Psychology’s Role in the Criminalization of Blackness

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The mass incarceration of Black people in the United States is gaining attention as a public health crisis with extreme mental-health implications. Despite Black Americans making up just 13% of the general U.S. population, Black people constitute about 38% of people in prison or jail. What does this have to do with psychological science? Well, historical efforts to oppress and control Black people in the United States helped shape definitions of crime but also mental illness. And, through its research and clinical practices, the field of psychological science might even have contributed to the perpetuation of anti-Blackness.

To speak about psychology’s contributions to anti-Blackness, this conversation features Evan Auguste, a researcher and professor at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and Steven Kasparek, a graduate student at Harvard University, talking with APS’s Ludmila Nunes. Auguste and Kasparek co-authored a recent article published in Perspectives on Psychological Science that explored how psychology has contributed to anti-Blackness within psychological research, criminal justice, and mental health, and what scientists and practitioners can do to interrupt the criminalization of Blackness and redefine psychology’s relationship with justice.

Unedited transcript:

[00:00:11.970] – Ludmila Nunes
The mass incarceration of black people in the United States is gaining attention as a public health crisis with extreme mental health implications. Despite representing only 5% of the world’s population, the United States is responsible for 22% of the incarcerated population globally. What’s even more striking is that the percentage of black Americans in the general US. Population is 13%, whereas the percentage of people in prison or jail who are black is about 38%. What does this have to do with psychological science? Well, historical efforts to oppress and control black people in the United States helped shape definitions of crime, but also mental illness. And through research and clinical practices, the field of psychological science might even have contributed to the perpetuation of antiblackness. This is Under the Cortex. I am Ludmila Nunes with the Association for Psychological Science. To speak about psychology’s contributions to antiblackness in the United States within psychological research, criminal justice, and mental health. I have with me. Evan Auguste, researcher and professor at, UMass, Boston, and Steven Kasparek, graduate student at Harvard. They were coauthors in a recent article published in Perspectives on Psychological Science that explored how psychological science has contributed to anti-Blackness and what can scientists and practitioners do to interrupt the criminalization of blackness and redefine psychology’s relationship with justice.

Welcome to Under the Cortex. Thank you for joining me today.

Of course, thank you. Thank you for having us.

Yeah, it’s a pleasure to be here. Excited to chat with you.

So I had the pleasure to read your article in Perspectives on Psychological Science. And I would like to start by asking you. Maybe start with the end, what is the main takeaway from your work, from the facts you put together?

Of course, I could take this one of my favorite psychologists named Amos Wilson, and he has this idea that when you frame history as progress, you risk erasing the harms, the damages that are going on in contemporary society. When I think about the project that we embarked on, it was, what are the harms? What are these harms based in that we’re erasing when we frame psychology as this force of progress and justice in society, when in actuality, it often serves and continues to serve as this kind of carceral punitive force in a lot of places, especially when you’re thinking about black people within the context of the United States. So that’s what we were hoping people would walk away with.
Yeah. And for me, I would say my takeaway from working on this project is that interdisciplinary research and science is extremely important. Oftentimes in our academic work, we are in silos. And so moving forward from here, I feel like I have this awareness that interdisciplinary research is so important, and particularly when you're trying to address some of these social ills that have plagued us for so long and definitely want to.

[00:03:46.030] – Evan Auguste

Shout out the people we worked with on this article, right? Jeanne McPhee, Molly Bowdring, Alexandra Tabachnick, Irene Tung, and Chardée Galan and the whole seed group, the Scholars for Elevating, Equity and Diversity. Again, it was a really collaborative project.

[00:04:04.670] – Ludmila Nunes

So would you tell us more about the history of anti blackness and how psychological science has contributed to this general sentiment?

[00:04:17.490] – Evan Auguste

Yeah, of course. I’m thinking about a disabilities black study scholar by the name of Alyce Pickens who said within the United States cultural zeitgeist, there’s no blackness without madness and no madness without blackness. The very ideas of mental health, disorder, of mental disease defect in many ways, especially in the context of the United States, are based in these ideas of innate inferiority that was formed by how specifically white European peoples thought about African peoples. Throughout the articles, we briefly go over how some of the theoretical basis of psychology of psychodynamic theory is based in that. For example, Carl Young, who went to I believe it might have been Uganda, was observing the populations there, those African populations there, and saw that as a complete lack of consciousness. As we know now, these peoples are guided by deep, intricate philosophies based in impart, bantu understandings of the world and spirit. And he saw that and could not reconcile that, saw that as unconscious. What becomes our idea now of the collective unconscious that’s rooted, that really serves as a root for a lot of psychodynamic theory. You look at G. Stanley hall, his idea that it was actually unhealthy for black people to experience and have freedom, that enslavement was the healthier condition for black people.

