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Episode 7: Black Feminist Sociology with Dr. Mercedes Dunn

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DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 0:04

Hello and welcome to Retrieving the Social Sciences, a production of the Center for Social Science Scholarship. I'm your host Ian Anson, Associate Professor of Political Science here at UMBC. On today's show, as always, we'll be hearing from UMBC faculty, students, visiting speakers, and community partners about the social science research they've been performing in recent times. Qualitative, quantitative, applied, empirical, normative. On Retrieving the Social Sciences we bring the best of UMBC's social science community to you.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 0:42

While I'm sure that most folks have heard the term intersectionality at some point in their perusal of recent social science, the term isn't just a catchphrase. Today we're taking a close look at black feminist sociology: what it is, what it isn't, and how its assumptions improve our understanding of the black experience, feminist approaches to knowledge generation, and sociology as a whole. Sociology is a long-standing, incredibly diverse discipline. And UMBC's

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24:26



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conversation I had with Dr. Mercedes Dunn, a postdoctoral fellow in the UMBC Department of Sociology. Dr. Dunn is a recent graduate of the Ph. D. program in Sociology at the University of Michigan, having earlier completed a master's in Public Health in Health Behavior and Health Education, also in Michigan. Her bachelor's degree is from the prestigious Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, which is quite relevant to our conversation because Dr. Dunn's research agenda incorporates sociological analyses of students at HBCUs, or historically black colleges and universities. Dr. Dunn's work is at the intersection of gender, race, class, relationships, and sexual health inequity, which makes her a perfect foray into the topic of today's episode. In our conversation, Dr. Dunn explains what black feminist sociology is, what's new or not so new about this approach, and how we might use it to inform our understanding of the social sciences in general. Let's listen in.

DI Dr. Ian Anson 2:46

So Dr. Mercedes Dunn is with us today. I want to thank you again, so much for your time and for agreeing to be with us. I'm really interested to hear about some of the research that you've been working on. And especially this concept, right, or I guess this approach really, of black feminist sociology.

DM Dr. Mercedes Dunn 3:04

Yeah, so Hi Ian. Thanks for having me. So, generally, black feminist sociology asserts that black women, black femmes, are inherently valuable and important, which, you know, seems pretty simple. But when we think about the ways that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism manifests that kind of, you know, it kind of isn't as simple as it might seem. So basically, in doing that, and what that means is that black feminist sociologists really take seriously how our social location, not just as women, not just as black folks, but as black femmes, sort of at the intersection of both of those, provides this unique understanding of our social world society, a range of social issues, how social justice can be enacted, and, you know, sort of resistance in a lot of different ways. And also just that knowledge that we get from, from those, you know, everyday experiences that black women and black femmes have. And those perspectives are important in their own life. So like, even if they're not in

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Fantastic. So, so this is kind of a new approach then, at least in terms of the the kind of scholarship that's being produced today in 2021. How is it different maybe from some of the work that's being done or has been done in sociology in the past? I mean, obviously, this is something that a lot of people are talking about. Clearly, there's a great deal of excitement about this sort of intersectionality in terms of the approach to sociology. How is it new?

DM **Dr. Mercedes Dunn** 4:49

Yeah, so I would actually say that it's not new. So black feminist sociology and intersectionality are distinct in some ways, and there might be overlap, right? So for me, I consider myself both a black feminist sociologist and an intersectional sociologist, right. And so, for black women in particular and black femmes, you know, sort of our experiences are best understood, I feel like the intersections of you know, those interlocking systems of oppression. However, for black feminism and sort of the tenets of black feminism, they don't necessarily have to always be, right. And so I guess, when I think about just in general, black feminist sociology, often in mainstream, so the canon is sort of set with these old dead white guys, right from like, centuries ago. And the voices and perspectives of other folks like, you know, black women, and femmes and queer folks are often marginalized, within the very sort of core of the of the discipline, right. We're sort of, you know, pushed to the edges to the margin.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 6:00

I'll jump in real quick, just to mention, that's certainly not a syndrome that is unique to sociology, is it? Definitely something that pervades the social sciences. And surely this isn't my field of expertise, but goes much further beyond the realm of our sort of corner of academia as well.

