

Alex Schein:

In these times is a handy turn of phrase in 2020. The varying adjectives you use to modify it, difficult, unique, strange. What started as a useful shorthand for the COVID-19 pandemic became used to describe worldwide protests and calls for racial justice.

This fall, the Omnia podcast goes beyond the shorthand using COVID-19 as a platform for a six-episode series that explores the science, social science, and history that has shaped events in 2020. In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

Today we talk about racial justice, which has dominated the 2020 headlines along with COVID-19. This is episode five, racial justice and repair.

Speaker 1:

What's his name?

Protestors:

George Floyd.

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Protestors:

George Floyd.

News Anchor:

A night full of nationwide protests amid a pandemic. From New York City to Columbus, Ohio, and Los Angeles, for the third straight day, throngs of people took to the streets outraged by the death of George Floyd. On Monday, Minneapolis police arrested Floyd who was black. While detaining him, a white police officer pinned him to the ground by his neck. Floyd could be heard saying, I can't breathe.

Protestors:

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

Speaker 2:

What do we want?

Protestors:

Justice.

Speaker 2:

When do we want it?

Protestors:

Now.

Speaker 2:

What do we want?

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Justice.

Speaker 2:

When do we want it?

Protestors:

Now.

Alex Schein:

In May, George Floyd's death at the hands of police sparked a wave of protests against police brutality and in support of the black lives matter movement. In the midst of the pandemic, an estimated 20 million people participated in protests, making it the largest movement in the country's history.

According to a five-year study by the Washington Post, Black Americans are killed by police at a disproportionate rate. They account for less than 13% of the US population, but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of white Americans. And a 2017 study showed that Black people who were fatally shot by police seem to be twice as likely as white people to be unarmed.

Since 2015, police have killed close to 1000 Americans each year. But police shootings are only part of the story that includes controversial policies like stop and frisk and the crisis of mass incarceration. The American Civil Liberties Union reports that the US has nearly 25% of the world's prison population despite only making up 5% of the world's population overall and Black men are incarcerated at nearly five times the rate of white men.

Looking at the facts we ask, what are the roots of these problems and what might justice look like? Daniel Fryer spends time thinking about these questions. He's a doctoral candidate in philosophy, and he's also a lawyer who worked as Philadelphia's assistant district attorney under Larry Krasner.

Daniel Fryer:

I was interested in criminology and a typical relationship between crime and society very early on. And that just is a matter of growing up and seeing various people affected by the criminal justice system. And that partly was a reason why I got interested in it.

Whenever you turn on the news, one of the things that society seems to be infatuated with is how people are being treated by the criminal law, but it wasn't until maybe halfway through and nearly I was done with undergrad that I started getting more interested in the philosophical questions that surrounded criminal justice. And since then, it's been going back and forth with both philosophy and law, the philosophical side dealing with these deep complex puzzles, but the legal side, actually looking on the ground and seeing what happens. How does this play out? Who are the real people being affected by these questions?

Alex Schein:

Fryer recognizes that the relationship between law enforcement and the Black community has a long and complex history.

Daniel Fryer:

You'll often hear stories about Black people disproportionately being perpetrators of crime. But the reality is that when you live in a social system and which a group of people are consistently disadvantaged, it's not only true that Black people are disproportionately perpetrators of crime, but they're also disproportionately victims.

You have this unique situation, which some people refer to as the paradox of the African-American community, where the community is simultaneously, both under policed and over policed. And you think, "Well, okay, how is this possible? How is it at the same time black people are disproportionately targeted as perpetrators of crime, but nonetheless, they're not protected?"

Alex Schein:

Fryer says that there are trust issues between law enforcement and the general public. This is true across the United States and especially true in Philadelphia.

Daniel Fryer:

In Philadelphia in particular, there is an issue of communities not feeling safe. Communities are feeling that the police are not protecting them. There are communities in which they feel like they haven't been heard by the system of justice.

Alex Schein:

What would a system of justice that hears and protects all people look like? Fryer's research on reparative justice offers a possibility. He explains that some scholars use terms like restorative justice or compensatory justice. These approaches focus on addressing or undoing the harm caused by a crime or wrongdoing for both victims and offenders. But Fryer points out that may not be enough.

Daniel Fryer:

When we try to apply that concept to certain scenarios in the United States, it doesn't really make sense because, say, a lot of Black Americans claim for repair to justice or reparation isn't that they want to be placed in a state in which they were before, rather the claim is that they never been in a state of equality to begin with. So the restorative justice labeled sometimes may, or a corrective justice label may sort of intel or connote something that's different. So I stick with the term reparative justice, mainly because it has the notion of repair. And I try to make the notion of repair central to the way in which we think about justice.

Alex Schein:

The protest that began in the summer of 2020 show that our country has a lot to repair.

