mistake.

Andy Luttrell:

Is there any amount of fitting a name to, what was it? Pull from-

Deion Hawkins:

I just do it randomly.

Andy Luttrell:

It's a part of the process that we never have to do. And I just saw that and I thought, where the heck? I have a hard enough time coming up with fake names for exam questions.

Deion Hawkins:

Some people, again, not everyone does in qual research, but to me, it's just so odd. I'm like, okay, well, a person clearly said this and for me it's important too, because I was trained in the way, it's like, all right. So it's also important for you to keep track of who was saying what, right. So if I say, Charlie, if Charlie says something about Twitter, I need to also be tracking what Charlie says about viewing images on Twitter and how he views, perceives that as triggering. So I don't have that ability if I don't put a name to

it. Right. So even as the reader, I need to be keeping track of what the person is saying holistically throughout the entire study, because that's how that person gave me their experience.

Deion Hawkins:

If you're in the qual, is all about making sure you're accurately representing the experience and member checking, this is what you meant is, this is what you said, this is what I understand it to mean, but this is about how you perceive it. So just make sure that we're on the same page. And so, it helps with that process, keeping a name attached.

Andy Luttrell:

And as a consumer, it helps that part that I was saying, makes that qualitative stuff so much more compelling, because it does hang onto that idea that this is a person. These are not just numbers that we're comparing.

Deion Hawkins:

Exactly. And that's really important for me to, right. Especially when we're talking about the cases, in the dissertation research or current research, I can't express enough how much Trayvon Martin has shifted the culture of this country, but it's so bizarre because he wasn't a victim of police brutality, but every study that I've ever done, has always said, Trayvon Martin and Tamir rice. So Tamir rice was the 12 year old. So when they're talking about those people, for example, that's why it really hits me. It's like, okay, well, you need to give a name to your respondents as well, because they could be that person at any time. And it's so messed up to say, but it could.

Andy Luttrell:

Got it. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about all of this. I appreciate you running through the whole part of it.

Deion Hawkins:

Of course. Of course. Thank you so much for giving me the platform. I am, hopefully, not hopefully optimistic. What's the word? Cautiously optimistic about, we are entering in a new wave of change in this country, particularly related to policing. I'm hoping that people will finally acknowledge that it's this whole bad apples bunch we got to get rid of that. It's like, no, the culture is bad. The structure of policing is inherently bad. And fine, we all know there's a problem, why do we not work on the solution? And I think we finally got to the point in this country where we're like, okay, we need to figure out a solution. Luckily there's research to tell us what the solution is. Just got by the way.

Andy Luttrell:

Let's hope so, and hope that it doesn't fade, right. That it's incumbent on us to keep it moving.

Deion Hawkins:

Absolutely.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, thank you so much.

Deion Hawkins:

Thank you.

[Music]

Andy Luttrell:

Thank you so much to Deion for talking about his research and the issues that it speaks to. Check out the show notes for more about Deion and the topics we talked about.

And actually, a few days after we recorded that conversation, Deion followed up with some news that was hot off the presses—the TV show Cops has been canceled. Honestly, the bigger surprise to me was that they were still making new episodes of Cops—there have been 32 seasons. The 33rd season was scheduled to debut today, but the Paramount Network released a statement last Tuesday saying: "Cops is not on the Paramount Network and we don't have any current or future plans for it to return."

I also just want to quickly thank my friend Erin McIntyre. The sounds of protests that you heard in this episode are from footage she took from the peaceful protests in Columbus, Ohio, where I live. She graciously let me use the audio and says: "I do want it to be known that what is happening is extremely peaceful. When it is said that the Women's March was completely nonviolent it should be said that the Women's March was allowed to be undisturbed while the Black Lives Matter protest has been met with violence by the police."

Ok, finally—in other news—I'm exploring options to provide transcripts of Opinion Science for people who are deaf or hearing impaired or for people who just prefer to read these things. As of right now, a transcript of last week's episode with Phia Salter on systemic racism and a transcript of today's episode are available. Since this is an independent podcast that I run myself, I'm still figuring out how to keep doing this in a cost-effective and time-efficient way, so reach out if you have ideas, but it's definitely something I'd like to keep doing.

To learn more about this podcast, visit OpinionSciencePodcast.com or follow us at OpinionSciPod on Facebook or Twitter. Subscribe on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify—wherever you get podcasts—and keep up with our weekly episodes. And please, if you like and support the show, leaving a nice review on Apple Podcasts or iTunes is an easy and effective way to help the show grow.

I'll look forward to seeing you next time on Opinion Science. Buh bye…