DM **Dr. Mercedes Dunn** 6:16

Yeah, for sure, and miss so much, you know, by sort of, staying with those,

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what are considered are the seminal pieces in our field, right. We miss so much by sort of staying with that, and sort of continuously excluding the voices of people who are traditionally marginalized in society, but also continue to be marginalized within various social science fields. So I often tell people, like I did my, you know, I did my PhD at Michigan, but my undergrad training was at a historically black, women's college. And so, you know, something that the training at my undergrad gave me that my graduate training, right, this top program, and soci did not give me is to question the canon, you know, just just from jump, right. So who's it for? Who decided that this was going to be the canon? Right? Who determined what was important? And who and what are missing from, you know, those sort of core conversations in the field? What perspective might I, you know, from my social location, contribute to that? And that's something that I certainly, you know, try to do in my research and, and definitely something that I encourage my students to do as well, even in the classroom.

DI Dr. Ian Anson 7:45

What's on the syllabus? And who writes it? I think that's an incredibly valid, yeah, sort of, sort of idea. And, you know, I think a little bit you know, as this is a podcast about the social sciences, right, one of the core sort of syllabi that we'll encounter in any sort of graduate level work in, in the social sciences is the methods curriculum. And so I wanted to sort of ask you a little bit about that, specifically. So black feminist sociology, obviously, this is an approach this is this sort of holistic way of thinking about the field. Is it also a methodology? Or is it something that maybe lends itself to certain kinds of research methodologies? Or maybe not. Is this something that that sort of surpasses or redefines what we think about when we talk about methods?

DM Dr. Mercedes Dunn 8:29

Yeah, I think that's a great question. So for, for me, personally, I, you know, it's the lens that sort of orientates me in my research. So, and that says, for me, black feminist sociology, can be both a sort of a theoretical approach, but also an approach to, you know, how I, you know, enter the field, or how I do empirical research, because it starts, from me with how I even think about the phenomena that I'm studying, and how I craft my project. How I, you know,

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short answer to that. But for me, you can kind of be both. Again, that sort of challenge that black feminists and intersectional feminism gives is, is to really center the standpoint of black femmes and in the knowledge that we produce and really validate us as, as knowers, who happen to be able to speak about and from my own, you know, social locations. And so, for me, I found that qualitative methods have been best suited for doing this in my work and also for more nuanced understandings of, you know, the sort of everyday lived experiences of young black women, their sexual lives and how they make sense of it and how they, you know, sort of think about it. But that's not to say that quantitative methods are inherently, you know, sort of an antithesis to some black feminist sociology, because I feel like there there are certainly, there are certainly ways to do quantitative methodologies, you know, from a black feminist approach.

DI Dr. Ian Anson 10:19

Those are some really fascinating insights about methods and specifically your approach to methods. And, you know, you kind of broached a little bit the subject of your own research and that answer, and I wanted to get a little bit more into that, obviously, I want to talk a little bit about some of the work that you've been doing. Obviously, you've been working to better understand the sort of lived experience of, of black women specifically at, at colleges, historically black colleges and universities, and other contexts. Can you tell us a little bit about that work? And sort of what what drew you to that work? And maybe what some of the, the big takeaways have been so far in your research career?

DM Dr. Mercedes Dunn 10:57

Yeah, so generally, my, my work has focused on the sexual and sort of romantic lives of heterosexual black women at HBCUs. And, and so it's been, it's been very interesting work. So what sort of drew me to this work was a couple of different things. So the first one was that my own sort of mentor, as an undergrad, has been studying sort of HCBU's students' sexual behaviors or what are considered in some fields, HIV risk behavior, is sort of from very early on in the epidemic. And so I just was, you know, sort of this tangentially, like,

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Armstrong, who has this great book, *Paying for the Party*, on, sort of around the sexual lives and of, you know, black, of not black women, white women at, at a large sort of party university, was very interesting to me. But it was also very puzzling and very, sort of, you know, it didn't really seem to match sort of what I sort of witnessed on my own as a black woman at a HBCU. And also, the book did not, did not feature black women at all. The sample was all white women. There is a lot of focus right to the way that gender and class sort of intersect to sort of shape, sexual experiences and how that matters, but the racialization piece was missing from the book. And not just from Elizabeth's book, from what I would later learn, from the majority of that sort of area, the college heterosexuality like sort of literature, a lot of attention to racialization was just missing, right. And so we've learned a lot about how gender and class sort of intersect, but again, that racialization piece was missing. And in sort of considering why racialization mattered, it's significant, right? Because, as other sociologists sort of allude to or tell us right up is that, that race and racialization can really, it can shape and sometimes it can amplify these other, these other sort of power dynamics that are going on.

