

Race & Wellbeing in the US: The Psychological Toll of a Broken System

Dr B. D'Andra Orey



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The United States government and law enforcement branches have a long history of abuse and violence towards African American people that continues into present day. Beyond the impacts to those directly affected, these traumatic events may have psychological and physical effects on those who witness them indirectly in the media. **Dr Byron D'Andra Orey** studies the physiological responses of black Americans to political images.

Biopolitics

Politics influences almost every facet of our daily lives, from what resources are available to us, to how we are treated by public servants, to who we associate and identify with, and how much we are personally impacted by national and global events.

As we foster an appreciation for the relationships between politics and human health, scientists are beginning to focus on how the two interplay. Dr Byron D'Andra Orey at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi conducts research in the emerging field of biopolitics, which explores the intersection between political science and human biology. Biopolitics leverages fields such as genetics and physiology to pursue questions such as whether people carry a genetic predisposition to conservative versus liberal views, and whether socioeconomic status impacts disease rates.

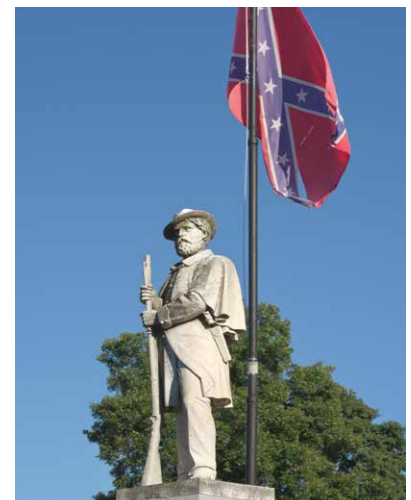
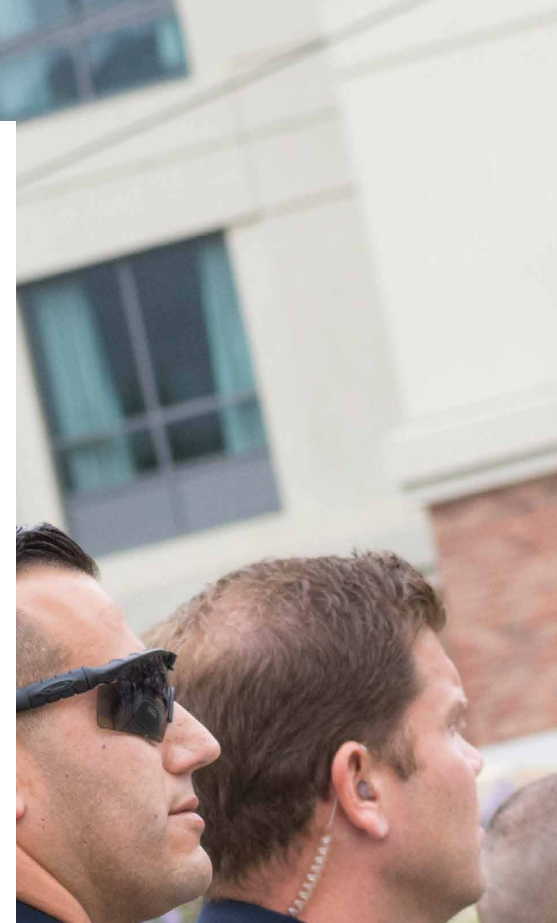
Dr Orey utilises physiology to understand how racial relations in the United States impact the health and wellbeing of African American citizens.

While the field of biopolitics has grown over the past decade, less attention has been focused on race-specific effects of politics. Dr Orey and his team are working to change this.

24-7 Trauma

Prior research has shown that a person does not have to be physically present during a traumatic event to experience trauma associated with the event. For example, it is unsurprising that many New York residents who witnessed the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center showed symptoms of trauma. However, many US citizens who did not witness the attacks first-hand, but observed the horror unfolding on their television screen, also experienced psychological effects akin to direct involvement in a traumatic experience.

Media exposure to events such as 9/11, the Boston Marathon bombings, and a litany of mass shootings has been associated with increased rates of acute stress, which often manifests as anxiety and high emotionality in those affected, with the potential to develop into posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Evolution has not yet caught



up to modern technology, and our brains cannot always easily distinguish between experiencing a traumatic event in real life and observing a recording of the same event. In many cases the same emotions are evoked, and the same stress response ensues.

Ongoing emotional stress can have major health consequences for sufferers. Anxiety, depression and PTSD are associated with heightened stress, particularly when the trigger is a traumatic event. Further, these psychological responses are associated with many physical health problems, such as gastrointestinal disorders, heart



disease and abnormal sleep patterns. Dr Orey's team wants to understand how exposure to racially charged stressors may carry strong consequences for black Americans.

The Psychological Toll of Racism

The primary focus of Dr Orey's current research is a National Science Foundation (NSF) funded project designed to measure the physiological and emotional impacts of racially-charged events on the wellbeing of African Americans.

In this project, his team measured participants' automatic responses to images, utilising galvanic skin responses – a standard measure of emotional arousal. The participants were shown experimental images, such as photos of police or racist symbols, alongside a standard set of images known as the International Affective Picture System (IAPS). IAPS images arouse almost universal participant responses – images, such as an attacking snake or a man charging with a knife, illicit fear responses, while control images such as cute koalas and flowers illicit positive and neutral responses for comparison.

