

Sociological Imaginations for Anti-Racist Futures: An Interview with Dr Prudence Carter

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Abstract

In this interview, Dr Prudence Carter, 2021–2022 President-Elect of the American Sociological Association, discusses how sociology can contribute to anti-racist futures across national contexts. Her insights point to the need for greater self-awareness in sociology regarding race and racism, for clarification of our aims and for better articulation and translation of popularized theoretical concepts, such as structural racism, to the general public. To achieve radical inclusion in the future, she highlights the importance of engaging in public and policy sociology, by explaining and substantiating policies and practices derived from our research. She also underscores the significance and value of comparative cross-national and multidisciplinary collaborative research. Most importantly, she brings to the fore the necessity of imagining new epistemological and methodological approaches to study the conditions that will enable our societies to attain equitable and anti-racist futures. Fundamentally, this involves extending our sociological imaginations.

Keywords

comparative cross-national research, critical sociology, epistemology, equity, inequality, interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary research, policy sociology, public sociology, race and racism, radical inclusion

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Johanne Jean-

Pierre: Your research is focused on racial inequality in education, while also drawing from the past to understand enduring discrepancies in education. As a sociologist and the 2021–2022 President-Elect of the American Sociological Association (ASA), how has our discipline contributed to a better understanding of persistent racial inequality in education? Are there some gaps that should be addressed and where should we go from here?

Prudence

Carter: First, let me say that my responses come mainly from my knowledge and training in US-centred sociology. That said, in my view, addressing race and racism in education is a relatively contemporaneous phenomenon and contribution. Despite the rich analyses offered by historians and psychologists about the effects that segregated schooling and the conditions leading up to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 US 483 (1954)) (US Supreme Court, 1954) legal precedent, since the 1960s, most sociological study of race in education has been more about the use of race as a categorical variable to proxy for different economic, educational and social statuses in society. Around the late 1970s to the early 1980s, two anthropologists of education, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, published a controversial article (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986) with a very provocative claim to explain racialized disparities in educational outcomes as a function of a cultural phenomenon of Black students' resisting 'acting white'. That set off a scholarly firestorm, in which many of us in that generation – I was in graduate school – started to take on the question of race-as-culture. Arguably, this argument was situated in a cultural deficit analysis, since it argued that one reason that Black youth did not fare as well as whites was because they perceived excellence in school as the province of whites, and that educational success would not benefit the descendants of the enslaved, native-born African Americans in the long run. Even though I think the larger oppositional cultural frame theory developed by John Ogbu is a strong, plausible one, in terms of understanding the differences between involuntary and voluntary minorities, the 'burden of acting white' thesis was problematic. In that moment, we saw a turn in how race was discussed in education. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, we started to think about race differently. We began to read the work of more scholars who challenged cultural deprivation explanations, interrogated colour-blindness and took on structural racism in a broader way within the field of education.

JJ-P: How do you think we should go from here to expand our understanding of racial inequality?

PC: Over the last two years, the entire world has seen these jarring, horrific images of what white supremacy and anti-Black racism entail. This moment opened the doors of opportunity for frameworks of critical race theory and structural racism to gather momentum, to urge us to really think about the institutionalization of racist policies and practices that have spawned the intergenerational reproduction of disparities. Now, because

there's great backlash in response to the recognition of structural racism, we have to persist and strategize carefully and continue to explain more accessibly what constitutes structural racism and anti-Blackness. To write and speak about these now are perceived as a personal attack by many who are in positions of power. If you push against anti-Blackness, (it is assumed that) then you must be anti-white. As sociologists, we tend to rely on discourse that is so highly theoretical and inaccessible with its jargon that it is not picked up readily by the general public. One of the things that I think is a challenge for our discipline is many people's reliance on older theoretical frameworks and paradigms from the discipline's forebears – many of them white European and American males – who were the products of the very political and social contexts that we aim to dismantle. Consequently, many of their ideas did not encompass the kind of radical inclusion that we are talking about, particularly when it comes to race and gender. That is why I really appreciated the focus on Du Boisian sociology of the 2021 annual meeting of the ASA under past president Aldon Morris.

JJ-P: Should we do something different to move sociological contributions further towards racial justice locally and across the national context?

