Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 13: Connecting ideas and action to understand racism and reduce disparities

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. I’m Peter Salovey, and thank you for joining me for this special episode of Yale Talk.

Today at Yale and around the country, we are observing Martin Luther King Day. It’s an opportunity to remember, honor, and reflect on Dr. King’s legacy. In 1963, in his famous speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Dr. King spoke about the “unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”

More than half a century later, policing, especially the way the police interact with members of black and other marginalized communities, has come under new scrutiny. Since the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer last May, we have heard calls nationwide to rethink and reimagine how police departments operate.

My guest today is a national leader in examining these issues. Phillip Atiba Goff is the Carl I. Hovland Professor of African American Studies and Professor of Psychology at Yale. In his research, Professor Goff conducts experiments on the science of racial bias. He is also the co-founder and CEO of the Center for Policing Equity, the world’s largest research and action think tank on race and policing. The center is home to the largest collection of police behavioral data in the world. The recipient of both academic and law enforcement awards, Professor Goff testified in front of President Obama’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

Professor Goff, Phil, thank you for joining me on Yale Talk.

**Phillip Atiba Goff:** Thanks for having me, Peter.

**Peter:** So, you’re teaching a course in Yale College in the spring semester called, “Is that racist?” Tell us about the course with that provocative title. What is it, and where did you get the idea for such a course?

**Phil:** The idea came from the fact that in all of the social science courses I took as an undergraduate, as a graduate student, in all the ones I surveyed amongst my colleagues, the question of racism was often core to the issues, and the definitions varied so wildly. If you imagine that the problem of racism is a problem of individual character, the set of solutions you have are wildly different than if you imagine that the problem of racism is a problem of historical momentum and power and elitism.

I figured it was important to get that defined in the abstract. But in parallel, I’ve been an academic for a long time, as you know I’m quite old, but I’ve been black even longer. And the definitions that were handed to me both from my family as they experienced and resisted racism in their lives, and from other folks who were outside my family experiencing the same things, as a child those definitions didn’t map on to the kind of racism that I experienced.

Racism morphs from generation to generation. It evolves. My experience was, I had to learn how to define it in the way I experienced it. And probably that means we’re not done with that process. So I talk about learning about racism, learning about justice as a second language. The point is not that I’m going to learn all this stuff as an academic and then just gift it to the next generation and they will go forth and conquer. The point is, I have to learn how to learn it and then teach how to learn it so that other folks who are experiencing it in different ways will have better language for what they experience than anything I could give them for mine.

**Peter:** I noticed you use the phrase “science of racial bias.” You and I are both social psychologists. I think we have a kind of common understanding of what we mean as social psychologists when we say “science of” anything, science of racial bias. But I think many listeners may not be used to thinking about racism and bias within a scientific framework. So what is the science of racial bias and will it be a part of your course?

**Phil:** Yeah, so the course is about, first, the theoretical underpinnings: what have other people thought about racism? How have they defined it? Why did they go about doing it that way? And then the second part of the course is, once you’ve got a definition that you like, integrating what theories make sense to you and segregating out the theories that don’t, how do you prove it? What are the methods for understanding? I think that racism requires X, Y, and Z to be present. How do I know? Because if the answer is because I said so, that works for authoritarian parents and dictatorial leaders and absolutely nobody else.

But the reason why I talk about the *science* of racial bias and the *science* of racism in policing is because we can use the same scientific methods we used to study almost every other important phenomenon to study racism. But we mostly don’t. We study economic deprivation, we studied disparities along a whole host of other dimensions using all the best tools of social science. But when it comes to race, oftentimes we’re reduced to just talking about character. We’ve defined the problem as things that are small enough to fit inside defects in individual people. And when you start thinking about, well, what is it and how can I study it and how can I remedy it, using the scientific method that we all learned in third grade, you come to radically different conclusions about what the problem is and therefore what the solution can be. So the hope of the course and the entirety of my career is to start lending those same tools to a broader group of folks because we end up with better solutions when we have a better understanding of what the problem is.

**Peter:** It makes sense to me, of course, and obviously central to the scientific study of racial bias is the collection of data, and data are also central to your center, the Center for Policing Equity. As we mentioned, it’s a huge repository of behavioral data about policing.

