

Tanya Domey: Hi, this is Tanya [Domey 00:00:04]. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the graduate center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domey: Dr. Gregory Smithsimon is an associate professor of sociology at Brooklyn College in the graduate center CUNY where he focuses on the social effects of urban space design, including how it can foster segregation or integration. In his new book, Cause and How It Doesn't Always Equal Effect, published this month by Melvin House, Smithsimon unpacks how we often have flawed reasoning about cause and effect, particularly when it concerns social challenges like racism, climate change, and poverty. Welcome, Gregory, to The Thought Project.

Dr. Smithsimon: Thanks a lot for having me. It's a pleasure.

Tanya Domey: In this book that you have just published, Cause and How It Doesn't Always Equal Effect, was recently featured in The Guardian in the opinion editorial section. You lay out sort of the startling statistics about neighborhood segregation trends. You note that African American are most likely to live in segregated communities. Considering why, you ask a really interesting question. Are black people choosing to remain segregated because majority white neighborhoods are dangerous? Can you talk to us about how you came to this question?

Dr. Smithsimon: Sure, I've been doing research for a number of years on an African American middle class suburb. This book comes out of research that I've done on a bunch of different topics and the chance for me to take a step back and think about it. It's about the stories that people tell. One of the things that happened was I would do interviews with people and I'd ask them, "What does segregation mean to you?" My African American respondents would smile politely, look me in the eye and say, "Nothing."

Dr. Smithsimon: It became apparent that as a good, white progressive, I liked integration. It was a value and an end in itself, but in the Civil Rights Movement, integration was a strategic means to an end and that it was a way to get somewhere. Now that that was no longer a strategy, it was no longer a priority. I started thinking about why neighborhoods are segregated, why they had remained segregated. Thinking about a series of different stories that, as Americans, we have told ourselves that help us understand the world, but really misrepresent what was going on. I wanted to understand what was really happening.

Tanya Domey: Very, very interesting. I happened to have grown up in Indianapolis, which was a very segregated city. The north side of the city, which has middle class blacks was called the gold ghetto. It was surrounded by a Jewish ghetto as well, which

also there was a lot of prejudice against Jews when I was growing up in Indianapolis. This thing, this phenomenon is very, very personal to me because I remember it as a child. In this book, you lay out some statistics about neighborhood segregation trends and that you note that African Americans are most likely to live in segregated communities. In considering why, you ask this interesting question. Are black people choosing to remain segregated because the majority of white neighborhoods are dangerous to them? Can you talk to us about this phenomenon, about wanting to be safe?

Dr. Smithsimon: Sure, sure. I'll say that it came out of going through a series of stories. The first story that I get from students when we talk about segregated neighborhoods is, "Oh, people like to live with their own kind." It makes it sound natural. Then, you see that the rates of segregation for whites and for blacks are much higher say than for Asian or Latina. It's not the same for everybody. You see that for other ethnic and racial groups, the wealthier you get, the less segregated your neighborhood is. But, for African Americans like that middle class neighborhood that you were describing, the segregation rates for middle class and upper middle class are virtually as high as for the poorest African Americans. There is something else going on.

Dr. Smithsimon: The second version of the story that gets told often by social scientists is about real estate practices, discriminatory practices, red lining-

Tanya Domey: Red lining.

Dr. Smithsimon: Exactly. Realtors not showing houses in white neighborhoods to black renters or buyers and that sort of thing. There's an important value to that, that gets you the Fair Housing Act, but it still doesn't explain what's happening. I really came to the alternative story by looking at history. If you look at American cities through, say, 1920 or so, black neighborhoods were not especially segregated. People lived in mixed neighborhoods.

Dr. Smithsimon: What happens in the 1920s is a part of the story we haven't talked about much is that there are riots in all the major cities in the midst of ... in the beginning of the Great Migration as African Americans are moving into cities. They're being funneled into segregated neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods are becoming more crowded and more black. Whites and police were rioting against African Americans. It becomes very dangerous to live off and be one African American or a small group of African Americans scattered among other people because there's violence from authorities and their white neighbors. People are getting attacked; their homes are getting burned down. Strategically, people move into one big, high dense black neighborhood in the city. That's reinforced by laws and segregation.