PC: I strongly support and advocate for cross-national studies, particularly if the discipline wants to gather some modicum of universal versus particular social processes and dynamics. Most sociological studies are locally based. Of course, this is not a problem in and of itself. Still, sociology is inherently a comparative social science across myriad contexts, groups, communities, identities and other social entities. Obviously, the limited nature of cross-national research in American sociology might be attributable to a resource problem for many, especially graduate students. Personally, I believe that there is so much we can learn from other societies, which is why I went to South Africa. As we think about racial justice and equity, we can pick up particularities and nuances in our conceptual frameworks. Comparative studies allow us to refine our frameworks. One of the goals for me during my tenure as ASA president is to raise awareness of the need to cultivate the multifaceted nature of contemporary sociologists. I believe that to attain equity in our society and to solve social problems, more of us must engage in both public and policy sociology.¹ As Michael Burawoy addressed in his ASA presidential address, public sociologists are those who interact as intellectuals and engage with various publics in the public sphere. As sociologists, this group of thinkers also frequently interacts with various media, including social media, or they are writing opinion pieces or speaking at protest movements. Policy sociologists really work with practitioners, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and corporate domains, and they work to apply the knowledge generated by research. Policy sociology, in my opinion, unfortunately has a lower status in our field. Meanwhile, economists are now investigating sociological problems using econometric methods, and many engage proactively with policymakers. They do not have a problem being in the public policy arena. Psychologists have an applied or community-engaged arena;

there are clinical and practising psychologists, as well as professional academic psychologists. Sociologists, as a collective, might consider the dominant strands of knowledge generation that we share with the greater society. Of course, some of us, in some of the sub-fields, are having an impact and influence in various fields of policy and practice, but there could be more of us amplifying the utility, the usefulness and the absolute necessity of sociology as a discipline.

JJ-P: When it comes to public sociology, especially with the rise of social media and increased polarization, are you still a good researcher when you speak about issues outside of your area of expertise?

PC: I believe that it is important to understand that when I say policy sociology, I am talking about *evidence-based* policy sociology. When you engage in policy sociology, I would expect that it is predicated on an evidence base of research studies and findings. As a public sociologist, one should not merely make claims or assume that others will trust them just because they have the microphone and stage. I think it is incumbent upon us, whenever we speak beyond our own fields of expertise, to say, 'This is not my field of research', unless we can draw on and cite other studies to substantiate our claims. It is important to qualify when it is an opinion versus when it is actually evidence-based. Citation is just as important in public sociology and policy sociology as it is in our own writing. But more importantly, I think it is important for us to train students as generalists, as well as specialists, which allows them to speak more broadly, drawing on not only other sub-fields of sociology but also on a wider array of other thinkers' work to substantiate their ideas.

JJ-P: You conducted research with Black people in the United States and South Africa. Both populations have experienced contextually specific forms of segregation due to anti-Black racism. Are there epistemological considerations that emerging and experienced scholars across the discipline should keep in mind while engaging in research with historically excluded populations?

PC: A challenge for some in our discipline – and those in other social sciences with a progressive racial vision – is that the ultimate ends to which we aspire are yet to be realized because generally, we can only describe racial problems and the factors that cause them. Very little mainstream sociology addresses how to solve social problems, how to gather the evidence for conditions that will either ameliorate or eradicate the problems. And here is the kicker: for many of us with a progressive, racial vision, the existence of the imagined, required conditions has never transpired. Given that, how do we effectively convince the field that specific solutions work to solve macro-level racial and other social problems? To me, this is one of the great limitations of positivist social science, as we know it. Many of us who write about equitable and anti-racist futures do not have exemplary models in society today. These are imagined futures and possibilities. How

can we study and show how we get to them? What facilitates, affects or leads to such change? Certainly, we can theorize and hypothesize; yet in mainstream sociology, both epistemologically and methodologically, we are taught that the building of knowledge is predicated on that which we have either observed or measured. How do you train emerging scholars and researchers to think further about the requisite social, economic, political and cultural conditions, processes, relationships and so forth, needed to attain those idealized outcomes? Unfortunately, we find ourselves reliant on select, circular logics. Frequently, some sociologists – and I am not casting any aspersions here – make arguments based on extant conditions, which are often highly problematic and lacking. Some studies locate micro-communities where case studies are possible, which help to fuel the sociological imagination; however, the limitation, no matter how rich and rigorous the analysis, is the particularity and uniqueness of that context. Are the social implications and practices applicable more broadly? Are they scalable? I think that both epistemologically and methodologically, we are going to have to allow ourselves to imagine and simulate. There will be many who say, ‘Well, that is ideologically fraught; you are being an advocacy researcher.’ As a sociologist, I value the progress of our global society, that the well-being of the world’s population is expanded, that people thrive economically, socially and culturally, civically and politically. Indeed, that comprises an ideology of progress, which is always, in my opinion, worthy of pursuit. If we want to discuss the ultimate goals of racial equity, the annihilation of white supremacy and anti-Black racism, then we must imagine beyond the constraints of that which has held us so far, because those models have been fundamentally problematic and at times, inherently, symbolically violent to those of us affected by them.