Daniel Fryer:

So watching the protests unfold early this year, it caused a lot of emotions. It was heartbreaking. It was frustrating. It was confusing. And also at the same time, it was somewhat inspirational. And it's hard to reconcile those.

One of the things that were heartbreaking is that it wasn't a one-off. It was a consistent idea, or it was a result of a consistent feature of society in which there's a racial hierarchy in the country and there's particular groups, namely Black people that are on the bottom of this hierarchy.

And it's frustrating to see that a lot of things haven't changed over time. And there haven't been significant efforts to repair the system or repair the broken aspects of the system that consistently places Black people on the bottom of the hierarchy through no fault of their own.

At the same time, it was also inspirational to see a lot of the conversations that resulted from it. You saw the America that was no longer satisfied with the status quo and begun to take questions of racial injustice seriously, more so than I could say any time in my life.

And I think part of it is just a lot of people seeing that play out on video in real time to where you had a situation where a group of people that if they went to the police or if they went to the media, sometimes were not taking... Their story wasn't taken at full value. There was some sort of reduced understanding of the true value of their statements.

But when you have that play out on video, it's almost like, "Look, you can see this with your own eyes. This is what happened. This is what the person was doing, and he didn't deserve it." And I find it promising. I think we are at least transitioning to a state where people are realizing that this is a real issue. People that normally denied it are now starting to say, "Okay, there is a issue of racial injustice in this country." In a sort of 12 step program type of way, the first step is admitting you have a problem, right? And I think America is now at that first step. We have a long way to go. We're nowhere near close to where we ought to be, where we want to be. But nonetheless, I think watching things unfold this year, it seems like America is ready to take that first step.

Kamala Harris:

Because now is when the real work begins, the hard work, the necessary work, the good work, the essential work to save lives and beat this epidemic, to rebuild our economy so it works for working people, to root out systemic racism in our justice system and society.

Joe Biden:

America has called upon us to marshal the forces of decency, the forces of fairness, to marshal the forces of science and the forces of hope and the great battles of our time, the battle to control the virus, the battle to build prosperity, the battle to secure your family's healthcare, the battle to achieve racial justice and root out systemic racism in this country.

Daniel Fryer:

That on a national stage, you could get both the president elect and the vice president elect speaking about systemic racism, to my knowledge, I don't think that ever happened before. I don't think Barack Obama spoke about systemic racism in his acceptance speech. He had moments throughout his presidency where he made solid statements on race. "If I have a son he'll look like Trayvon" and all those things. But to begin your presidential career by bringing these issues to the forefront, and it's somewhat new, particularly in a moment where the president elect is saying that I'm not going to be the president elect of red America or blue America, I'm the president elect of all America, but nonetheless, realizing that being the president elect of all America requires attacking these systemic racism and other issues of injustice in this country. I think that's pretty new and inspirational.

I think as we attack all of these complicated issues, especially racial injustice, health inequalities, education inequalities, mass incarceration, et cetera, we just need to operate with the notion of repair as central to our framework. A lot of people will speak about justice and equality and fairness, but somehow don't make repair as central to their analysis. But in order to move forward, you have to look backwards. You have to actually have serious questions about what got us here, about why are we in a position where the same people who were in the bottom of the racial hierarchy a hundred years ago,

200 years ago are still on the bottom of the racial hierarchy. And I think that as we move forward, we need to just make sure, we look backwards.

Alex Schein:

For most of our interviews, we've asked participants to look out at the world and offer their expertise on big issues. Things like healthcare, access, climate change, and political polarization. For our next conversation, we stayed on big issues of justice and equity, but we looked inward at the Penn community.

Chaz Howard:

Hello, my name is Chaz Howard. I serve at the University of Pennsylvania as University Chaplain and Vice President for Social Equity and Community. I have served as University Chaplain since 2008. And a big part of that role, the way we describe it as sort of journeying with and loving the university community. That includes, of course, students, but also faculty and staff and administration and even alumni, and in a lot of ways, those who surround campus. If someone wants to talk about what they're going to major in or what they're going to do after college, or they're having a hard time in a relationship, or is God real, we're there to talk about that. We're also there when crises strike.

Alex Schein:

The Chaplain's Office provides support for students facing a variety of crises, personal loss, academic struggles, natural disasters, and in 2020, the effects of COVID-19. His new role provides a different type of support.

Chaz Howard:

The vice presidential role which we're sort of still forming in a lot of ways, I was invited by Dr. Guttman to serve in this position the summer of 2020. And I think her vision for it in a lot of ways is to help the university have high level conversations around issues connected to equity and justice.