Dr. Smithsimon: When we look at ghettos in America, not all countries have them. They get formed because of violence and we don't talk about that. Then you fast forward and I was doing interviews with African American professionals, judges, real

estate brokers, lawyers, asking about the neighborhoods they lived in. They would sometimes be pioneers and move into mixed neighborhoods. They liked moving into neighborhoods that they didn't feel anybody had real strict ownership over. What they found was that while the neighborhood was predominantly white, there was a cost to be paid. One judge recounted for me how many times her husband would get pulled over coming home from work or coming home from church events at night because he was a black man driving the car, how she worried about her son getting hassled by the police when he was a teenager.

Dr. Smithsimon: What is fascinating to me ... I talked to one man who said, "It's really changed. It used to be that you could only live in a black neighborhood." He was somebody who had seen ... He moved a block across the dividing line when he was a young man and had his car window shot out. There was a cross burned on his church's front yard. He said, "Now, we're living where we are right now. It's mixed and it's fine. We even looked out in this rural county. That's a place most black people would be afraid to live." I had grown up in this area, so I knew the answer, but sometimes you have to ask a question that you know the answer to. I said, "Why would people be afraid?" He said, "Klan." He said, "Maybe this is just an impression I had, but that's what we're worry about."

Dr. Smithsimon: I realized that for black residents ... White will look at black neighborhood and think, "Why would somebody want to live in a neighborhood like that? It's more dangerous. Why wouldn't that want to live in a safe neighborhood like mine?" For black residents, even if you account for higher rates of crime, say in some black neighborhood, it's the white neighborhood that look really dangerous. They would rather live in a black neighborhood where they are safe than in a white neighborhood where they're in danger, where they're harassed by the police and they have no confidence that anybody's gonna be there to protect them, neighbors, police, or the local government.

Tanya Domey: So, your article also indicated that with the attainment of power like a black mirror, they have the least amount of violence. With franchise and political power, that also creates much more safety for black communities.

Dr. Smithsimon: That was one of the fascinating things from looking at the recent shootings, Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, the shooting in Ferguson of Michael Brown. Because I was looking at black suburbs, I was looking at where these shootings were happening. If you think about the headlines that got made about races in as recently as the 90s. Rodney King being beaten. That was in Los Angeles, right? The stories came out of cities. The shootings that we hear about all too frequently today very often come from the suburbs, even the choking of Eric Garner in Staten Island happened in a place that was racially mixed. If you think about Ferguson, it's two-third black. Sanford, Florida is 30% black.

Dr. Smithsimon: What two researchers, David Jacobs and Robert O'Brien found was that police shootings were likely to happen where a growing percentage was African

American, but where the mayors are still white. When you got a black mayor in an area, the rates of police violence decline. I think these are happening in these areas in transition where African Americans make up enough of a percentage of the population that whites and the local white power structure feel threatened, but that African Americans are not numerous enough or politically organized enough to have political power. It's in that dangerous gray area that there's a safety living in a black neighborhood and a safety to having a mayor that cares about your issues. When you got neither one of those to protect you, then you're really at risk.

Tanya Domey: That's very interesting. I just want to go back to your article. You talk about the 19th century being blacks lived in rural, in the 20th century, inner cities. Now, as you indicated, blacks are living ... have a critical mass of black people living in the suburbs and where all these really horrible crimes have taken place in the past couple of years.

Dr. Smithsimon: That's right. Today, 40% of African Americans live in the suburbs, not the city or the countryside. In the 100 largest cities, a majority of African Americans live in suburbs. That idea of the 21st century being the black suburban industry raises some interesting cultural questions. What does it mean to be authentically black in the suburbs? What is black suburban culture? I think these are things that people wrestle with. Young people in particular growing up in the suburbs has to figure out what it means to be black and suburban. They are not familiar with their cities. They are used to being out in the suburbs. They may have a large or small group of black or white friends. I think that that's interesting because that's an area where we're going to see a lot of growth and a lot of new developments.

Dr. Smithsimon: In some ways, the Black Lives Matter movement that comes out of this violence that I'm talking about is so important particularly because it's making the demand not only about this violence but the idea that African Americans need to be safe wherever they go. If that happens, you would see a dramatic change in sort of the opportunities that black Americans have and the way our neighborhoods get structured because they wouldn't be built along these desperately defensive lines by African American residents who need to be safe and don't have formal sources to turn to for that safety.

Tanya Domey: Can you talk about a couple of the initiatives that are really very significant in our history? One was the Fair Housing Act. With that, the objectives of that was ... The other is a more recent program where people are supposed to ... you're integrating poorer people into middle class basically successful communities. One of the things that you pointed out is that there's more poor white people dispersed across America, whereas the black community, they're more concentrated if they are poor. Talk about that. That's very interesting.