JJ-P: Drawing from your own research and recent scholarship, can you discuss the relevance of revising *past* historical events to conceive and conduct sociological research in the *present* to transform the *future*?

PC: The current political moment has exposed the limitations of representational and symbolic politics and diversity. We must interrogate deeply and dismantle how many social institutions, organizations and communities are currently structured. If we care to avoid the reproduction of the forces of institutional and structural racism in the future, then as a field, we will need to be open to new, innovative and different sociological paradigms and ways of thinking.

When I think about using the present to transform the future, I often fall back on my training in poverty research to consider some potential pitfalls. Every few years, the US federal government recalibrates the poverty line. We know that if you are a family of four and you have an income below a certain bar, then you are considered ‘poor’: at, below or above that line within a specific standard deviation of the income equated with poverty. With certain policies and supports, federal and state governments may improve the

percentage of families and individuals who move above the poverty line: that, we refer to as an absolute reduction of poverty. Relatively speaking, those people are still quite poor, compared with the resources of the middle, upper-middle and wealthier classes in our society. Thus, you can have a reduction of the absolute poverty gap and still have a large, relative class inequality gap that exists among groups. The same logic can apply when we examine racial and gender disparities in society.

Both sociologists and economists who investigate anti-Black racism are already informing us that it would take nearly five generations, if not more, to eradicate the wealth gap that was created by slavery and other forms of economic exclusion sanctioned by the US government. We can go back to World War II and when the United States Federal Government was complicit in building a white middle class and homeownership that laid the grounds for wealth for whites in this country, and that Black, Latina/o/x and Indigenous folks do not have. What do you do with that? Even if you bring a family of colour out of poverty, there is a significant wealth differential that we have not erased in an unbridled, capitalist economy that generates excessive amounts of money for a very small proportion of the society. Therein lies the conundrum. Therefore, many are calling for more radical forms of social policy and reparations. Practically speaking, we will never fully eradicate inequality in our society. We will likely never do away entirely with racism or ethnocentrism or xenophobia in our society. I think that human nature is such that there is always some kind of group-based conflict and competition based on subjective traits. But is the goal merely to reduce absolute inequality and maintain relative inequality? Or do we also aim to attack the relative differences that are not normally distributed and show patterns along lines of class, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and so forth, depending on the outcomes of interest? I think these are the big questions for us as sociologists.

JJ-P: Is there theoretical or empirical sociological research that you find promising to provide new directions for the study of social inequality?

PC: I find some of the most promising research involves cross-national, comparative analyses. I view studies that illuminate what is going on between societies, that can elucidate certain mechanisms that the nation-state engenders, and that matter to the well-being of the people, to a society, writ large, as very useful. Research that really galvanizes my attention also consists of studies that attempt to braid the macro-, the meso- and the micro-levels of social factors and conditions together, and really see the multi-dimensionality of the forms of inequality under investigation. I love it when scholars are taking on problems in race and education, for example, and can situate it not just in the classroom, but within a larger ecology of neighbourhoods and communities, and even a wider ecology of history: the evolution of state and federal educational policy contexts. Further, those that conduct intersectional analyses, invoking the scholarship of feminist sociologists and scholars, have always had promise. The power and dominance of positivist social science, versus reflexive science, which is generally employed by intersectional thinkers, often elide

the value and contributions of this work. For me, those are the studies that are the go-to first.

I suspect that methodologically, people might assume that I am referring to higher linear modelling or other multivariate, statistical analyses. Yes, some; but not all. Fortunately, in some sub-fields, critical quantitative research, which embraces some of the principles of this type of scholarship, is emerging and developing. Still, I am more of a qualitative researcher who appreciates numbers greatly but loves the narratives. I think I am more interested in the interpretive analysis of ecological frameworks. Bronfenbrenner (1977) offered a seminal framework about this from a psychological perspective with the child or individual situated in a Venn diagram of the different dimensions of society. I think sociology needs to think about the learner and groups of learners within families, schools, communities and neighbourhoods, and within the capitalist state, the nation and the global world. I am aware of some attempts. It is hard work to do in terms of study design, but I think more collaborative research teams could facilitate that breadth and depth. I am impressed by researchers who do not try to go at it alone, but who work with others. Multi-disciplinary, transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary teams taking on different parts of the puzzle can be destined for richness in analyses. We know from organizational, behavioural research that a diverse team yields the most innovative designs and outcomes. Can more sociologists move beyond the individualistic to more collaborative and interdisciplinary research? I have now co-authored with several non-sociologists with whom I enjoyed working. I appreciate all the social sciences and humanities, too. Naturally, I always centre my sociological training, but one of the appreciations that I have from my years of teaching and working in schools of education is to be close colleagues with historians, anthropologists, psychologists, economists and philosophers who broadened my own understanding of how society operates. I do not think I would have gotten that breadth of perspective just by staying within the boundaries of knowledge offered by sociology and sociologists alone.