[00:05:48.980] – Evan Auguste

As we move to the article, we show that these are not just ideas. We have institutions that are built based on these understandings, psychiatric hospitals that house people. And while people’s ideas and understandings of mental health might evolve, those institutions and their functions still remain. So you see those same populations if forcibly institutionalized at these places.

[00:06:12.150] – Steven Kasparek

So, for example, a lot of us in psychology, as we go through our training, we become familiar with some of the more hallmark studies that represent kind of psychological research. Malpractice, like the Tuskegee Is Syphilis study being an example of that. But there are a lot of kind of lesser known studies,
many of them actually, that we’re unaware of, that have systematically tried to find characterological flaws in black individuals specifically, or biological or genetic flaws that predispose us to believing that those individuals are more likely to be hostile or aggressive or more likely to use drugs. As some examples. And then when we think about how research is represented and where it gets published and how it is disseminated there was a really compelling paper by Dr. Roberts at Stanford, I believe it was published in 2020 showing the kind of systematic exclusion of psychological research that actually focuses on and reports findings on race. Those studies are oftentimes relegated to specialty journals and they’re not often included in journals that have a broader readership, which also would happen to be the readerships that most need the information.

[00:07:30.610] – Ludmila Nunes

It’s interesting what you’re mentioning, because we just published another article in Current Directions in Psychological Science, actually, that talks about how the emphasis on universalisms, finding these universal cognitive processes has helped to shape a very racist field. So I think this is connected to what you’re saying.

[00:07:54.390] – Evan Auguste

Exactly. And so I would dig up the field of black psychology. It’s played a consistent and a forceful role in tackling that idea that psychology has ever been a universalist project. It has been based in very specific ideas of sanity, of community, of civilization that for a lot of people we know it doesn’t work. We can see the fallout of that. So to your point, this very idea of universalism has cast aside so many brilliant thinkers, so many brilliant healers and removed so many useful strategies we have for guiding community.

[00:08:34.070] – Ludmila Nunes

That’s absolutely true. Going back to what you described earlier about how certain theories, certain researchers basically created dysfunctions that they could attribute to black people. You give an example in your article of a fake disease, basically a fake mental illness. Do you want to tell our listeners about it?

[00:09:01.710] – Evan Auguste

There’s a couple snuck in there, right? We have Cartwright, who I believe the late 18 hundreds, has drapedomania the very idea that to desire and pursue freedom is a mental health disorder because, again, as the theory would say, no enslavement is a better situation for these African people. Their biology is more suited for labor. Civilization, in fact, would render them, as they would say, insane. So the idea of a draper Tamini becomes a disorder used exclusively for African peoples. And we push forward and we look at the protest psychosis, the idea that to participate in civil rights, black liberatory movements, again, was evidence of a specific type of psychosis. And again, I think there’s this tendency within psychology for people to say, okay, of course there’s racist, everybody has racist, but we’ve moved on from that. But this has shaped our practice. And so the book, The Protest Psychosis shows not only that disorder, but how that disorder then shaped our understanding of schizophrenia. And so when we look at today, everybody’s well aware now that black people tend to get misdiagnosed over diagnosed with
psychotic disorders as opposed to mood disorders. People try to act like it's a distinction and symptom profile.

[00:10:21.020] – Evan Auguste

But I think the research would show it’s happening at the intersection of culture, the type of culture, the type of practice that people think of, again, as worthy of institutionalization.

[00:10:30.730] – Ludmila Nunes

And you also mentioned a study about connecting biology and criminality.

[00:10:38.550] – Steven Kasparek

Yes.

[00:10:39.290] – Ludmila Nunes

And the findings were not very surprising given this framework, right?