A critical component of this research is the appreciation that African Americans do not respond uniformly to racial events, but are unique individuals whose personal views and experiences shape how they respond to the world around them. Dr Orey's team surveyed variables such as how strongly a person identifies as black, if they feel aligned with the African American community, if they carry internalised racism or negative stereotypes about other African Americans, and their level of awareness of racially-motivated discrimination and violence against black people in the US. In this way, the team hoped to provide context for variations in responses to different images.

Fear of the Police

With the widespread use of cell phones with video recording capabilities and increased reach of media coverage, the abuse and deaths of unarmed black people by the hand of white police officers have become more visible, sparking nationwide outrage and protests. Dr Orey's research team classifies such events as racially traumatic stressful events (RTSE), and as with other types of traumatic events, an

RTSE does not have to be experienced first-hand to have a lasting effect.

Dr Orey predicted that the experience of RTSE, whether first-hand or through the media, increases the likelihood that a black person will have a fear response when shown otherwise neutral pictures of a police officer making a traffic stop. When combined with measures of intra-racial differences, these responses show which African Americans are more likely to experience acute stress from interactions with police.

As expected, the majority of black participants demonstrated negative fear responses to images of police making traffic stops. Individuals who identify strongly as American, have a deep sense of shared fate with other black people, feel that the US legal system is unfair to African Americans, and/or believe that most people appreciate the contributions of black people to American culture showed the strongest negative responses to images of police.

Conversely, those that believe the black experience is distinct from other groups, feel that African Americans should be active participants in the current



system, and/or believe that society as a whole is unfair to black people showed less emotional response to these images. Overall, for many participants, traffic stop images generated as strong a negative response as an image of a dog attack or a man shooting himself, indicating that this is a serious problem that warrants further study.

Don't Shoot

One component of Dr Orey's recent work has focused on identifying and shifting racial biases against black people. In one of his studies, law enforcement agents engaged with a law enforcement simulation that measures how quickly they shoot black people versus white people, while also measuring their physiological response during each simulated encounter.

With increases in public attention to the shooting of unarmed black Americans by police officers, Dr Orey's most recent work focuses on the reactions of African American police officers when interacting with black civilians. Perhaps unsurprisingly, black officers who harbour resentment towards other African Americans are more likely to shoot an unarmed black person than those who do not. However, officers who believe that the American legal system and society as a whole are unfair to black people are less likely to shoot an unarmed person. As the need to decrease police shootings of unarmed individuals becomes glaringly apparent, understanding the factors that influence an individual officer's inclination to shoot could help shape training programs.

As a follow up, a portion of the participants will join educational exercises designed to increase cultural competency and awareness, in an effort to see if it is possible to reduce bias through education. Following these exercises, participants will receive another bias test to determine if those that have undergone the educational component show reduced bias compared to those that have not. Ultimately, Dr Orey hopes to design training courses that reduce the tendency for officers to shoot black people more quickly than white people in situations where race is the only distinguishing factor.

Political Disarray

Given the current political climate in the US, Dr Orey's team has grown interested in how exposure to images of the current

US President, Donald Trump, and anti-black messaging and symbology impacts the psychophysiology of black Americans. Trump has made numerous remarks perceived by many as racist, and has also refused to denounce the acts of violent racist groups and neo-Nazi organisations. Though violent crimes against racial minorities and incidents of openly racist behaviour have increased during his presidency, Trump continues to use divisive language in his speeches.

At the same time, open displays of racist symbols, such as Confederate and Nazi flags, have become more common. Dr Orey's home state, Mississippi, is the only state in the US that still flies the Confederate flag and whose state flag contains Confederate imagery, despite the long history of Confederate imagery being used in campaigns to suppress and terrorise African American citizens. The Confederate flag is often flown alongside Nazi flags at neo-Nazi events and serves as a symbol for those that espouse views of white supremacy.

Dr Orey's team wished to understand how the present treatment of African American peoples in US politics and society impacts their psychological wellbeing. In addition to galvanic skin response and inventories of each participant's beliefs, the team used eye-tracking technology to understand where a participant's eyes dwelled while viewing the Mississippi flag, which contains the Confederate flag in its top left corner.

Dr Orey found that black people who were angry about something in America showed stronger emotional responses to images of Trump, while those who were ashamed of something in the US were less emotionally aroused. Those who believed that the general public held African Americans in good regard, felt a shared fate with other black Americans, and those who felt disillusionment towards the US legal system had a stronger response to the Mississippi flag than those who felt some resentment towards the African American community. Those whose eyes stayed on the Confederate symbol on the flag longer had stronger responses than those who did not.

The failure of the US political system to protect black Americans from RTSE has broad-reaching significance. In addition to a serious public health consequence, people who feel threatened by and disconnected from their government are less likely to engage in public service and participate in democracy altogether.

Moving Forward

Dr Orey and his team hope to use their findings to drive policy and practices that improve the lives of black Americans and increase sensitivity to the African American experience in the US. They will continue delving into the nuances of psychological and physiological responses to political and police stimuli, and will develop educational resources to mitigate and eliminate sources of racial bias.



Meet the researcher

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Dr D'Andra Orey began his education at Mississippi Valley State University with a BS in Business Administration, continuing on to earn a Master of Public Administration from the University of Mississippi and an MA in Political Science at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He earned his PhD in Political Science from the University of New Orleans, following which he served in the faculty of the University of Mississippi and the University of Nebraska. In 2008 he took his current position in the faculty at Jackson State University as Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science. He has received numerous grants and awards for his ground-breaking research into the impact of racially traumatic events on African American wellbeing.

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