A Conversation With James S. Jackson

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James S. Jackson, an APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow and Director of the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan, has begun a 6-year term on the National Science Board. He will be among 25 board members who will advise the US Congress and the president on science and engineering policy. On his birthday, Jackson sat down in July with APS Executive Director Alan Kraut for an interview, at a time when both scientists happened to be on travel in Europe. In the dialogue, conducted on his 70th birthday in the south of France, Jackson reflected on his life and career.

APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow James S. Jackson (right), pictured here with APS Executive Director Alan G. Kraut, has not only sparked major advances in survey research, but has been an advisor to federal science agencies in a variety of capacities.

Alan G. Kraut: James, what an incredible time in your life. You've just been appointed by President Obama to the National Science Board, the policy-setting body of the National Science Foundation. Next year you're going to be finishing a very successful second term as director of the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, arguably the world's premier social science research organization. Your marriage to another distinguished University of Michigan psychological scientist, Toni Antonucci, makes you a part of an eminent and visible power couple in the field. Your daughter Ariana is getting married in a month and your other daughter, Kendra, has just announced she's going to have a baby, the first grandchild for you and Toni. And to top it off, here we are in beautiful Provence on the day you have friends and family here celebrating your 70th birthday. With all of these wonderful things happening, I thought we could use this opportunity to reflect on your life and your career and get a sense of what brought you to this point. Let's start with a basic question: What brought you to psychological science?

James S. Jackson: I started as an engineering student at Michigan State University in 1962. I was going to be an electrical engineer and I was going to change the world. But one day I wandered into an

introductory psychology course and it was transformative for me. So, in ’66, after graduating from Michigan State, I headed to the University of Toledo to get a Master’s degree in psychology, starting out in biological. And even though I ended up in social psychology, the research I’m doing now has reconnected me to that earlier interest.

My experiences at Michigan State helped define who I am today. I worked my way through school, had three jobs. One at The Evening College was doing evaluation research on courses designed for adults in the community. The second job was as a janitor 4 hours a night, 5 days a week. I was a very good janitor. In fact, to this day I can’t help looking to see whether people have done a good job on the floors. The third job was showing slides to art history students. That was the best — I enjoyed that job very much.

But no one becomes successful without assistance and help and good fortune. I became president of my fraternity as an undergraduate. I’m an Alpha Phi Alpha, and it was through that experience and through meeting a fraternity brother and academic advisor, Dr. Robert Green, that I had the chance to do some incredible things in the civil rights era. Robert, who took me under his wing, became one of Martin Luther King’s assistants. So I got to spend a day with King. I got to meet Malcolm X and talk to him privately, I spent a day with Jimmy Hoffa. Jimmy Hoffa was an incredible person. I got a chance to meet a lot of the leadership of the civil rights movement, including Jesse Jackson, who I know to this day because of that experience. It was a defining set of experiences. I was a very, very fortunate young man.

Kraut: An old friend of yours, someone who was also such an important figure in the clinical science movement in psychological science, Stan Schneider, who worked for many years at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), once told me that he first met you when you were blocking a stage at an American Psychological Association Convention. What was that about?

Jackson: I went to Wayne State University to get my PhD after my Master’s at Toledo. I was one of the few African American graduate students there and was part of a group that formed something called the Black Student Psychological Association in 1968. We joined forces with a local group that formed at the same time, based at the University of Michigan. Feeling that something dramatic needed to be done to bring poor training opportunities and other issues facing racial and ethnic minority students in psychology into focus, we ended up taking over the podium during the presidential address at the APA Convention.

There must’ve been about 17 of us from across the country, we all put on our dashikis and marched up there, and took over the microphone. We didn’t do this thing lightly. We all thought we were going to jail. But George Miller and George Albee, particularly Albee, and a social psychologist from Harvard, Herb Kelman, decided they would handle this in a very different way. They told us, “Well, some of your points are well taken. Let’s have a meeting tomorrow morning and talk about it, and see what we can do.”

