

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

This week's guest, Brett Stoudt is an associate professor in the psychology doctoral program at the Graduate Center where he heads the PhD program in critical, social, personality, and environmental psychology. Dr. Stoudt has worked on numerous participatory action research projects with community groups, lawyers, and policy makers nationally and internationally.

Tanya Domi:

His interests include the social psychology of privilege and oppression, as well as the human impact of the criminal justice system. He is also interested in critical methodologies, particularly critical approaches to quantitative research.

Tanya Domi:

Dr. Stoudt is currently the associate director of the public science project at the Graduate Center. He has also a steering committee member of the Communities United for Police Reform in New York City. Welcome to the Thought Project professor Brett Stoudt.

Brett Stoudt:

Thanks for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

Tanya Domi:

It's great to have you. You're one of the longest relationships I have at the Graduate Center. Speaking of which, congratulations on your appointment to Graduate Center core [Align 00:01:46] faculty. You're a great addition. You've been here a long time.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah, I mean, I'm incredibly excited and honored. I spent nearly a decade at John Jay College and had spent, in the consortium, a good time here at the Graduate Center, but I'm glad to be core faculty and really hopeful for the future and how I can contribute to the GC.

Tanya Domi:

So, speaking of which you are in critical psych, which has this methodology approach of participatory action research. So, talk about the philosophy of critical psych. Apparently the Graduate Center is really the only higher education institution that teaches this discipline and its philosophy and research methods in the United States. It's a well known discipline in Latin America and to a lesser extent in Europe.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah, I mean, critical psychology. Yeah. We are the only, as far as I know, there are programs across the country that certainly educate in this philosophy of psychology, but in terms of explicit, we're the only doctoral program in critical psychology in the country. It's a bit more popular, a little bit, in England, global south, in Europe.

Brett Stoudt:

It's complicated, but the basic idea is we're not fully a critique of mainstream psychology, but a psychology that's deeply invested in critical theories. Post-colonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory, feminist theories, Frankfurt school of critical theory. And so, there's an investment in understanding history, and context, and power relationships. There's an investment in understanding the human experience and the psychology of oppression and privilege, and it's methodologies range from quantitative, qualitative, ethnography.

Brett Stoudt:

There are many designs and methods in critical psychology and one of them is really a combination of, I should say, ontology, epistemology, ethics and methods all wrapped into one. And that's participatory action research. And it is what it sounds like at first, in its most simplistic, superficial form. In some ways it's a decolonizing method. It's a method that understands knowledge as not being only centrally focused on places like higher ed institutions, at universities, in hospitals, amongst lawyers, politicians, that these are forms-

Tanya Domi:

Basically, the elite.

Brett Stoudt:

The elites. Yeah, the power knowledge, elites and who gets to produce knowledge. There is an investment in an expanded understanding of expertise or an acknowledgement that research can look myopic and can even be distorting if we don't include this expanded version of expertise, particularly in the case of participatory action research or PAR, for short, P-A-R, particularly because it's a research explicitly linking both social science, in this case, and action, social science and activism, social science and policy change.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, when you link those two, which is not typical, I think, in this public science, it's not typical necessarily in all of academia, then it's also important to have the people who are most directly impacted living-

Tanya Domi:

The classic subjects, and they are empowered through this approach. Correct?

Brett Stoudt:

They're empowered. So, I think of it in two ways. In the first way, that they're the knowledge and expertise that comes from living in oppressive systems and being the person, people, who are directly impacted or take the brunt of these very harmful, violent systems. There is a knowledge and expertise that comes from that, and within the enterprise of research, there needs to be that knowledge to produce

the most accurate data, and also understand the ways forward, in terms of pushing against those oppressive systems.

Brett Stoudt:

So, in that way it's not only an empowering but it is a vital part of the research enterprise, in terms of validity and in terms of its ability to push against oppressive systems.

Tanya Domi:

I mean, I know in some studies you actually work with the classic subjects that where they write the questionnaires, the surveys, in partnership, of where some of these projects that Dr. Michelle Fine has actually led at the public science project. So, it's definitely different. It's a different approach. It's paradigmatically different from just standard psychology in different fields.