[00:10:44.160] – Steven Kasparek

Yes, absolutely. There have been many studies, and in the paper we pick out just a few as exemplars to kind of highlight the larger issue of these well established researchers and labs at prestigious institutions. That have been able to publish these works that have clear methodological biases and flaws. So, for example, there’s been several studies, many studies actually attempting to link the presence of a genetic anomaly, the X-Y-Y anomaly, so an extra Y chromosome with a kind of hyper maleness, particularly in black males, young black males. The idea being that of course, there would be a higher prevalence in young black males who are naturally more aggressive, more violent, more prone to those types of behaviors. And of course, they didn’t find a higher prevalence in black males. In fact, they found a higher prevalence in white males, but they didn’t end up publishing those studies because they weren’t in support of their original hypotheses. So that’s one example. There have also been examples where they have targeted younger brothers of kind of older male siblings who were incarcerated to try to study risk for juvenile delinquency. But that sample, again, was about 90% black, almost 100% black, actually.

[00:12:04.570] – Steven Kasparek

And they were administering drugs to those youth that had not been administered to children ever before. They caused really kind of severe side effects. And so there were many things being done in the context of the study that were harmful, but the welfare of the children was disregarded in the process. And so it just kind of showed the lengths that people historically have been willing to go to to make these associations, even despite evidence to the contrary that they don’t exist. And at the same time, there have been many, many studies, of course, seeking to validate treatments for broad populations, psychological treatments such as things like CBT, for example. And those studies that would benefit, in theory, the population have systematically excluded black people. So at the same time that you have
many studies historically seeking to showcase violent traits or risk for juvenile delinquency in black people, you have other studies that are systematically excluding black people from research that would be able to validate treatments for use to help improve the well being of those people. So this just highlights like another kind of cycle throughout history in the research space that has contributed to the same issues that I was talking about earlier.

[00:13:22.690] – Ludmila Nunes

Yes. So basically, researchers are using samples composed almost exclusively of black people if they are researching criminality behaviors that are considered nonoptimal, but then when they are investigating how to address any type of issue, mental health issues, then they completely ignore black people in their samples. It’s almost like they’re trying to find these treatments only for white people.

[00:13:49.150] – Steven Kasparek

Exactly.

[00:13:51.130] – Ludmila Nunes

But in your article, you also identify some steps that researchers and practitioners can take to improve the field.

[00:14:01.310] – Evan Auguste

We actually have a lot of recommendations. We have several tables of recommendations, and by no means is that list exhaustive. One of the things that we do mention right, as Steven had mentioned previously, the importance of interdisciplinary work, some people would frame it as almost antidisciplinary work. We almost can’t hope to do this work effectively, authentically, without considering the complexities of history, philosophy, sociology that frame all these conditions. As researchers in psychology, we can’t be so myopic as to think our measures, our assessments, our MRIs effectively capture the full weight of somebody’s sociocultural and historical context.

[00:14:47.210] – Steven Kasparek

And to that, one thing that we discussed when we presented this work at the American Psychology Law Society conference in March was that there tends to be a lot of gatekeeping, particularly at the PhD level. There tends to be a lot of gatekeeping around who deserves a seat at the table when we’re designing these studies, when we’re deciding on components of these interventions that we want to test, and so that mentality of gatekeeping has to really be shed in order to facilitate the type of interdisciplinary work that Evan’s talking about. Because we’re not just talking about working with other PhDs from other fields. That’s part of it. We’re also talking about working with community and cultural leaders, people who are experienced in some of these treatment modalities that Evan referenced earlier that have roots in kind of African history. And so that gatekeeping mentality is another big barrier that we have to work on overcoming as a field as well.

[00:15:45.710] – Ludmila Nunes
What this means is, if we want to dismantle systems that are perpetuating racism and other issues, we cannot work just within academia, for example, because these systems are transversal to many aspects of our society.

[00:16:03.970] – Evan Auguste

Exactly. And I think that’s a really important point. I’m sure we’ve all seen those conversations. But even among people who want to do antiracist work, who want to do antiracist research, who are giving keynotes on antiracism, who have the book, a lot of this work staged in academia, it has to be direct service. It has to uplift exactly as Stephen was talking about, right? The people that are actually being impacted, because often those people with lived experience have the dreams of freedom needed to guide us towards better, more effective communities of care.