Kraut: And this was during George Miller’s famous “Give Psychology Away” presidential address?*

Jackson: Exactly. Here was a guy talking about projecting psychology into the public sphere, making it part of everything. And that’s what we did. We had that meeting the next morning, and it was the first step toward the establishment of an office of the Black Student Psychological Association at APA. I

became the president of the Black Student Psychological Association that year, and helped oversee the establishment of the office. Then, I finished my degree in ’72, and I became president of the Association of Black Psychologists in 1972. Ultimately, the student association disappeared as a separate group, but the Association of Black Psychologists grew, with national conventions and other programs.

Kraut: And at that time, you were finishing your degree at Wayne State?

Jackson: Yes, right. I worked there with some wonderful psychologists. Reuben Baron was my major professor. I also worked with Sam Komorita who was an absolutely marvelous professor, and Kal Kaplan from Illinois, another wonderful social psychologist, and Gloria Cowan, who was actually my cochair, from Wayne. It was just a wonderful opportunity for me. But I made one big mistake.

Kraut: What was the mistake?

Jackson: Taking a job before I finished my degree. I started as an assistant professor at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1971 even though I still had to finish my doctoral thesis — I was trained as an experimental social psychologist focused on social reinforcers. But by the time I finished my degree, I had gotten pulled in other directions and I wasn’t able to pursue my earlier, very promising work on contingency learning and social reinforcers.

By the way, Bill McKeachie was the chair at Michigan when I went there. To this day, a lot of people think the reason I was appointed is because I was a very good softball player and Bill was crazy about softball [laughing].

When I got my degree, I had already been an assistant professor for a year. I was the first full-time African-American faculty hired at the University of Michigan. There were two part-time African-American faculty there: Ewart Thomas, who later made his mark at Stanford, and Floyd Wiley, who was an adjunct professor teaching one course in the Community Psychology program. He and I cotaught a Community Psychology course for 10 or so years. But I was the first full-time black faculty member, out of maybe 170 faculty in the department.

Kraut: Even in the early 1970s?

Jackson: Yes, even then, and out of 170 faculty.

Kraut: Wow.

Jackson: But Michigan, through the work of Pat Gurin and Gerry Gurin, had embarked on increasing the number of African-American students, and Michigan had been very active in bringing students from historically black colleges into the program. The year I came in, Michigan brought 15 African-American students into the graduate program in psychology. In fact, the following year, half the students brought into the social psych program were African Americans.

Of course, many of these students had an interest in race and ethnicity as important variables in understanding psychological phenomena in general and particularly social psychological processes. In order to be helpful to them, I had to develop a wide array of knowledge about a lot of different things in

psychology. Not to mention that as the only black faculty member, I was called on to serve on an incredible number of committees.

So, it was enjoyable in the sense of being able to do those things, but it was not good for completing my degree and getting my own research started. I've always thought I should have followed up on some of the work in my doctoral thesis. In fact, maybe that's what I'm going to do when I retire, I'm going to go back to my doctoral dissertation.

Kraut: The work on operant conditioning to social stimuli does seem like it ties directly to what you've been doing most recently.

Jackson: Yes, my recent work is about behavioral change.

Kraut: But that's not the path you took early on.

Jackson: No, it's not. It's not the path at all.

Remaking Science: The National Survey of Black Americans

Kraut: Let's talk about starting up what turned out to be your incredibly productive research career.

Jackson: The social psychology program at Michigan at that time was located at the Institute for Social Research, in something called the Research Center for Group Dynamics. The Center was headed by Dorwin Cartwright and Al Zander and it had some wonderful social psychologists. I mean, it was social psychology heaven. Helen Peak was there, Bob Zajonc, Jack Atkinson, Gene Bernstein, Ted Newcombe, Pat Gurin, Richard Nisbett, Joe Veroff, Libby Douvan. And Dan Katz was there…

Kraut: … whose name you took as your chaired professorship.

