

2022 Spence Award Mini Episode: Neil Lewis Jr. on the Unequal Nature of Society

April 27, 2022

The winners of the [2022 APS Janet Taylor Spence Award for Transformative Early Career Contributions](#) represent some of the brightest and most innovative young psychological scientists in the world. In a series of mini-episodes, [Under the Cortex](#) talks with each winner about their research and goals.

Today, [Neil Lewis Jr.](#) (Cornell University) talks about how the unequal nature of the society that we live in affects the way we think.

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Transcript:

Charles Blue ([00:35](#))

This is Charles Blue with the Association for Psychological Science with another in our series of many episodes of Under the Cortex. This series presents the compelling and innovative research of our 2022 recipients of the Janet Taylor Spence Award for transformative early career contributions. Today I'm talking with Neil Lewis, Jr. from Cornell University, who explains how the unequal nature of our society affects the way we think and how different life experiences affect people's minds. Welcome to the program.

Neil Lewis Jr. ([01:11](#))

Thanks for having me.

Charles Blue ([01:12](#))

Can you tell us about your current field of research? What are you most interested in? What are you looking into right now?

Neil Lewis Jr. ([01:19](#))

Sure. So I'm a social psychologist who works in the area of social cognition. And right now I'm most interested in how the unequal nature of the society that we live in affects the way that we think. So say a bit more about that. I live in the United States, which is a country that continues to be highly segregated by race and class and where resources are distributed in highly unequal ways. And so despite living in the same country, people end up having wildly different life experiences. And so I'm curious about what that does to their minds.

Charles Blue ([01:54](#))

I understand your research also involves looking at what motivates people toward their goals and how that may lead to success. How does this play into that overarching area of research that you're involved in?

Neil Lewis Jr. ([02:08](#))

Yeah. So what I've been thinking about is how do these circumstances that I just talked about, what do those mean for what people think they can achieve? What does it motivate them to do or not do? And what are some of the consequences of these processes for individuals and society? I've been spending a lot of time thinking about these links between how society is structured, how people think, and what that motivates them to do.

Charles Blue ([02:34](#))

And what excites you about that is the major thing that you really get excited about when you start going into your work.

Neil Lewis Jr. ([02:45](#))

The thing that's been really exciting to me is not just studying these processes, but then thinking about the implications for interventions and for policy changes that can help to promote broader equity in society. So, for instance, we do some work in the domain of education, trying to understand various types of performance and achievement gaps. And so we've been looking at what kinds of schools students are in affect, how they think about their studies, and what are the educational outcome implications for that? That allows us to then take the lessons from psychology, work with principals, with teachers and other policy makers to design interventions that can be implemented in schools to improve student outcomes. So those are the kinds of things that have been really exciting to me.

Charles Blue ([03:35](#))

Well, that leads to a kind of a tough question. What are the challenges in your field that hinders progress in this? Where are the major hurdles, grand challenges? What's something that you would like to see change to make this work progress and address these problems?

Neil Lewis Jr. ([03:53](#))

So there's a large overarching problem, I think, in the field that makes this worth challenging at times. All right. And that issue is a lack of diversity in our field. A lot of the way that this work has been done in the past, it's sort of omitted some important perspectives that are relevant for thinking about how these problems unfold over time, how we should go about studying them, how do we think about solutions and so forth. And so we have to do some more work to expand our methodological approaches, for generating knowledge, to expand our sampling frames to include populations that have often been excluded from our literature. And so on the optimistic side, I've been sort of encouraged by some new initiatives, such as the Psychological Science Accelerator, for instance, has been working to try and address these challenges and improve our science.

Charles Blue ([04:47](#))

What is this accelerator? Could you define that for us?

Neil Lewis Jr. ([04:50](#))

This accelerator is an international network really of laboratory. So instead of me sitting in my University conducting a study and just finding solutions that work here, instead we take the approach of let's pull together 40 or 50 labs from around the world. So we really get a broad range of samples in our studies. We get an understanding of how these things work in different parts of the world so that we can come up with more precise estimates of what's going on and hopefully then develop better solutions that can help more people.

Charles Blue ([05:23](#))

So it's diversity in the work as well as in the profession.

Neil Lewis Jr. ([05:27](#))

Absolutely. We need it in every level.

Charles Blue ([05:30](#))

well, I'll ask one final question, and that is what is next for you? What do you want to tackle as your next major field of research or your next focus or what's just off in the corner of your eye that you think would be really interesting to investigate?

Neil Lewis Jr. ([05:46](#))

what's next for me is really continuing in the direction that we've been moving so far of the jargony way of saying it is to continue exploring the heterogeneity in our findings. So how much does what I find here in Epica, New York differ from what I might find, say, in Los Angeles? How do those processes work in different places? It's really important for refining our understanding of psychological processes, but also because it might lead us to different solutions that need to be tailored to the context and the people there. So really diving further into those nuances, I think, is going to be really important for advancing our understanding of psychologists related to education, to health, to environmental sustainability. That's the kind of stuff I'm really excited about.

Charles Blue ([06:33](#))

That sounds genuinely exciting. Well, I'd like to thank you very much. We have been speaking with Neil Lewis jr. from Cornell University. One of the recipients of this year's Spence Award at APS. Thanks for chatting today.

Neil Lewis Jr. ([06:47](#))

Thank you so much.

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