DI Dr. Ian Anson 13:30

Layer upon layer of these approaches and theories, right, thinking about class, thinking about gender, thinking about race. And when you put the whole puzzle together, you arrive at these really very interesting insights that take us far beyond the literature that we've read in the past, right. And I think that is such a great example of how black feminist sociology specifically, is advancing the field in new and different ways. I just wanted to mention, by the way, that we'll definitely be dropping a link to that book, to Professor Armstrong's book, in the in the show notes so that interested listeners can check that out and, and maybe think about the comparison, right between your research and maybe the research of the past. Speaking of the past, I want to move to the future a little bit. So obviously, you're a postdoctoral fellow at UMBC. And I want to hear a little bit about what's next in terms of your research trajectory. What kind of projects are you working on right now? And what can we expect to see from you in the future?

DM Dr. Mercedes Dunn 14:26

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know, how HBCU women are sort of, you know, navigating their sexual lives and the context of all of these systems of oppression that are swirling around them, right. And in doing so, sort of, how much of that is very much about crafting, this elite black feminine performance that represents the kind of woman that HBCU women are told they should be sort of directives from their institution, but also as they're trying to sort of align themselves to institutional values around racial uplift and found anti black racism. By my one of my next projects is informed by that work in a way. So it sort of moves from this individual level study to sort of an institutional level. So it'll be an ethnographic study of HBCU, policy, programming, and practice. And the sort of point of this is to explore how these institutions are broad on confronting, in a lot of ways, constructing the ways that students think about and sort of grapple with sexuality in ways that are racialized, gendered, and classed. And so my sort of focus on HBCUs, in particular, is that I believe that HBCUs, if nowhere else, are have the great potential to be transformative spaces, both in terms of reimagining the rules for black gender, performance, and sexuality. And also to sort of help encourage a sort of consciousness and self definition among these emerging black adults. But getting back that self definition piece is incredibly important to black feminist sociology and black feminist tenants in general. And I feel like HBCUs are, are a dynamic place and a great place for that. And I want to plug one more plug in. So just general, for folks

DI Dr. Ian Anson 16:33

Please do. We're always happy to get some plugs here. So we can throw in all of these in the show notes. So please go for it.

DM Dr. Mercedes Dunn 16:42

Yeah, so there's this, there is a great edited volume that just came out this entitled Black Feminist Sociology, I think, Perspectives and Praxis, and it is edited by the incredible Dr. Zakiya Luna and Dr. Whitney Pirtle, who, are sort of engaging in these questions around like, what is black feminist sociology? What are sort of the new frontiers of it? How is it evolving? How has it evolved? And so I also have a chapter in that book with some of my mentors, as well and a mentee. And so it's been an incredible, like, you know, it's very, it's very intergenerational, it's intersectional in a lot of ways. And so it's just a

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not, I will be out by the end of the month.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 17:37

Wonderful. And certainly, you know, we'll be putting that link in there. And interested listeners can probably pick that up at the UMBC library or wherever they get their books. You know, this this concept that you were talking about, this sort of pressure of eliteness. That's a really fascinating concept. And I think that yeah, the work that you're planning on doing in the future, I'm really excited to think about how illuminating that concept, and especially thinking about the sort of sexual lives of students from that lens is going to really lend itself to some some new and interesting and valuable insights that will hopefully redefine the way that we think about the college experience, the student experience, and the lived experience of black women sort of everywhere, as a as a real contribution to the field, and you know, beyond the field as well. So, of course, so I have one last question for you. So this is something that I always ask anybody that I interview on the podcast, and of course, as producers of knowledge, as researchers, we're always interested in doing our own work. But certainly, we're also teachers. And we're people who are involved in sort of cultivating the next mind, the next generation of minds, of social scientists. And I wanted to know, if you had any words of advice for students who might be interested in getting involved in the social sciences, students who want to start doing research, learning more about the various subfields, and hopefully becoming producers of knowledge themselves in the near future.