Tanya Domi:

And that's what's so unique about the approach in critical psych and it's unique to the Graduate Center. So, you are in fact the associate director of the Public Science Project, which is a 501C3 nonprofit, which has served as a vehicle for a number of research projects using this approach.

Tanya Domi:

And it was founded by Dr. Michelle Fine and Dr. Maria Torre you're the associate director. Tell us about the Public Science Project and some of the work that you've done there, for example, on the Morris Justice Project is a recent study, I know that you've done.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah, so the Public Science Project it's a space within our university or I could back up. I do think something special has happened at the Graduate Center and at the City University. It's really not for us to label it but it feels like a CUNY school of social science, excuse me, a CUNY school of public science that that seems to have emerged here over a bit more than a decade.

Brett Stoudt:

And the Public Science Project marks that effort. It has with students and faculty and, as you said, led by Maria Elena Torre and Michelle Fine, it has become a place where faculty across the campuses, and particularly at the Graduate Center, can share ideas, can help educate students around PAR philosophies and critical psychology philosophies, can offer resources to community-based organizations and legal organizations, and folks around the city who may not have the expertise around social science but certainly have the grounded knowledge and policy focus.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, it's a place, it's really a think tank, a place to organize resources, a place to offer or to build relationships between our public institution and the public broadly around social justice issues. And as an example of that, or one example, is a project that Maria Torre and I help lead in the South Bronx called the Morris Justice Project.

Brett Stoudt:

How it emerged is serendipitous, and luck, and relationships, and as these projects, they're very large projects, they're longterm projects, they're projects based on relationships as strength, not as bias. And so, these aren't the typical extract and leave-type projects, but they last, in this case over, I think it went on six even seven years and-

Tanya Domi:

Very longterm.

Brett Stoudt:

Very longterm, almost like ethnography, and so, basically what happened was, early on there was a lawsuit in the '90s and then 2000s and it released the stop and frisk data, and Maria Torre, Maddie Fox, and myself, we were a part of another participatory project called Pulling for Justice.

Brett Stoudt:

And, here, we were really interested in working with young people in New York City to think about the various public sector, the institutions involved in their lives, from criminal justice system, to health, to school. We really wanted to understand how these things were circuited, how they felt about them. And what kept coming up, this was 2008, 2009, is, yeah, but policing.

Brett Stoudt:

It wasn't our primary focus, but policing kept coming up as something's going on, we're getting stopped. We just got stopped coming here to the Graduate Center. Something's going on. And, of course, we know now, and then, the numbers were released that every year more and more stops were happening in the city as a primary tool of a broken windows philosophy of the NYPD.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, in that process and being forced to examine our own data, looking into the public data and going, "Wow, I mean look at the South Bronx where 50% of all of the stops, there's some sort of physical force by their own definition, not a definition that we've developed, but their own understanding of physical force."

Brett Stoudt:

I looked at Maria Torre and she looked at me and we thought, "We need to understand what's going on a bit more." And we were introduced to three mothers in the South Bronx who we're already mobilizing, already organized. They were already collecting their own form of data by filming, for example, their children getting stopped, so documenting, working with Bronx Defenders.

Brett Stoudt:

They had an organized set of networks where if one of their children were taken to the precinct, but they were at work, then someone else would go and meet them. And so, they were already organizing and we connected and they saw the value in asking... They knew what was going on with them. They were feeling it acutely, as were people across the city, but in many ways, and as a function of the policing, they were isolated and not just to policing, but to the neighborhoods that they were living in. They were isolated.

Brett Stoudt:

And they had a sincere understanding, is this only happening to us? Is it only happening to our kids? What's going on in our neighborhood? What can we do about it? So, we spent some time and put out some flyers saying if you're interested in talking about the police, the good, the bad, the ugly, what we think of it and what we think should change, then come to the library in their neighborhood, in the basement and we'll talk about it.