And so my office and I, we describe ourselves as first serving as internal consultants to the university. So we get to have good, hard hitting, challenging conversations with administrators, but also faculty members in different departments, with student groups, with our alumni, with surrounding communities about how can we do better around equity issues on campus and equity issues in the world that Penn can help affect and push.

Alex Schein:

Reverend Howard was also a member of the college class of 2000. His thinking about equity is informed by his experiences as a student.

Chaz Howard:

When I enrolled at Penn, I ultimately ended up majoring in urban studies with a minor in Africa, what's known now as Africana studies. It was African-American studies back then, and I loved it. I loved being in the College and I loved all the classes I took.

I remember that feeling of opening the course catalog back then, which was literally a printed bound magazine of classes that we had there and eating with my eyes. We could only register for four or five courses, but there were always like 20 classes a semester that I wanted to take.

And I loved Penn. I would choose it again and again. And yet, Penn is not removed from the challenges of the world. And so just because we seek to sort of be a cosmopolitan, welcoming, affirming place, it doesn't mean that we, that in my case, black students don't feel the sting of racism or low-income students like me don't feel that the challenges of lack of resources at a place like Penn. And that was real for me. That was definitely real, whether it was dealing with sort of racism in the world and wrestling with that as an 18 to 22 year old, or dealing with it sometimes on campus too.

I remember very clearly going to a dining hall and leaving and looking up at one of the dorms and the one of the dorm windows in the quad and seeing a Confederate flag there. And the challenge of the question, what do you do about that as an 18 year old? Or certain fraternities would have ethnically insensitive parties or when advisors and teachers would sort of question that kid's intelligence in a classroom. Some of my classmates thought I only got in because I could run fast and jump far -- where I was there to sort of fill up some type of quota. That's not to paint Penn as a racist place. It's meant to sort of paint it as a complicated place, just like this country, just like this world.

Alex Schein:

Reverend Howard graduated from the college 20 years ago, but we know that minority and first-generation students face similar prejudices today. Sometimes they come to the chaplain's office to talk about it. In 2020, those stresses have been compounded. Reverend Howard says that all students, faculty and staff have struggled with anxieties related to COVID-19 and the isolation of remote learning and work, but for black students, there was more at play.

Chaz Howard:

I think certainly in the last year and 2020 has been such a challenging year for so many of our students, a lot of our conversations are for them to kind of unload the burden of the year. And so, it was for Black students who had seen the image of George Floyd being killed. It's sort of like a secondary trauma that someone gets watching that and they often want to come in and be sad and cry and angry with someone who loves them.

Alex Schein:

Reverend Howard is still defining his role as Vice President for Social Equity and Community. He imagines that it will involve campus and the surrounding community, just like his role as chaplain. He believes that Penn can be a national leader in issues of justice.

Chaz Howard:

What would justice and equity at Penn look like? I think it's a difficult question because I think there would be a lot of different answers to that. I would say broadly, Penn being a place where all different types of students feel welcomed and celebrated and safe and affirmed, but a space where marginalized students in particular don't feel oppressed and don't feel pushed and kept at the margins.

Alex Schein:

For years, students have come to Reverend Howard for guidance. This year, there was sadness, worry and anger, but also reflection and commitment.

Chaz Howard:

It's one of the most powerful things about, I think, the summer of 2020 was in the midst of this pandemic and in the midst of us all trying to figure out kind of how we're going to survive the whole country and in many ways, the world did a lot of self-examination around issues of racism, equity, other forms of bigotry, be it antisemitism and sexism and homophobia and Islamophobia, all that, but particularly sort of racism in America.

And so, I found a lot of the conversations with our students this summer were one, examining racism in the country, examining American policing, but then looking inward at Penn and saying, "Hey, are there ways we can improve as a university and as a campus?" And to be fair of conversations, aren't new to 2020. I think our students are remarkably service focused and I think justice focused.

And that is one of the coolest things that distinguishes Penn from other schools as well is our students have always had this sort of conscious mentality. It's one of the things that drew me to campus years ago. And I think our students are quick to sort of call out inequity and they're rightly so quick to take up action and direct action and protest. I think it's remarkable. And I think it's one of the best parts of campus.

It's just students who are trying to figure out what's next. And this has been true every year of chaplaincy for me. And certainly all the last several months around doing this equity work is the students who are trying to make sense of it and trying to find their space, their role, their lane in making the world a better place. And I love that, helping students discern how they can contribute

Alex Schein:

This wraps up episode five of In These Times, racial justice and repair. This conversation is a preview of what's to come in season two of in these times, where we'll dive deep into the protests, policy and black lives and culture.

We'll be back with our sixth and final episode, Beyond the COVID-19 crisis, where we talk to an English professor, a resilience expert, and three college students about their COVID experiences and hopes for the future.

The Omnia podcast is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Daniel Fryer and Chaz Howard I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

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