Q & A with Lucius Couloute

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When you are talking to people outside of academia, how do you describe your research?

Typically, I describe my research as a process of understanding the causes and consequences of racialized mass incarceration. This is, admittedly, a little vague and leaves out a good deal of my work, but it's a starting point. Much of my research centers on the experiences of those who have been formally criminalized by the criminal legal system. I use a range of theoretical and methodological tools to help me uncover what life is like for those with criminal records, but most often I employ qualitative methods such as interviews and field observations; these methods in particular help to uncover processes and meaning-making related to criminalization. In the end, I think of my work as a way to better understand and address structural inequalities through the lenses of those who know them best.

What sparked your interest in this research area and related topics (i.e., sociology of racialized mass incarceration, prisoner re-entry, etc.)?

I think my interest in better understanding these issues began during my undergraduate days. At that time, I was reading texts like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, while taking sociology classes on race and social movements. This was also when Trayvon Martin was murdered and many of us began organizing around that moment. Although I think I always knew our criminal legal system had problems, my formative undergraduate years really opened my eyes to the foundational injustice it presented (and continues to present) in our society. So, for graduate school, I wanted to develop the skills to better illuminate—and maybe help address—this very unjust thing we call a "justice" system.

What are some ways your work has helped advance knowledge about these research areas?

I'd like to think my work has helped people understand that the social and economic reality for people who have been swept up in this system of mass incarceration neither resembles justice, nor does it promote a better society for the rest of us. My work with the Prison Policy Initiative (https://www.prisonpolicy.org/)—illustrating severe levels of unemployment and homelessness among formerly incarcerated people—continues to inform local policies across the country. And my more recent qualitative work provides a critical corrective to dominant narratives suggesting that once people are released from prison, they are given a "second chance." In many ways, release from a carceral facility is the beginning of an extremely intricate journey—one that sets in motion a range of processes intersecting with family life, the labor market, the social welfare state, and beyond. Hopefully my previous and ongoing work helps us better understand these overlapping processes.

What are some of the most important take-aways for practitioners and policymakers from your research?

We've created a system that perpetually punishes those with felony records; a population that is disproportionately composed of Black, Latinx, and Native folks—which isn't incidental; it's a pattern facilitated by the policies, practices, people, and institutions governing our racialized capitalist system. My hope is that my ongoing work helps practitioners and policymakers realize that none of it is inevitable, we can (and should) do things differently.

What is next for you—that is, what areas of work are you most excited to begin or continue exploring?

I'm really excited to be working on potential solutions. As a sociologist, much of our work hinges upon the issues—disadvantages, inequalities, and so on. Luckily, I have had the privilege of examining the impact of providing direct cash transfers (specifically, a temporary guaranteed income) to those with felony records over the last few years and it has been very interesting work. Typically, when people are criminalized, we exclude them from the kinds of opportunities and resources that would help them get back on their feet. My guaranteed income work takes a different approach and asks, "What if we supported people instead?" Along with my amazing colleagues from UPenn's Center for Guaranteed Income Research (https://www.penncgir.org/), we are attempting to answer this question using both quantitative and qualitative methods. We recently published two reports based on pilot programs in Gainesville, Florida, and Durham, North Carolina, with more peer-reviewed work hopefully coming down the pipeline. For me, this is one of those projects that re-imagines not just reentry, but society as well. With the increasing use of technology to derive private profits from public investments, rising economic inequality, and an institutional infrastructure that renders millions of humans disposable, my hope is that we can look toward alternative practices and ways of allocating resources to produce a fairer and more equitable world. Guaranteed income certainly won't solve all these problems, but our analyses thus far suggest that providing a bit of material support can go a long way in promoting economic stability, family reintegration, improved health, and an array of other positive social outcomes.■