

The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy
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Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]: Hi everyone. Welcome to the season two of the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcasts, produced at the University at Buffalo. I'm your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah. This episode I have professor Waverly Duck and professor Anne Rawls on the phone with me. Waverly is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and one of the 2020-2021 UB Center for Diversity Innovation Distinguished Visiting Scholars. Anne is a professor of sociology at Bentley University. Today they are going to talk to us about their book *Tacit Racism* published in 2020 by the University of Chicago press. Can you tell us a little bit about your book?

[Anne]: We've had a problem in the United States for a very long time with the way we define racism and the way we understand race. W.E.B. DuBois started saying back in the 1890s that race is a social construction, that it's being socially made; nobody listened. White Americans have, as a block, tended to define racism in terms of individual attitudes, individual prejudice; it sort of morphed into microaggressions and implicit bias, but it's still individual. And Black Americans have been saying again from the 1890s that this is systemic, that it's institutional, that the way we approach it in legal cases makes it impossible to prove, and the way we treat it in terms of consciously aware intentional behavior allows white people who are engaged in outright overt racism to deny being racist because they didn't have hate in their minds when they did the racist thing. And what we try to do in this book, and I think it's the first time it's ever been done, is to argue that systemic racism has been institutionalized in interactional expectations. Which means that even though we're looking at the level of social interaction and we're looking at individuals interacting with each other, we're not looking at a psychological phenomenon here. So, it's not implicit bias, it's not microaggressions. Some of it may be the things that are getting caught up under those terms, but we're giving a different explanation. And the consequence, the implication is that when you're trying to do sensitivity training, when you're trying to raise awareness or teach courses on race and racism, that we need to stop focusing on raising the sensitivity of people to these conscious act microaggressions and implicit bias and instead focus on where the systemic racism is built in, and nobody's really doing that, so this book is intended to raise awareness of the problem at that level.

[Waverly]: In one way the book is about how race is embedded in a number of our interactions, both practices and language, and we do a good job at illustrating how this works and sort of the way that we greet each other, how it works in medical settings, how it works in neighborhoods. And I think one of the things that we try to stress is that we're working with these categories, but how do you study it, how do you think about it? And there was also a realization on both of our parts that in a lot of ways these issues are a matter of life and death in terms of citizen police interactions and medical settings, but also just illustrating the troubles that people have in everyday interactions that they attribute to race.

[Azalia]: How does W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness influence your argument about how white and Black Americans interact?

[Anne]: One of the challenges we face in doing this research that anyone would face is that white people are expecting of each other is opaque to Black Americans who can't see it, and what Black Americans expect of each other is opaque to white Americans who can't see it. So, what double consciousness did, and I was able to see this clearly in my early research, I was at Wayne State University doing this research and had lots of Black graduate students, of whom Waverly became one, and they knew that there were these differences in expectations by race. I was theorizing that they were there, but I couldn't see them. So, their double consciousness alerted them – this thing that white people are doing, this is different. I couldn't see what was different, I just knew it had to be there. Double consciousness didn't tell them why white people were doing it, and so when these things occurred, they would need to make up motivations, you know, so there were lots of narratives about motivation. I was able to use those as clues to generate more problematic interactions so that I could begin to see what those differences look like. Never as clearly as if I were a Black American who had those expectations, but I could begin to recognize them, I could begin to make sense of them. So, it's a form of double consciousness we call white double consciousness when you begin to see what white expectations look like from a Black perspective. So, it's not the same double consciousness, but it's indispensable. But the research couldn't have been done by me alone which is why it's, uh, pairing, because I can see some things and Waverly sees other things and so then we figure out what it is in this joint work.