DM **Dr. Mercedes Dunn** 19:09

Yeah. So the number one piece of advice and I think that I've gotten this advice personally from some of my mentors, is to don't allow yourself to be disciplined to your discipline. And so, what that means is to feel free to challenge the conventions of your field, you know, whether they be theoretical or methodological. And you know, are you just sort of pushing the envelope on what it is, what is or is not considered sociology or psych or econ or poly sci or public health, like those types of things, right or anthropology.

Remember that your your field right the sort of point of the discipline is to

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missing, right? That's part of being a scientist, right? And don't be afraid to test it out. But also feel free to reach out to folks who might not be your home department as you're doing that, right. And oftentimes, they can sort of help you see things from another perspective, right. Sociology doesn't have all the answers. Anthro doesn't have all the answers, right. And so sort of making those connections across disciplines can often illuminate sort of how you can, ways to make your fields stronger.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 20:35

What was that catchphrase? Again? It was, don't be disciplined by your discipline is that right?

DM **Dr. Mercedes Dunn** 20:40

Yeah. Don't be disciplined to your discipline.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 20:42

Don't be disciplined to your discipline. I love it. That's a fantastic piece of advice for any student for any faculty member, honestly. And I think that's a great point to end on. Because obviously, that's the whole point of this podcast, actually, is to try to help, you know, social scientists at UMBC, outside of the UMBC community, get to know one another a little bit more and to learn more about the research that's going on on this wonderful campus. So, Dr. Dunn, thank you so much for sharing a little bit of your own research. I think that that really we've learned a tremendous amount about black feminist sociology, about your approach, about some of the work that that you've been working on and the work that you are going to be working on in the future. And I'm really excited to hopefully have you back on the podcast sometime soon and talk a little bit more about some of your forthcoming publications.

DM **Dr. Mercedes Dunn** 21:30

I look forward to it.

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3 **Speaker 3** 21:39

Campus Connections (6)

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 21:48

It's time now for a regular segment. This is Campus Connections, part of the show where we connect the work of today's featured speaker to other research happening on UMBC's campus. Today's Campus Connection features the work of Dr. Loren Henderson. Dr. Henderson is associate professor with three affiliations on UMBC's campus: in the School of Public Policy, in the Language, Literacy and Culture Program, and the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Public Health. Wow, that is a lot of campus affiliations. You know, I'm getting tired just thinking about all those faculty meetings. Dr. Henderson studies a diverse array of sociological topics, including diversity issues, stratification and inequality, health disparities, and gender and sexuality. In a recent co-authored journal article, Dr. Henderson and colleagues perform an investigation that likely fits well within the rubric of black feminist sociology. The study investigates urban, single, low-income African American mothers and their role in a seemingly unlikely activity: genomic research. While I'm sure most of us have heard of the harrowing tale of Henrietta Lacks, a black Baltimore woman who was experimented on without her consent or understanding. This research proposes a far different model for involving black women in the process of scientific research. Instead, the article envisions recruiting black single mothers as co-producers of knowledge, citizen scientists, with stakes in the outcome of the research. The study itself investigates how the stress of living in violent neighborhoods has a negative impact on both the mental and physical health of residents, a process that we cannot fully understand without the full participation and collaboration of those residents themselves. The study suggests new ways of thinking about health, well-being and the process of scientific research itself, and will hopefully lead to many productive collaborations in the near future. That's all for today's show. See you next time.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 23:49

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director is Dr. Felipe Filomeno. and our production intern is Jefferson Rivas. Our theme music was composed and recorded by D’Juan Moreland. Find out more about CS3 at socialscience.umbc.edu and make sure to follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, where you can find full video recordings of recent UMBC events. Until next time, keep questioning.