Jackson: Right. Dan was an important person in my career and took a close interest in me and my research even after he retired.

But Michigan was like that. There was a commitment, particularly among social psychologists, to broaden and diversify the field, and they gave me lots of opportunities to work with students, particularly African-American students, and as part of my work, I became interested in survey research.

What I found interesting about survey research was the incredible power of this form of gaining knowledge in some of the work we were doing, particularly in ethnic and racial minority research. I was working with Gerry Gurin and Pat Gurin, and Gerry helped train me as a survey researcher.

So, in 1976, working with a large group of graduate students — many of whom are now full professors and tenured at different places — we started planning the National Survey of Black Americans, which became a major vehicle for studying and for what we call "giving voice to the African-American population."

The survey was designed to do two important things: Ask questions of a population that were

meaningful to the population; and reach representative samples that allowed us to say with some certainty we really were representing the array of the black population in the US. We launched the study in 1979 and conducted it over 2 years.

Kraut: This was large scale, huge research, well-funded. Who were your funders back then?

Jackson: We were in a partnership then with the NIMH. NIMH was very supportive of this work, which was breaking new ground for them and for the field. One unique part was our proposal for a 2-year run-up period to develop a questionnaire from scratch using a multimethod, multitrait approach.

I had been greatly influenced by the work of Campbell and Fiske, and we applied that kind of conceptual basis to the development of questions. So, we used a lot of different kinds of methods, like Q sorts and open-ended questions and focus groups and so on, and used them across a wide array of different kinds of constructs. And in all the constructs, we started from the perspective of asking "What's unique?" about, say, self-esteem within the African-American population that might lead us to approach its assessment in a different way. We spent 2 years doing that, and wound up with a questionnaire, the National Survey of Black Americans questionnaire, that was very culturally sensitive.

The second departure we made from past survey studies was aimed at getting a true representation of the population. Previously in this kind of research, the approach had been to oversample. You identified individuals that were representative of the population as a whole, and then you oversample in areas of high concentration in order to get the numbers you wanted. The problem with that is that you wind up with a lot of nonrepresentative samples.

The National Survey of Black Americans started from a perspective that we had to tie the sampling and study to the distribution of the black population. But we had to solve a very serious methodological problem that had been a serious impediment in previous research, that was due to the fact that African Americans were maldistributed in the population — and it's still true today. They live in areas of high density and high concentration, so you don't want to take too many people from this group because it would be nonrepresentative. They also live in areas of low concentration. Previous studies had not represented African Americans very well who lived in high-density white areas. We had to devise a cost-effective strategy for representing those individuals.

Now this is the truth: It came to me in a dream as to how we might be able to do this. Screening was the problem. For example, if you're screening an average of 60 household blocks, the traditional way of screening was to knock on every single door until you found the sample person that you were interested in — in this case, African Americans. So, that's a lot of doors to knock on when, say, there might be only one African American in that 60-household block. But I woke up one night, in the middle of the night and said, "We'll ask white people where the black people are!"

So we developed WASP, the Wide Area Screening Procedure. It uses the high visibility of African Americans to ascertain their exact locations. What we discovered was that in an average 60-household area, if there was one African-American family, you only had to go to three households to find out where that family was. We developed this procedure, did lots of pretesting, and it worked. That's really why we could do the National Survey of Black Americans.

WASP is now used around the world, particularly in England in studies of high-visibility populations — Bangladeshis, Africans, other groups. And it's used in regions like the Middle East, because it results in good sampling characteristics.

The other aspect of the National Survey of Black Americans that was very bold for that time was that we wanted to make it nonracially comparative, meaning we would only focus on African Americans. It would not have a comparison group of whites or any other group. We initially ran into a lot of difficulties when we first proposed this approach.