Brett Stoudt:

About 15, 20 folks showed up and probably 15 stayed thereafter and we spent a summer just thinking, what's going on in the neighborhood? Where do you get good food? And building relationships. Me talking, at the time I was living in the East Village, and so, I was talking about my own experiences, very different experiences. For example, being near NYU and also lots of bars, lots of drinking outside, lots of smoking marijuana, much less policing, and the exact opposite.

Brett Stoudt:

You could be stopped on the stoop of your home and be understood and assumed to be a criminal. And so, there was just these vast differences. And we spent the summer getting to know each other, getting to develop our ideas, and then, learning about the methods we might use to help answer some of our questions. And that's how we began.

Tanya Domi:

And it's a specific neighborhood. I mean, the 48 blocks around Yankee Stadium, which normally would have a lot of attention because there's a lot of people going into Yankee Stadium, and then, they're leaving Yankee Stadium and they're from everywhere else. They're certainly not necessarily from the neighborhood, and the impact, what did you find out about that in and out population? What happened to people that lived in the neighborhood?

Brett Stoudt:

There was a number of things to consider, but it's a really good example of this philosophy of research and how it revolves around a flexible, inductive action-oriented iterative process. And so, once we realized what we really want to understand, our research question, is we want to understand people's experiences with and attitudes towards policing.

Brett Stoudt:

Then, our next processes or our thought is in our neighborhood. And the question for the group was, well, what is neighborhood? And it's an example of this participatory process where if there were five other people in the group than the people that were there, they might have defined their neighborhood differently. The neighborhood that we were in doesn't have a realtor's defined, "This is the East Village, this is the West Village."

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Brett Stoudt:

So, it wasn't blocks built on the census. It wasn't blocks built on the precinct. It was a group coming together and going, of young people and adults, "I understand, here are the railroad tracks, these blocks and these blocks, there was some gang territory. These blocks are too close to Yankee Stadium. That's a different neighborhood. This is the neighborhood I want to understand."

Brett Stoudt:

And once we defined the neighborhood and we defined the group of folks, I mean basically, everyone within that neighborhood and what they were experiencing, then we could employ some methods like a participatory survey, a community-based survey that we developed, and interviews and other strategies, and what we were hearing in these moments where not only an over-policing and a frustration around it, but also this huge presence of Yankee Stadium, which was eight blocks away. And the courthouse right in the middle.

Brett Stoudt:

So, you have this juxtaposition of these enormous structures, where the heartbeat of the criminal justice system in the Bronx living right where the over-policing is happening and a feeling like you're here when I don't want you, but when we do need you, you're not here.

Brett Stoudt:

And then, this new Yankee Stadium that had already betrayed the community because there were supposed to be jobs for folks in the community that didn't come through, and this basic sense that in the summer, or six months of the year, when there's a home game, there is even more police and they're not there to protect the neighborhood from the largely very privileged and certainly of a middle or upper class base coming into the Bronx, and then, going back to Manhattan.

Brett Stoudt:

But they're there to protect those folks who are about to spend a lot of money on craft beer and hotdogs from the stereotype of what this South Bronx home of hip hop neighborhood is.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, that very real feeling of and understanding of gentrification of the neoliberal capital flow, entertainment, a stadium not meant for them, and a policing designed to control and warehouse and, in many ways, the implication is to criminalize black and brown bodies-

Tanya Domi:

And to make them invisible, too, right?

Brett Stoudt:

Make them invisible.

Tanya Domi:

That was one of the most interesting findings I think you had where people, they couldn't even sit on their front stoop during the game the policing was so intense and that it actually went into apartment buildings where children couldn't even be in the hallways of their building.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah. I mean, what we learned from young people, and again, it's emerged out of a confluence of events, but we have a war on drugs and we have all of these things that have led to policies where it has been, for politicians, it has been a strategy in their favor to be seen as tough on crime.

Brett Stoudt:

And because of this, you talk to young people and they talk about police and surveillance and the criminal justice system essentially being a part of their lives from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed. They wake up, with clean halls and other policies, the police can be in public and private housing at the time, if the landlord signed up.