[00:16:38.270] – Steven Kasparek

Some of the other recommendations that we make at kind of the research level because that is ultimately the space that a lot of us are in. We try to break it down by both the individual or, like, departmental level as well as the broader level of a journal or funding agency because really these things can be addressed at all of those levels and ultimately need to be to really create changes in the academy. But at the level of the individual or academic departments, we have recommendations such as diversifying course materials. How many of us have been in a history of psychology course only to find the kind of classic articles, not a lot of articles written by diverse authors or not a lot of diverse perspectives? And I think that awareness of the fact that this is happening is really important. First step for any psychologist in training and even just for myself, like working on this project, I felt like at times a veil was being lifted because I didn’t know so much of this information that we were able to kind of collate in this paper. And I feel like I know a lot more now and there’s so much to learn.

[00:17:43.500] – Steven Kasparek

So that’s a first step. And at the level of journals and funding agencies, there have to be structures that are created to really promote equitable research practices. For example, minimum standards of equity. Journals and funding agencies can outline these things and they ultimately do get to dictate like, what papers they’re accepting, what projects they’re funding. And so they have to set the standard. And then there also has to be an acknowledgment at some point of past harms. So at the level of a journal, some of the things that we cite in the paper as these past studies that have been harmful and that have kind of leveraged harmful conclusions and discussions, they still just exist out there. And you can go read it and download it. And if you don’t have that context or if you don’t have that discipline to check, like, has this been debunked or has this been corrected, then you can take that at face value. So some kind of disclaimer or some kind of indicator that maybe this article is not being retracted, but there’s counter evidence to some of the claims made in this article would maybe be a good starting place as well.

[00:18:52.410] – Ludmila Nunes

And besides these strategies and recommendations, I would like to end with a question about applications. So I started by talking about the percentage of Black people who are incarcerated in the United States, which is much higher than what you’d expect given the percentages of black people in
the general population. So what can we researchers and scientific societies, and even the common people who might be listening to us, what can we do to start making a difference. And changing these patterns?

[00:19:31.750] – Evan Auguste

Yeah, of course. And I’ve thought about it, right. Like often as researchers, again, especially within the academy, we go to think like, okay, we need more and more and more robust studies, more and more robust evidence at this point. We have a lot of evidence. Over the last several decades, people have done the work. We’ve seen the alternate models in the paper. We mentioned all the different alternatives to policing for mental health that exist and have documented efficacy. So at a certain point, it’s like, okay, can continue to refine, continue to optimize. But here’s where the scholar activist piece comes in too. We have the evidence. It’s not enough to go to your local conference where you’re going to have a room full of maybe 20 people who are going to nod vigorously. It’s about like, reaching those other audiences, reaching public audiences, reaching political audiences to help shift and shape that. As a brief example, we referenced that I think some of the maybe like the 31st APA presidents were involved at some level in the leadership of eugenics organizations. That’s people who are leaders in the field making one of their primary societal interventions eugenics.

[00:20:48.110] – Evan Auguste

So when we think about, okay, what should our calling be, what should our commitments be? I can count on my hands the number of psychologists I know that are engaged in the reparations movement, like creating material substance for the people who’ve been harmed by this history. So that’s where I think we move, right? We have research. People can continue to do research, but making that advocacy, that activism a substantial part of their scholarship.

[00:21:15.750] – Steven Kasparek

Yeah, I was going to say the same thing, and I would just add, you might be the only person in your department or your lab group to listen to this episode of this podcast, but now you know, and now you have a resource and you can be the one to spread that within your small circle. And that’s how this ultimately takes hold and leads to the types of action that Evan’s talking about, leads to the political arena where those people ultimately end up deciding a lot of these policies. And so I think that is another crucial level of intervention that we can all take on for ourselves.

[00:21:51.490] – Ludmila Nunes

This is Ludmila Nunes with APS. And I’ve been speaking to Evan August from, UMass, Boston, and Steven Kasparek from Harvard. Contributions to Antiblackness in the United States Within Psychological Research, Criminal Justice and Mental Health is the title of their article.

[00:22:09.410] – Ludmila Nunes

In perspectives on Psychological Science, and it was my pleasure to talk to them today. I’d like to thank you both for joining me.
Thank you.

Thanks so much for having us.

If anyone is interested in reading this article or learning more, please visit our website, psychologicalscience.org. You can also follow us on Instagram and Twitter at @psychscience.