The argument we made was that the social and behavioral sciences always had a comparative perspective, but there are many questions that you want to know about the black population for which the comparisons are internal to that population, not across race. For example, if you want to know something about the ways in which social and economic status influence people, you don't necessarily need a race-comparative design to be able to do that. In fact, it confuses things.

We thought not making cross racial comparisons was a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but in the mid '70s it turned out to be more revolutionary than we thought. But NIMH was very supportive of our arguments. In fact, they said, "Yes, it sounds good to us." They played an important role in the development of not only the survey, but all the things that emerged as a result of that particular survey.

But my colleagues at Michigan looked askance at this idea: "How could you do a study in this modern era of the 1970s without doing a racial comparison?" So, I had to go before the entire faculty at the Institute for Social Research to defend this proposal and presented the arguments that I just mentioned. Fortunately they agreed it made sense, and we prevailed. That's how the National Survey came about.

A Global Perspective on Race and Ethnicity

Kraut: Here we are in France, so this seems like a good place to ask how you got into international issues.

Jackson: It was really because of Bob Zajonc, whose work in the 1960s was part of what inspired me to become a social psychologist, and who later became a close friend. Bob was a Francophile. He spent time here during World War II, and he convinced me that I should come and work here. So in the mid-1980s I applied for a sabbatical and off we went to Paris, where I worked with Gerard Lemaine, who had been trained with Henri Tajfel and was close to Eugene Burnstein, another colleague at Michigan.

We put together this group of social psychologists who were interested in race and ethnic influences and immigration problems in Europe, including Thomas Pettigrew as well as people in England and Germany. I even convinced the University of Michigan to give me some funding to put a module of questions in the 1988 Eurobarometer, which was a cross-national study in Western Europe. That actually embarrassed the European Union, which back then was known as the European Commission.

Kraut: It embarrassed them because they had ignored the issue?

Jackson: Exactly. But they decided to catch up and do this gigantic study on racism and xenophobia in

Western Europe. With the assistance of Ronald Inglehart, we had to go before the European Commission Parliament in Brussels in 1987 to argue for this study, and it got a lot of support from a variety of politicians, particularly in England. Bernie Grant, who was one of the first black members of the House of Commons, was a very big supporter. So, we got that study launched and I've worked closely with Tom Pettigrew and that group from 1984 until now.

By the way, my talk at the first APS Convention in 1989 was on this European research. It was the first time I'd presented on that research in a public setting, which was very exciting.

Kraut: I still remember that excitement around your talk at that first convention.

Jackson: That work led to a more recent focus of mine, which is on the African-Caribbean population.

Kraut: What is the new work about?

Jackson: In the field, there's long been an argument about what's more important, race or ethnicity. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought that the real question is, under what conditions are ethnic differences and ethnicity important and under what conditions would racial differences be important? That became the driving question in this more recent work, which is focused on trying to understand the conditions under which ethnicity makes a difference and conditions under which race makes a difference.

In starting this line of inquiry, we needed to find a way to empirically separate ethnic effects from racial ones. It turns out that the African-Caribbean population is an example model for studying these issues, because they share a race with other groups in many societies, particularly in the United States — African Americans — but they don't share ethnic background; that is, their socialization, their belief systems, their values, and so on are determined in different ways than for African Americans. For example, we find in mental health and the distribution of disorders that ethnicity trumps race. So, you find big differences between the African-Caribbean population and the African American population. On the other hand, if you look at things like experiences of discrimination and racism, race trumps ethnicity, and you find very little differences between the populations, almost none at all as a matter of fact. So, we've been following that the last 10 years or so.

What we're doing now — and this joins with the research I've been doing in Europe — is working with people in England and in Canada and actually working in the Caribbean because we're trying to capture the African-Caribbean diaspora. African-Caribbeans are an African-based population that came to the Caribbean, in many ways like the African Americans did as slaves early on. They have moved to very few places — primarily the United States, England, and Canada. We're studying those populations in those various settings as well as in the Caribbean, trying to understand something about how movement out of that setting influences development, attitudes, values, and similar kinds of things.