Brett Stoudt:

And then they'd walk to school. And, of course, we know about schools and we know about the school safety agents and metal detectors, and then, you try to get an education, and then, you come home, and when it's time for the school to come out, the police are around schools with the assumption that kids are going to get rowdy, and then, they're back in their neighborhoods and there's the use of stop and frisk tactics and it keeps going from there.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, from school, to on the blocks, to in your home, it's a very pervasive and ominous-

Tanya Domi:

Ubiquitous.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah. It's an assumption that you and your community are doing something wrong. It's just a matter of catching you.

Tanya Domi:

So you've been doing this work. When I first met all of you, you were pretty deep into the Morris Justice Project. But now, your current work is also through that lens and you're working on what's called Raise the Age. And tell our audience about what that's all about. Again, it's in the criminal justice context of court systems and juvenile justice. And what's changing in New York City in New York state too as well.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah, I mean it's just interesting, when we think about our carceral state, to think about it as these multiple institutions., It's good to take a 10,000 foot view to understand that policing is the edge of this enormous set of institutions. It's the entry point. But it's essentially the representative of our state and the criminal justice system that goes from in the courtrooms, to prisons and jails, and correction facilities, and parole.

Brett Stoudt:

And the tentacles of the criminal justice system have become increasingly pervasive. And what has become clear as we've seen both the rise of the criminal justice system, and now, a changing criminal justice system where it seems like we're in a move to go from what was many more people than the rest of the world in prison to maybe releasing people, but having almost soft surveillance on, not only individuals, but larger populations largely of poor and particularly communities of color.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, what we see with broken windows philosophy, this idea that if you go after the small stuff, in quotes, small meaning misdemeanors, summons, stop and frisk. Yeah, then that brings down, again in quotes, the big stuff like murder or like-

Tanya Domi:

Robbery.

Brett Stoudt:

Not a lot of empirical evidence that this is true, but we know that the impact, the social and economic impact, on communities of color is enormous. And so, just taking a cost benefit analysis of this philosophy of crime and its implications, or maybe it's feature, depending on how you look at it, we need to think about something else.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, what's clear, by focusing on this small stuff, the process is the punishment. That you're over-surveilled, a young person of color is over-surveilled, and then, for one thing or another they might be picked up, and then, the process of taking off of school or taking off of work, and then, going into the courts, and then, you might have to go a couple of times, you only see the judge two minutes, maybe something sticks, and then, it's happening-

Tanya Domi:

Then you're in.

Brett Stoudt:

And you're in.

Tanya Domi:

Then you're in the system.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah. You're labeled, and then, that keeps accumulating. It's dehumanizing, it's violent, it's pervasive. Very few people in poor communities, in particular poor communities of color, go unscathed, in terms of connected and net worth.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, I wanted to expand what had been a decade of research on policing and aggressive policing in New York City, and working directly with the human impact of what this has meant in New York City. I wanted to expand it into, what about how young people travel through the criminal justice system and particularly the juvenile justice system?

Brett Stoudt:

And the opportunity for this was a new policy called Raise the Age, and basically what this has meant is that, up until recently, the 16 and 17 year olds were automatically tried as adults. They were understood as violent. We got to lock them up, and so, what happened is that through a phase-in, it went from 16 and now 17 year olds are no longer automatically tried it as adults, in fact are almost now entirely not, so a new court system for felonies has been developed specifically for young people, the youth part, the adult court.

Brett Stoudt:

And so, for a felony, young people 16 and now 17 year olds will go in, but almost all are diverted to family court. There are exceptions and those exceptions involve the most violent crimes, but many are now diverted to family. And with that provides a whole new set of programs and opportunities. And hopefully, the idea of not getting that label.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Brett Stoudt:

So, in one way it's a step towards a more humane system, but given that our prisons don't do much to deter, are incredibly violent, they don't seem to reform. It's hard to see how it is good and it's far from not enough. But so, what we've done is we wanted to understand how this policy has been implemented. If it's being implemented, the extent that it's doing some good and we're sure that it is, or it's producing less harmful outcomes, and what still needs to change, and what still needs to change is a vast amount.