So let’s talk a little bit about data. As you know, Yale has an initiative around data science that we have announced. So why are data important, and what kinds of data do you collect, and how would it help us improve policing?

**Phil:** I’m going to start answering that question at a basic level that is maybe surprising for a social scientist. All experience, all observation, it’s all data. When I’m in a classroom, I try and explain to students who think of themselves as not researchers because researchers wear tweed and have terrible taste in jeans and didn’t get picked to go to dances—I explain we’re all researchers. Anybody who’s ever wanted to get out of the house on the weekend in the house where they live with their parents is a researcher because you do what’s called “PMR,” parental mood reconnaissance. You figure out, are mom and dad in a good mood? Is it the kind of time when they’re going to say yes? That’s the time to ask if I can go out. So we do research all the time, and every observation is a piece of data.

The deal with current forms of data science is we can take those individual human observations or human life, and we can make it into numbers that can be analyzed in more sophisticated ways and scaled better than an individual set of observations. So that’s what we’re looking for in the context of race and policing is data on not just reported crimes, but what police officers do. And that allows us to look at things like, oh, maybe it’s just poverty and crime that leads to these racial disparities? In fact, no, poverty and crime are not sufficient to explain why black folks are stopped, arrested, and had force used on them more often than white folks.

But there’s a second part to this, too, that I want people to understand. Everybody growing up got a chance to see how someone who cared about them, even if it was just them caring for themselves, how they measured the things that matter to them. You know I use this example when I’m talking in general, particularly for large talks, if you grew up in a house where your parents were a little bit smothering because they loved you so much, you have in some doorframe markings with pencil of your height at various ages, they might even have numbers or dates next to them. On the refrigerator there might be a series of pictures of you at various ages going up to grammar school. You keep track and you count and you measure the things that matter. We count how long it’s been since you are with someone who you really care about, or if you’re not sure that they care about you, how long it’s been since they texted you back.

What does it look like, what does it feel like, to be part of a community where the people who are legally entrusted with the power to purvey violence on behalf of the state haven’t been asked to account for how often, for where, for when, for why they do that? What does it mean to live in a community where we haven’t bothered to measure the scale of the brutality to which we have subjected them? And when those communities are disproportionately made up of the children, the descendants, the progeny of formerly enslaved folks, it’s no longer just the pain of being ignored. It feels intentional. So part of the point of putting together the data is to learn about where and when we should be making interventions, either to change police or to remove them from situations altogether. But the other part of putting the data together is to remedy the fact that for several generations we have not bothered to measure what the state does to the most vulnerable communities. And that is a violence in and of itself.

**Peter**: Do you have any plans to work with the Yale Police Department or the City of New Haven Police Department? You’re coming to Yale fairly new, and it seems like an opportunity for all parties to benefit.

**Phil:** I have had had a relationship with Chief [Ronnell] Higgins for years now, and back when Dean Esserman was chief of New Haven Police Department, we worked regularly there.

C.P.E. [Center for Policing Equity] goes wherever we’re called, with the caveat that right now, a lot of people are calling. We had a thousand phone calls in the week after Minneapolis announced that they were going to disband their department, and they were going to use us to help do that. So we’re in conversation. There is rightfully significant student engagement and activism around how law enforcement should be structured and if law enforcement should have the imprimatur of Yale in it. And we intend to continue to be directly engaged.

But I’ll also say this about scientists: We can be technical assistance, we can be advisers, we can know things that work and things that don’t work, but ultimately society is a reflection of the values of the people who are in it.

Science can be descriptive and it can be inferential, but it is rarely normative. So while as a black man, I have strong feelings about how public safety is achieved and how ideally we’re doing that outside of and before law enforcement ever gets involved, it will depend on the people who make up community to decide what that’s going to look like at Yale and New Haven and across the country,

**Peter:** So is this a moment, do you think there’s something different about the post-Minneapolis moment from the last several years of experiences with the police, especially in minority communities?

**Phil:** I can tell you this feels really different. I have never lived through a period of time like this. Ferguson wasn’t like this. Also, Ferguson had never lived through a time like that. L.A. and the uprisings in L.A. post the Rodney King beating and the decision there didn’t feel nationally like Ferguson did. And this summer, which it’s snowing outside and this summer is not yet over, feels different than that still. Part of what’s different is that I’ll say previously I was and my center were constrained by what we thought was politically feasible, and now I think everybody is constrained by what we can think. Our imaginations—that’s why we’re talking about reimagining—our imaginations are really the guard rail against what’s possible. And so people are contesting those imaginations, they’re saying we want you to imagine bigger.