Mental Health Research in Black and White

Kraut: I've been in an audience when you've talked about some of your more interesting and provocative findings, including that African Americans have protective features against mental disorders that white populations don't have. People's mouths drop when they hear this.

Jackson: In part it came out of the research with the National Survey of Black Americans. Since the ’80s I was seeing that NIMH’s *Epidemiologic Catchment Area* (ECA) studies, which were trying to get household-based estimates of the distribution and nature of mental disorders, uncovered something really peculiar, which was that if you look at the distribution within households for the major mental disorders, African Americans had lower prevalence rates than whites. And it turns out that every major study subsequent to the ECA — every regional study, every national study — has found that to be true.

But it didn’t make sense. If poor circumstances — poverty, bad living conditions and so on — create disparities in physical health, why didn’t they create the same disparities in mental health?

One thing that’s wrong with disparities research in public health and other fields is that people are seen as helpless, passive victims of their circumstances. What we brought to this research is a psychological perspective. We made the argument that people have agency, that people don’t just walk around not doing anything about their circumstances, that they try to actively address stressful events in their lives.

We further argued that perhaps the things that people do to reduce the negative influences on their mental health and to protect themselves may turn out to be deleterious for their physical health. And so, we became interested in mechanisms and speculated that perhaps chronic stress — specifically its effect on the HPA axis functioning — was really at the core of all this.

Kraut: HPA is…?

Jackson: The hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis (HPA) is a complex set of direct influences and feedback interactions among three endocrine glands: the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland, and the adrenal glands. The interactions among these organs is a major part, but only a part, of the neuroendocrine system that controls reactions to stress and regulates many body processes, including digestion, the immune system, mood and emotions, sexuality, and energy storage and expenditure. It is the common mechanism for interactions among glands, hormones, and parts of the midbrain that mediate the general adaptation syndrome. In general, because the system is so complex and not fully understood, I often refer to it as the physiological stress response which is affected by external exposure to stressful situations and events. This all went back to my early training and interest in biological psychology and what I was doing in my master’s thesis. We set out to demonstrate and try to understand empirically why it would be true that African Americans, who have worse physical health outcomes, would have lower rates of major mental health disorders.

Over many years of looking at this question, we came up with what we call the Affordances Model, which is a tip of the hat to James J. Gibson in terms of thinking about how things work. The Affordances Model argues that the behaviors African Americans engage in to cope with the stresses and strains on their lives contribute, along with the poor circumstances I mentioned, to bad physical health outcomes such as early morbidity and so on, but those behaviors collectively are actually protective for their mental health; they in some way interfere with the physiological cascade to mental health disorders.

Kraut: We’re talking about behaviors like…?

Jackson: Smoking, drinking, overeating, using drugs, other similar kinds of things. All people are not doing this because they’re bad people. They’re doing this as coping mechanisms.

We published several papers in this area which empirically demonstrated that these bad behaviors actually buffer the serious mental health outcomes, particularly anxiety disorders and depressive disorders —- and replicated the effect 4 times in different data sets, different periods of time. But it still was not very satisfying. Because why should this biological mechanism exist for African Americans but it doesn't exist for whites? It still didn't make any sense.

That question led us into a whole new area of research which is trying to understand the ways in which populations may differ in the nature and distribution of bad living conditions and other related issues, with the idea that maybe those differences accounted for the effect. For the last 3 years what we've been doing is trying to figure out how can we make black people white and make white people black — statistically, that is.

In the course of this, we hit upon work on propensity score analysis, and what we discovered was that if we "make" blacks white, we can get the same effects that we were getting for whites, and if we "make" whites black, we get the same effects among the white populations that we were getting for blacks. And we have now replicated that.

Kraut: What specifically are you doing?