JJ-P: We are increasingly encouraged, at least from our funding agencies in Canada, to work in interdisciplinary teams. The last question, then, brings us to how, as a discipline, can sociology shape racial justice and equity in the future?

PC: First things first: more sociologists have to be comfortable talking about these issues. Further, we need to have a conversation about the sociology of sociology to understand, how we as a field, a discipline, reproduce power hierarchies, social stratification, segregation and inequality. Especially at the organizational level, many departments within the landscape of academia reproduce too many of the social issues that the faculty at those universities study. That is a problem in and of itself. Thus, the social problems that many think about become intellectual questions, and they are not real problems to solve if we are just going to collude and participate in them.

For the last 20 or so years, Patricia Hill Collins, Joe Feagin, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Aldon Morris, Mary Romero and other past ASA presidents have opened up the canon,

the discourse in sociology. Of course, some angst, fear, and pushback have emerged from individuals who are uncomfortable with that. Many merely view race as an object, a category of study. Let us acknowledge that we must be more conscious of power and the history of disproportional, racialized and gendered accumulation, and more multi-dimensional in how we understand race and racism, anti-Blackness and white supremacy. When I was in graduate school, we could not even say 'racism'. We wrote about 'racial inequality'. Writing more comfortably about structural racism is a relatively newly acquired power for me. I wrote about it in *Stubborn Roots* (Carter, 2012), but notice that because of the dominant methodological and epistemological tenets in our field, we were trained that we could only really measure inequality and discrimination. Racism in the post-Civil Rights era could not really be proven, we were told. So, discursively, we are at a cultural turn. We know racism exists; it is a social fact in our society. If you were to conduct meta-analyses of all the discrimination studies, the audit studies and the inequality studies, collectively they point to racism.

In sum, sociologists need to accept that institutionalized and structural racism and anti-Blackness exist. In this interview, I have centred Blackness because that is the primary focus of my work, but I also acknowledge that racism afflicts more than Black people. It manifests in anti-Asian hate crimes, Islamophobia, xenophobia towards immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and elsewhere around the globe. Scholars and researchers push us to consider the forces of settler colonialism and what that means for First Nations' peoples own realities and material lives. What are the implications for how we understand national boundaries from a progressive, racial perspective? I do not think that we attain racial equity just with those scholars and researchers who are members of communities or social groups most affected by the lack of equity.

Finally, I am aware that numerous sociologists around the globe could not care less about any of these issues. They work on other questions that they perceive as important, objective and theoretically fertile, that have to do with additional aspects of social action. Though I care about these equity issues as a sociologist of race, education and inequality, they are not representative of the whole of the discipline. However, if we do not attend to the issues that we have discussed here, then sociology risks losing its identity as a useful social science to all facets of society.

As a professional community, sociologists can enrich their own imagination, and thereby society's, by supporting new, generative research and scholarship that produce the tools and solutions to achieve equity and racial justice. This generative work will include studies that emphasize the critical importance of linking micro-, meso- and macro-level social factors from an ecological perspective. Deep engagement with other disciplines helps here. US sociology can also aim to diminish its parochial tendencies and seek enlightenment through comparative, cross-national research. And, of course, for those actual practices of equity and justice to occur, then US sociology – and the field in any other nation – should aspire to have high-quality policy sociology better supported and elevated. As sociologists, we must imagine, innovate and lead in the application of ideas and interventions for social change and progress.

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Note

1. Michael Burawoy identifies four types of sociological labour: professional, critical, public and policy sociology (see Burawoy, 2005).

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Prudence Carter is Sarah and Joseph Jr. Dowling Professor of Sociology at Brown University. Professor Carter's research focuses on explanations of enduring race, class, and gender inequalities in education and society and their potential solutions. Her book, *Keepin' It Real: School Success beyond Black and White* (2005, Oxford University Press), was awarded the Oliver Cromwell Cox Book Award by the American Sociological Association (ASA) for its contribution to the eradication of racism and was a finalist for the C. Wright Mills Book Award, given by the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Other books include *Stubborn Roots: Race, Culture, and Inequality in U.S. & South African Schools* and *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (co-edited with Dr. Kevin Welner) – both also published by Oxford University Press. Currently, she is the 2022–23 President of the American Sociological Association.

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