Dr. Smithsimon: Sure. Even in New York, which is a predominantly non-white city, there are more poor white people in New York City than there are poor black people.

Anytime I mention that in class, the students are surprised. I pull up the map. What you see is that poor African Americans are concentrated in neighborhoods with a lot of other poor African Americans. Poor white people are spread all throughout the city. A footnote to that is that poor whites live everywhere except where poor black live. The only neighborhoods we really don't see anybody. You get a very different set of experiences.

Dr. Smithsimon: A lot of people look and think about that way that if you're poor in a neighborhood that's mostly non-poor, the thinking is you may have neighborhoods who can get you a job. Your school is supported by people who have a job right now and are a little bit better off. You got access to stores that have a range of customers. Often, it's the grocery stores in the poorest neighborhoods that have the worst prices and the least selection.

Dr. Smithsimon: There are advantages, if you're going to be poor, of living in a mixed neighborhood. That got carried through to this federal program, which is called Moving to Opportunities, which is the one you're talking about. We recognize that public housing in America was built to be segregated, that public housing was built, by and large, in predominantly black neighborhoods and segregated neighborhoods. When courts recognized that this was segregation and that if we were going to build anymore public housing, it needed to be integrated. The United States just stopped building public housing. That's what turned the switch off.

Dr. Smithsimon: The Moving to Opportunities Program is an interesting one in that it tries to create situation incentives for people who had been living in public housing or in low income communities to move out of neighborhoods that are black and predominantly poor into more economically mixed areas. I understand the motivation. I would even say that it seems like it's an important thing to do. What's interesting is that the findings, which people had been really anticipating and people have done some excellent work to look very carefully at what effect it has-

Tanya Domey: Like the economic payoff for example, yeah.

Dr. Smithsimon: Exactly. There have been a bunch of different studies, but what it appears to be so far, the most comprehensive work, is that the wages didn't improve for parents who moved. Somewhat not surprising because they were already working. They kept their jobs. For teenagers, their outcomes may have been worse, but for younger kids, kids under 13 who grew up in these mixed neighborhood as a result of MTO, Moving to Opportunities-

Tanya Domey: They had more mobility.

Dr. Smithsimon: They were making about \$3000 more per month-

Tanya Domey: And opportunity.

Dr. Smithsimon: Which doesn't sound like much until you consider that the average otherwise is \$1100. To go from 11 to 14 is a big deal, but remember I was just talking about how non-black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods, mixed neighborhoods can be dangerous for African Americans because of the lack of protection that we as a country provide them in their own neighborhoods and other people's neighborhoods. Think about your own kids. I want the best for my kids. If you told me that moving to another neighborhood was going to increase their earnings as an adult by 25%, I'd be really interested. If you told me that moving to that neighborhood was going to put them in danger, was going to lead the police to single them out for harassment, was going to lead to them being pulled over by the police, was going to lead to neighbors being suspicious of them, I would give it a second thought.

Dr. Smithsimon: MTO has a great deal of promise, but I think we want to be very careful when our policies for poor people are to give them strong financial incentives to do something that they have in some ways decided [inaudible 00:15:58] risks that they don't want to take. They say, "Let me sweeten the pot a little bit." I would suggest that to make MTO complete, what you need to do is complete the Anti-Police Violent Movements goal. What is every neighborhood in America was safe for African Americans to walk through? What if every neighborhood in America was safe for African Americans to drive through? What if every neighborhood in America was safe for African Americans to live in? That's something we can do. If we did it, then you wouldn't need to worry about those negative effects, and you wouldn't need a program like MTO, though you could do it.

Tanya Domey: And have economic incentives.

Dr. Smithsimon: Yeah, and people would recognize that they would have more opportunities. I think we would all benefit from that sort of a situation. That, as I said at the beginning, integration is something I like politically and like to see, but I think it would have real advantages, certainly if we could get rid of the kind of strictures that get put on housing choices of black families. There's no reason to be doing that.

Tanya Domey: I want to thank you so much, Gregory. The book is Cause and How It Doesn't Always Equal Effect, published by Melville House. Congratulations on this book and thank you again.

Dr. Smithsimon: Thank you so much. It was a real pleasure to get to talk to you.

Tanya Domey: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest Professor Gregory Smithsimon.

Tanya Domey: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the graduate center in the heart of New York City. With production, engineering,

and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack [Horrowitts 00:17:33]. I'm Tanya Domey. Tune in next week.