

2022 Spence Award Mini Episode: Jason Okonofua and the Power of Empathy

March 29, 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, [Jason Okonofua](#) (University of California, Berkeley) tells us about his research on empathy and social-psychological processes that contribute to inequality.

Transcript

Charles Blue ([00:12](#))

This is Charles Blue with the Association for Psychological Science with another of our many podcasts featuring the winners of the APS 2022 Janet Taylor Spence Award for Transformative Early Contributions to psychological science. Today I'm speaking with Jason Okonofua with the University of California, Berkeley. Welcome to the show.

Jason Okonofua ([00:34](#))

Alright, thank you.

Charles Blue ([00:36](#))

Let's dive right in and just have you summarize for our listeners your current field of research.

Charles Blue ([00:42](#))

What are you most interested in? What's the exciting thing that gets you out of bed in the morning?

Jason Okonofua ([00:48](#))

I am most interested in thinking about and investigating the power of empathy and how it can apply to so many situations and how it can provide real world benefits and outcomes for things that have been difficult to bring change in, like equity.

Charles Blue ([01:11](#))

Well, it seems with the stories going around internationally now in the news that there's a definite lack of empathy. So with that in mind, what inroads do you feel you've made in your understanding of empathy? What is it that we now know that we didn't know before?

Jason Okonofua ([01:31](#))

Well, I think with my work, it very much has to do with the application of it and how to channel its benefits in a way that can strategically solve problems. And so so far in my career, I've looked at this as it pertains to the consequences, negative consequences of bias and domains like education and criminal justice. And so in education, the empathy can protect teachers from the influence of stereotyping and prejudice and how they engage or interact with their students. For example, black students are around four times more likely to get kicked out of school. And taking this approach in a scalable way, it's possible to reduce that real world disparity in suspensions and the type of discipline that removes children from the learning environment across entire school districts and in criminal justice. We've worked with probation and parole officers, and there's a huge experiment. Pretty much every probation and parole officer for a major US city. And those officers served about 200 adults on probation or parole. And that similarly in a very scalable online exercise, reminding them of their own empathy and doing it in a way that it's more likely to be applied in times of conflict or times of stress, when otherwise we might have more knee jerk reactions that could lead one to think of people who have been incarcerated as once a criminal, always a criminal.

Jason Okonofua ([03:09](#))

So instead of that type of bias, more empathy that can lead everyone to win those officers to get more out of their job, the teachers to get more out of their job, the students and the people on probation and parole to have a relationship upon which they can explore and build and become better versions of themselves and teachers, probation and pro officers. These people joined that profession for some very prosocial, empathetic reasons. They wanted to help people that's where this work has been so far, and I very much look forward to all the opportunities for where it can go, whether that be in healthcare or military, anything that has potential for bias to shape decision making and ongoing real world relationships.

Charles Blue ([03:55](#))

Taking a look at your fields, taking a look at the current body of knowledge, is there anything that's missing? Are there pieces to the research puzzle that would advance what you're trying to do? What's the hurdle that's keeping us from the next step in understanding?

Jason Okonofua ([04:12](#))

Well, it's funny, because actually that would also be the answer to the first question I love thinking about when I wake up in the morning is exactly that. A few main things. One, this idea of heterogeneity or just essentially, when will this type of approach work? We don't know if it would just work in all contexts, and I don't believe that it necessarily would. However, it'll be interesting to see are there certain schools or departments or regions that makes it more likely that this type of approach will indeed be effective? I think that's going to be very important to learn, and I'm excited to find out more about it, to be continued and coming soon, and also would like to find out more about how exactly this works for these teachers. We have reason to believe that it leads teachers to be more satisfied with their jobs, feel more efficacy in their jobs. And our research is suggesting that maybe it's indeed doing something with the students or the people that those probation parole officers are engaging with that leads them to feel

more respect, more respected, and more motivated to indeed go the path and follow their pro social goals.

Jason Okonofua ([05:28](#))

And so it's beneficial to all involved. But it would be great to find out more about the specific processes by which that happens and how those can build on each other over time. And so very much looking forward to looking at it in a more granular lens and more strategically pinpointing exactly how this is working. But then last, something I think a lot about is the connection to stereotyping or implicit or explicit bias and how it seems like this type of an approach kind of puts bias in the back seat. And it doesn't necessarily get rid of people's bias, though in ways I imagine it does. But it foregrounds the empathy, and it makes it more about what are your goals and the context. Well, an empathic mindset is more conducive to getting those things done. For example, teacher joined a profession to help children learn and grow and become their best possible selves. And due to policies in place or just the nature of the job, it can become difficult to remember that in the heat of the moment when you're teaching 20 young children with their hormones all over the place and may resort to something more punitive in nature.

Jason Okonofua ([06:40](#))

But instead, if one's remembering those reasons for joining the profession in the first place well, bias then is rendered not functional or dysfunctional because that would get in the way of helping children learn and grow and become their possible selves. And for them, they especially want to do that for the children who may have been the least likely to receive that support or care elsewhere. And so again well, bias would totally get in the way of doing that. And so thinking about bias in that way, I really look forward to all of the amazing research we have on implicit and explicit bias and introducing it to the growing research we have on applied psychology and how we can do wise psychological interventions that bring about large and lasting effects in the real world. Bringing these together, I really look forward to seeing how this can be done in a variety of other ways that while we continue to rightfully investigate ways to provide more education about how bias functions that we can also have other options at our disposal to sideline bias. Those are some exciting avenues that we're thinking about Well.

Charles Blue ([07:51](#))

I'm excited to see how this plays out as well. They're fascinating bits of work and definitely amazing contributions. This has been Charles Blue I've been speaking with Jason Okonofua with the University of California, Berkeley, who is also a recipient of the APS 2022 Janet Taylor Spence Award. Thank you for joining me.

Jason Okonofua ([08:09](#))

Thank you.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or comment below.