Brett Stoudt:

And we've done this through court watching, we're going to do it for one year in four of the five boroughs. Of course, Staten Island always gets left out. But in the other four, in family and youth part, we have young people or younger people, a good portion who have been directly impacted by the juvenile justice system or the criminal justice system, who are, once or twice a week sitting in all day observing, both taking ethnographic notes and using a tool so that we can document with numbers.

Brett Stoudt:

And this allows us to see-

Tanya Domi:

So, you get data trends.

Brett Stoudt:

You get not only data trends but you see things that you don't get in public data. You get to see the amount of young people, things that people just don't know. They don't see it on Law & Order. People don't realize that these young people more often than not having not done anything wrong, come in in shackles, might have two or three officers behind them, might need an interpreter, but they don't get an interpreter.

Brett Stoudt:

So that there are these set of details about the court experience that are not documented in public data and the only way you would get it is if you really are expanding your perspective and systematically collecting it by just being there.

Brett Stoudt:

And then, we're about to release a public defender survey. Another incredible, again, thinking about this positionality and expertise. Public defenders are strained in many ways and have an incredible amount of expertise just by the volume of a year. And so, we're asking them to reflect on the last year and we're asking them reflect on all sorts of things including secure detention facilities, their work, their case load, and other aspects.

Brett Stoudt:

And then, next year, this is a two-year project, we're going to continue this and also begin conducting focus groups with young people who have been directly impacted by this policy and begin asking them their experiences, both in detention centers and they're experience in courts. We're going to house it within an action project that involves spoken word and poetry. And we'll take all of this data to tell a story, a small story in January, and a larger story at the end of next year.

Tanya Domi:

You have a real panoply of stakeholders involved here too. It's really pretty impressive scaffolding in this project. And I would also say that you've also been a steering committee member of the Communities United for Police Reform for a number of years. And so, you really bring a really solid foundation into your work with this particular stance of empowerment and potential to change public policy. It's a pretty impressive piece of work.

Brett Stoudt:

Thank you. But I do want to mention, in terms of the Raise the Age work that I'm partnering with Youth Represent and Children's Defense Fund and a whole set of colleagues and young people. It seems to me, given participatory action research, all of those parts, expanded expertise and collaboration, a commitment to action and pushing against oppressive structures using systematically collected evidence, it seems to me that that combination is best when connected to grounded grassroots movements.

Brett Stoudt:

And similar to civil lawsuits. These things need to be grounded and started in the community. And then, in my perspective, them leading it, and then, bringing in other expertise like lawyers, like researchers to help facilitate-

Tanya Domi:

Social workers.

Brett Stoudt:

Social workers, which we're also working on. And so, with the Raise the Age work, that was years of a huge coalition of many organizations to push this forward in Albany and we continue to work with that organization as an advisory group, or that coalition.

Brett Stoudt:

Communities United for Police Reform started in 2011 it's the largest police reform and abolition coalition in New York City. Hundreds of organizations and between 30 and 50 primary organizations that have been connected to all the stop and frisk stuff, the Floyd, Ligon and Davis cases, the Community Safety Act, the Right to Know, the special prosecutor at the state level, in terms of please involve killings, Eric Garner, supporting families.

Brett Stoudt:

It's vast. And also, as a component of the policy of the legal, of the grassroots organizing, there's a component of research as I think is beneficial.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. In New York, Community Trust is the funder of this project.

Brett Stoudt:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

Brett, thank you so much for being here today. Incredible work. We want to have you back to hear the results, and I know that you're going to be appearing on CUNY TV in January with two broadcasts about this important research project.

Brett Stoudt:

Yeah. On the eighth, and it will be pretty awesome.

Tanya Domi:

So, our listeners need to tune into CUNY TV, and that's going to be with Eldridge and company, correct?

Brett Stoudt:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

Wonderful. Thank you again for being here today. Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Brett Stoudt of the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

This transcript was exported on Feb 20, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.