[Waverly]: And I think what I would add to that, I think what was exciting in terms of being one of the early participants and a part of some of this research, was how innovative and important it was to focus on language and practices, and really trying to understand when communication would break down how we would attribute that to motivations or motives that were usually steeped in sort of speculation and trying to theorize why that interaction fell apart. I think one of the ways that we try to illustrate these interactional troubles was to do something and almost taking you down a path to show in basic introductory sequences how there's sort of different taken for granted understandings of what you do when you meet a stranger for the first time, and how sometimes asking questions about neighborhoods you live in, where did you graduate, what do you do for a living, how those are questions that situate people in a particular class category, not something that I believe a lot of Black Americans do initially meeting people, and I think a lot of things that we noticed that when Black Americans would meet people for the first time, it was very topical about the situation they were in or why they were in that particular situation. I think what ultimately happened is doing, you know, broader research of looking and explaining like, this is not something that's just happening in poor and working-class Black Americans, that a lot of middle-class Black Americans experience this in terms of talking about things like fractured reflections, where the presentation of self, who you present as somebody in a leadership position, how even though you're in that position, your authority, your legitimacy, is not being taken seriously, and then even getting deeper and thinking about sort of power dynamics and how a lot of Black Americans think about the greater good in terms of the overall well-being of not only each other, but people in general, and that there are these strange power dynamics, and going back and seeing that as a country we have historically sort of privileged people in positions of power. And I think one of the things in addition that W.E.B. DuBois talked about, in addition to double consciousness, is this idea of the submissive man and submissive civility. Of this history that leaders and iconic figures that white Americans have always valued. And he used the example of Jefferson Davis as this person we idolize and celebrate that eventually people who've been colonized but marginalized will start critiquing and interrogating that identity, and what was unique and special about the experience of Black Americans in terms of understanding that we're in this situation together, I think is very telling and very powerful. And so W.E.B. DuBois gives us a way, an important tool of talking about this. But I would be remiss in not pointing to sort of the legacy of this area of sociology that Anne specialized in, that I'm a part of, the ethnomethodology people's methods and their ways of sense-making and things about trust and

reciprocity, that Harold Garfinkel was a powerful figure from the 50s in writing about, sort of, color trouble on the bus, to his work on gender and doing gender with the Agnes chapter in studies and ethnomethodology, and bringing that and pairing that with DuBois has given us a powerful way of interrogating how interactions work, how troubled interactions work, and how people attribute the breakdown of communication to motives that are, sort of, situated in sort of stereotypes that we have about each other.

[Azalia]: So you mentioned about how even high status Black people are still prone to racism, which you talk about at length in one of the chapters in your book. Can you elaborate about it?

[Waverly]: You know one of the things that we try to do with chapter two, and I think it was something that I relate to, is when you're working or you're in a social situation where people don't expect you to be. And so, as a vice president of a company, or a college professor, and how there are questions in terms of when you give out directives, or people who report to you double-checking, going above you, sending emails to the president of the company, and what that does to a person's, not only ability to trust people you're supposed to work with, but also what does it do to your overall well-being in terms of trying to navigate this terrain where you never know where it's coming from or when it's going to happen. But you sort of build up almost a resistance to it and decide whether you're going to participate in your – and it wouldn't be drastic in saying like your degradation or your marginalization, and so you choose not to enter those situations. You choose not to respond to people who don't see you or take you serious as a person who inhabits that position in that space. And so I think it was important for us to show that this is a wide phenomenon, that's structural, that's embedded in our interactions, and a way of interrogating it, and but also naming it, and-and allowing us to sort of think about why are we doing these situations and how, even if no matter how successful you are, like you still experience these incidents. I think one of the things that I often think of is when Barack Obama is the president someone yells out at him, "he lies," like and how the most powerful person in the country, I just remember looking at the faces of the people who were on stage with Obama and how they responded to it. But it's just to show that there's an assumption that people, once they move up this economic ladder, that they're immune to structural racism and we're just saying, like, no it is so a part of our language and our culture, and making the ordinary strange by seeing it and illustrating how it works becomes significant and so important.