But there’s a form of this question I get a lot because I’m a guy who studies race and policing a lot. And that question is, on some level, what’s going to happen next? Is this going to be different? Are we going to remember this time differently? We’re going to remember this time, if for no other reason than because we got intimately familiar with the four walls of the places where we live. But I don’t know whether or not it’s going to be different. I don’t know what’s coming next.

But I know that if we don’t do something different than what we’ve done, this moment is coming again. And it may come six years later, like the distance between Ferguson and now, or it may come 20 to 30 years later, which is the cycle we were on previously. But we’re going to keep doing this mess, reckoning with our unpaid debts owed to black communities, to the children of formerly enslaved folks, until we get it right. That seems preordained. So my hope is there’s enough different, that the next time we’re at this place in the cycle, that we will have made some sustained progress.

**Peter:** I’m going to move us a little bit from policing to some other contemporary issues that you have written about a little bit. And one of them is COVID-19. You wrote a piece in *Vox* about racial disparities and how they’re driving the speed of the transmission of the virus. And so maybe you want to say a little bit more about that. I follow the public health literature on health disparities, but I think you’re thinking in broader ways about the relationship between the pandemic and racism, and I think our listeners would be interested in hearing the connections that you make.

**Phil:** The project was started—we were almost finished with it, actually planning and in conversations to publish it on May 24th of 2020, and you might recall on May 25th my world changed because the country changed. That was Memorial Day and the last day that George Floyd had on this earth. But the idea was that, I kept hearing the beginning parts of what we now understand, that COVID-19 has racially disparate outcomes because of comorbidities, because of poverty, because of health disparities. And so it was this really unfortunate compounding thing. It was hurting black and brown communities more than white communities, but it was framed just as an outcome: look at how awful it is for black and brown people. And that didn’t seem quite right to me and my collaborators. So Tracey Lloyd, Amelia Haviland, Mikaela Meyer, and Rachel Warren—these amazing data scientists and social scientists who collaborated and did a lot of the heavy lifting on the project. We were getting together and thinking, if it’s the case that the spread is faster and deeper because of concentrated poverty, population density, and other things that that are true within black communities, then it’s also going to be that those black and brown communities are going to be drivers, that our failure to protect the most vulnerable within us is literally a failure to protect everybody.

In that model, what we did was we looked at folks who were returning from jail and prison. We didn’t do a mathematical model of the folks who were in jail and prison; good friends and a sister organization in recidivism doing a wonderful job of that. So we didn’t want to duplicate that. We looked at people returning, folks who have contact with law enforcement, the folks who are designated as essential workers, especially the people who can’t social distance. And what we found is that our synthetic city, about 40 days in, about 70 percent of the spread is from those groups.

That’s not just, when we start looking at the deeper numbers, that’s not just about them getting the virus, it’s also about them spreading to folks who are not within those populations. So when we look at the racial disparities in that mathematical simulation, the racial disparities for the people who are not in any of those groups—folks who are not returning from jail and prison, folks who have no contact with law enforcement, folks who are not in essential work, the folks who can socially distance, folks who can wear PPE, folks who are separate from this. About 40 percent of the racial disparity is driven by just the criminal legal system.

So the virus is contagious, but so are the ways in which we choose to marginalize people. They are the twin scourges of this year. When this year is remembered, it will be a year when racism and biology both conspired against democracy. Hopefully it’ll be a year when democracy won. But if we don’t reckon with that while we’re seeing this incredible, terrifying spike of a third wave coming and hitting all of us, if we don’t reckon with our failure to protect the vulnerable, everybody is more vulnerable.

It’s not that we can just keep them over there; it’s going to get to you, too, and I wanted that to be part of the broader conversation, and I’m glad it’s been picked up in the way that it has.

**Peter:** So finally, you represent something that is just completely fascinating for us at Yale, and that is to do work at the intersection of academic research and public policy. And I think you know that our strategy for the social sciences, in part, is to emphasize data-driven social science that has ramifications for public policy. You can see that in our building up of the Tobin Center, of the Jackson School, also some of the hiring in social sciences departments and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and elsewhere—social scientists in the School of the Environment, in the law school, in the management school, in the School of Public Health.