Jackson: We're using a set of variables that allows propensity score matching across a set of variables relating to things like poverty status, educational background, where people live, and other similar kinds of things. We found we can balance black and white populations so that they look similar. And when you balance those populations, when they look similar, the effects that we observe for blacks to start with are exactly what we get for whites as well, and lend support, we believe, to the effect being a biological mechanism. The reason why we see it so clearly in the African-American population is because the distribution of their living conditions is so much worse on average than for whites, but for whites who live under similar kinds of conditions and are raised in similar ways as a disproportionate number of African Americans, you get exactly the same effects. That's what led us into a whole lot of thinking about the life course.

Now, in my most recent research, we're arguing — and this is where my social psychology comes in — that there's nothing permanent about the categorization of race. While blacks are given a designation and categorization at birth, they aren't really "black" at that point in time, and that through the nature of their lived lives, they become black. At the same time, whites who are categorized as white at the beginning, some of them also become "black" over time; that is, the nature of their lived experiences exposes them to the same kinds of things blacks are exposed to. And some blacks over time in some ways become "white" or, more likely, they don't become black.

It's a totally different way of thinking about what we mean by race. There's nothing set in stone. In fact, race probably is better thought about as a kind of stimulus which influences the experiences people have because of skin tone and other characteristics that accumulate over the life course and influences their final racial designation. I'm now writing a paper that tries to lay this out in detail.

The Life Course

Kraut: Along with all your research accomplishments, you've contributed to the field in many other

ways. You've been an advisor to federal science agencies in every possible capacity, from peer review to serving on NIH national advisory councils. You're director of the Institute for Social Research, leading the development of so many great things there. And you've received so many honors and recognitions from your peers — election to the Institute of Medicine, a presidential appointment to the National Science Board, and of course an APS lifetime achievement award. You've shaped whole areas of the field and had an impact on society. What's it like to look back on all this?

Jackson: Well, when you put it like that [smile]… it's been interesting thinking about my life course. I'm 70 years old today, but the fact is I'm also 21 years old, 30 years old, 40 years old, all wrapped into one. When I first went to Michigan I never had an expectation that I would wind up being the head of ISR or elected to the Institute of Medicine, or any of the other things that happened to me. They happened because of circumstances. Now, I'm not saying that I don't have some skills or I'm not willing to work hard. But no one gets to do those kinds of things without the help of a lot of other people.

Over my career, people like Bob Zajonc and Kenneth Clark were very, very important professionally and personally. And Stan Schneider from NIMH and I worked together way back during the Nixon administration. Stan picked this young guy from Michigan and said, "I want you to be on the review panel for NIMH training grants." Well, it turned out that Nixon froze committee appointments, and so year after year after year, I was on that committee. Stan and I did so many site visits together that we became a real team. We could just look at each other and know what to do. Stan taught me how to deal with departments of psychology around these very important training grants. And [laughing] he taught me about wine.

Kraut: Very important…

Jackson: Yes!

And I mentioned this earlier — to spend time with Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders as a 21-year-old kid, that experience set me on certain paths.

And then, some directions I took were out of necessity. Being the first African-American full-time faculty member at Michigan meant becoming responsible in some ways for the training of large numbers of African-American students, graduate and undergraduate, and their wide range of perspectives broadened my interests significantly. As I mentioned earlier, I taught in the Community Psychology program for over 10 years and have quite a few publications in that area, and I became interested in how you reach out to the community. That's one of the reasons why the Program for Research on Black Americans (PRBA) has a large public health and community-based approach.

I always argued that even with this particular perspective and orientation, we could do good science, and our work has always been dedicated to doing just the best science possible while being community relevant. And so it's really been the people in my life, past and present — students, family, mentors — and the aim to do good for so many communities, including the science community, that has guided me over all these years.

** George Miller's address as president of the American Psychological Association used the phrase*

“giving psychology away” as a means of providing psychological knowledge and expertise to the public at no charge.