[Anne]: This particular chapter is very useful for generating some white double consciousness about what white privilege is. Because the big problem with white privilege is that you just have it. You don't have to do anything, there's no experience that comes with it, and white people who are being told about problematic interactions that black men have will very often say, "well they should have done this, they should have done that," and this paper makes it really clear that there's a cost to going along to get along. That if these men participate in their own degradation then they can't be vice presidents. That there has to be some kind of pushback. They can't do the kind of pushback white men would do. White men get really aggressive and push back, and they're allowed to do that. So, learning the very subtle forms of preserving self and the integrity of self and identity that people in the Black community have learned to adopt that white people don't have to do, don't recognize, don't even know what's going on, and don't realize that a lot of what they do is what's making this necessary.

[Waverly]: One of the things that has come out of that chapter and working with Anne has been ways of, you know, coping with when that communication breaks down by when people say or do racist things by simply asking, "what do you mean by that?" Uh, what do you mean that this come from the president? What do you mean am I the professor of this class? What do you mean am I the vice

president of this company or, and so, really allowing people to think about why they produce that particular account. But that chapter is one of the ones just to illustrate, this happens to even people who are in secure economic positions and positions of power. That they can't take the same things for granted as somebody who's not a Black American.

[Azalia]: Why is this book important? Especially in these times.

[Waverly]: I'm going to give my- why I am passionate about this book. And it was very early on that we were having discussions everything for how this was a threat to our democracy in terms of the divisions that can be exploited by outside powers as countries like China and India, Brazil and Russia become more prominent on the stage, that the divisions between people within our country, how those things can be exploited. And then it became much more serious because it's a matter of life and death that I can't stress when we were really talking about doctor patient interaction and particularly citizen police interaction. Of how do you get and navigate these very dangerous situations safely. And what can be learned in really capturing the value and the resiliency of a number of Black Americans in this country. And so, at the start for me, it was why is this book important? And even in this particular historical moment it wasn't purposeful that we were writing this book, and we knew what the fallout would be in terms of some of the police killings, the divisions that we are witnessing in this country. But I think the book is timely and it's important on a number of levels.

[Anne]: On the one hand, we had been working on the stuff for 25-30 years, so that was not motivated by the current situation. I have spent the last 50 years frustrated at the way Americans talk about things that are all about race without realizing that they have anything to do with race. That's one of the original motivations for doing the research is to show people that things that they think are just about the economy, or they're just old-fashioned traditions – no. They start in slavery, they have to do with race, they're white supremacists, you need to be able to see this. When Trump was running in 2015 for the presidency there are a couple of things that happened that were really important. The racism came out of the closet. I'd been teaching and doing research on race at that point for 45 years and it was very hard to convince people. Suddenly it was out there. Everybody could see. The racism is over, but they were still treating it as his supporters being racist, and, you know, the real problem is that everything that happens in the country is grounded in racism. And then we have this thing people want to call a culture war, as if we had two different cultures. And one of the things I've argued is that we actually have two different ways of having cultures, not two different cultures. We have the people who are using racist traditions to make sense who will not make sense any other way, and we have people living in cities together in high-tech jobs, in corporations that have people from all over the place, who are forced to make sense in new ways that don't just rely on tradition. And the split in the country is between the people living in the diversified cities being forced to learn these new ways and the people who have not been, either willing or able or exposed to those new ways who are still trying to use a 400-year-old comprehensive set of racist icons to make sense. And I thought, the country is going to split down the middle if people don't realize this is about race. It's not about two cultures, it's not about the economy, it's not about disaffected rural white voters, it's about racism. And we need to have a national conversation about that or it's just going to keep happening over and over and over and over again.

[Azalia]: That was professor Waverly Duck and professor Anne Rawls, and this has been the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcast produced at the University at Buffalo. Please visit our website buffalo.edu/baldycenter for more episodes, and follow us on twitter @baldycenter. Until next time, I'm your host and producer, Azalia Muchransyah.