But how did you come to the idea that you needed to connect ideas and action? And then did coming to Yale have anything to do with realizing that goal along those lines?

**Phil:** So I think the honest answer to the question is, I had a pretty formative experience my senior year of high school, where I came to find out that the teacher of my AP English class had a history of not liking black kids. And it was shocking to me. He was mean, he was demeaning, humiliating, and I couldn’t understand why he didn’t like me. And it was so surprising. And I remember there were other members of my class who, I was surprised showed up an allyship and others who I was surprised showed up in the other direction. And I realized pretty quickly that that was not an individual issue, but that’s a community-wide issue, that folks have different theories about what racism is, what it does, how it operates. And if they’re off, they miss pieces of what they’re going to need to fix problems. And so when I came to understand that that was the thing, I was like, oh, this is not a thing you study in a book. The thing I was good at was math, right? Math and music were the things that kind of like, yeah, those are languages that make sense to be. But this is a thing that you do in the world. It’s like architecture. If you write a pretty graph of what a building’s going to look like and then it falls down on itself, you’re a bad architect. And in the same way, if you’re trying to study the ways in which the political formations of race shape power, resources, and lived experiences of vulnerable people, and you can’t make a dent on it, how good are you at studying it? The idea that I could write things that would be interesting to folks who cared about this was less inspiring to me than the idea that I could test these ideas out in the world and help people’s lives to be better, less miserable, what have you, in the face of it. So it is the confluence of being black and doing black, living in a black body, having black experiences, and then not replacing my experience with others, not saying that all black people have my experiences because for sure they do not. But to say that this process of gaining language and a better and more precise understanding of the systems that conspire to do damage to vulnerable communities, ~~i~~t can’t be divorced from the actual existence of it, can’t be divorced from people’s lives. And I guess that’s called public policy.

**Peter:** You know, I went through a similar experience in my own life as a social psychologist like you. First half of my career was almost entirely in the lab. And then we pushed our experiments out into the field. And these were experiments on health communication. And pretty soon we were doing community-based research, trying to actually change real behavior that was helping people in vulnerable communities, not get HIV/AIDS, not get cancer. And to me, I still could test theories. I could still run experiments. They tended to be field experiments, but there were still randomized trials. But make a direct impact on actual behavior that then made me much more confident making policy recommendations. I think, in the way you describe it, and I hope in the way I do, we’ve gone back to the roots of our own field. Our field started this way. I think of the founder of modern social psychology as somebody like Kurt Lewin, and he talked about action research, and he talked about not drawing a bright line between what you do in the laboratory and what you might do in the field and in trying to improve the world. Why not?

**Phil:** In our field, Kurt Lewin gets the credit and rightfully so. I mean, you can go back to Durkheim, anybody who’s talking about social science cares about applying the rules of science to social problems to fix them. If you just want to understand social problems and then go to bed, it’s going to be hard for you to do the work to be a good social scientist. It’s this combination of the idea that getting the theory, the diagnosis of the problem right, is deeply important, and also that if you only have a diagnosis and not implementation plan, then that’s deeply problematic. It’s almost irresponsible. We need to be walking between the laboratory and the thought experiments to the world and back. Otherwise, we’re not doing what the discipline is calling for, what communities need.

**Peter:** Well, Phil, I’ve got to thank you very much for a really stimulating conversation and for talking to me about these ideas and the challenges ahead. There’s no doubt that you are doing truly important work to expand our understanding of the behaviors that go into racial bias and then the way they play out in law enforcement situations. I can’t be more pleased that you chose to come to Yale.

**Phil:** It has been an absolute pleasure to be here. The welcome has been warm, showing up at the same time as Elizabeth Hinton with the Justice Collaboratory here and the sort of critical mass of scholars and engaged students. I couldn’t imagine a better home for the work that I’m doing.

**Peter:** Today, we honor Dr. Martin Luther King and his profound commitment to serving others. I’m really humbled, I’m inspired, by members of the community such as yourself who carry that legacy forward.

To all Yale students, faculty, staff, and alumni around the world who are working to create a more just, peaceful, and equitable society, you have my deepest appreciation. And to all our friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining us for Yale Talk on this special day. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.