

Episode 60 - Alankaar Sharma: Tuskegee and the Negro Project: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Public Health (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University at Buffalo School of Social Work is making a difference every day through that generation and transmission of knowledge promotion of social justice and service to humanity. We offer MSW and PHD programs continuing education programs and credits online courses licensor exam preparation professional seminars and certificates and much much more. To learn more about the school of social work please visit www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Hi again from Buffalo. Did you know that Frederick Law Olmsted designed our extensive park system. He's also known for a little piece of work called Central Park in Manhattan. I'm your host Peter Sobota. In the second of our two episodes series Alankaar Sharma continues the discussion of his work related to the intersection of race gender and public health by answering his fundamental question what accounts for the huge differences in the longevity and funding support between the Tuskegee experiments and the scarcely known Negro Project write off. Mr. Sharma raises troubling questions related to research ethics and how the answer may lie in the cultural narrative of black men during the time of the studies. Citing examples such as the accepted hypersexuality of black men and their perceived basic physiological inferiority to whites and the pervasive impact of stereotypical racial assumptions he ties historical oppression to African-American access to healthcare services today.

[00:02:04] Mr. Sharma concludes with a call for a social work response and comments on the legitimacy of a post racial United States Alankaar Sharma is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work and visiting instructor at the University of Iowa's School of Social Work. His academic interests include gender based violence child sexual abuse sexuality rights social justice and diversity and international social work. He maintains a key interest in understanding masculinities from a feminist and social justice perspective. Mr. Sharma was interviewed by Dr. Adjoa Robinson assistant professor here at the UB School of Social Work. Dr. Robinson interviewed Mr. Sharma by telephone. Hi this is your host Peter Sobota. We'd like to mention that this episode contains some background distortion that is due to technical problems we experienced while recording thanks and we hope you like the podcast. So why then does it suggest that he enters the custody a justice of review sometimes it was said that they had 600 subjects in the study and 399 out of the 600 identified civilizations and ran from the 1932 and to 1972 and and in 1972 it came to an unplanned end and it wasn't a plant and it wasn't because somebody was a whistleblower. And then a journalist wrote the story in the media and that we needed a public outcry which led the termination of the study. So had that not happened. Knows that it was funded by the United States Public Legal Services was a public health program. In that program the subject either was an experimental study surely.

[00:03:49] What was going on was lying to people that they were being treated for syphilis though they were not being treated for syphilis at any point in time. There was even not an intention to keep this nation separate was only true in their own words. The statement was about Unison's studying this disease in the natural environment in the natural environment of the subjects african american men. So they were studying it. They were not preventing or curing it. And they were trying to see how it impacted black men. And I've said they were lied to and cheated about very excruciating repeated experiments conducted on them. And today as we know it's very embarrassing and shameful example of how this should not be done. But to me the big question was so why is that. To watch those public health projects both looking at than real diseases in African-American communities. Why is it that one project is so short lived. Negro project started in the 1940s had

disappeared by the mid 1950s. Why is it that it was so short lived but the Tuskegee study it almost flourished for 40 years for nearly half a century and who knows if the person have the list on it. Among other things. Why is it that two projects both of them looking at men in African-American community and syphilis. One has a very short life. The other one flourished for nearly half a century. Why is it that half and that can be comfortable with the perspective that the answer lies in the narrative of both the projects. What I mean by that is the that he fit the narrative of racial black masculinity in the United States. The project was a continent. It resisted the same narrative of racial madness.

[00:05:46] Once the narrative of black masculinity sees black men as one insider devious dangerous and black bodies have be constructed as almost animalistic than the sight of African-American people. They must not physically strong black male intelligence are very unfortunate by the very obvious and that either means. This was at the time then or is it now because it seems pretty familiar. Unfortunately I think that what has has been with us for centuries beginning with or even predating times of slavery and that not that part that idea continues as he said even after today African-American men and women have been constructed as hypersexual. So even in times of slavery and Jim Crow you would find this whole idea about black men as a rapist and as a sexual threat to white woman. But is that something that we don't see today that black men are considered dangerous and sexually aggressive. Similarly black women have also been considered hyper sexual. So this whole idea that they have too many children that they make too many babies and they cannot take care them that that's why so many of them are welfare moms those are the harmful and damaging discourses the mainstream that these ideas flow out of talking about the intersection of race and gender. With regard to masculinity and African-American communities African-American race has denigrated the disease vice and fine over centuries the black body has been constructed as hypersexual and black men have been constructed as people with unbridled animalistic sexual desires and the same thing about what we hear about black fathers today that they want to make babies but they're are not able to take care of them. So where does it come out and what you just talked about a lot black neighborhoods.

[00:07:51] It is my view that this mainstream narrative of black masculinity plays a role in the longevity of Tuskegee study but a very short life of the Negro Project for example the Tuskegee study was based on the notion that black men were naturally inferior that there was something natural about high prevalence of sexual harassment of diseases among black men. They believed that and this is something that scholars who researched the disease study extensively talked about and they said that the belief on which the study was premise was that black men could not benefit from treatment for syphilis they could not gain from the medical advancements because they believe that black and white bodies were inherently naturally different. So the treatment that actual evidence with white people will just not work with black people. That was the assumption that started off. They said if you will that men will not see in treatment because they are hypersexual or because they are set up because they just live in places that they will not have access. So there was always a purpose of working with the skin to be if this community was not going to benefit was about extending treatment to that men. When treatment was either locking them or they were not going to they were not going to continue this. So they wanted to study syphilis essentially what was going on was these people that syphilis and they were being experimented on but not treated. Even then to show improvements in the health outcomes of people that syphilis.

[00:09:33] Even then they did not consider that an incident that suggests this mainstream idea that somehow African-American people are inferior that this treatment that work on what kind of body art work on this account. But that was at the root of it as to why it even conceptualized this study in the first place. It also shows that not they not solicit collaboration partnership the African-American community and because all the same idea that black people they excel in physical ability they lack an electorate that concept of black leadership itself was missing. It happened because leaders from

communities that lacks ability. Moreover the idea that African-American people were not wanting treatment suggests that somehow these people would not comprehend the value of treatment and therefore not wanting to. They may have been able to get away with that type of thinking. Until the 1950s. But as we look at or observed the social movements there was a tremendous rise in black leadership. Not that it had been absent before but it gained national attention as well as the perseverance. African-American people and the pursuit of good the pursuit of social justice in terms of equality. At a certain point these folks had public health service who continued to believe that there was the intellectual ability was lacking that the leadership was lacking and that perseverance was lacking. It has no merit. They have no leg to stand on. Absolutely. I agree with that. I think we have a whole lot of progress. There's more in terms of challenging whose ideas I would see us me and some homes present in this guess but above all I've been pushed back and is dangerous hasn't gone be on TV. Economic growth is outrageous that is one.

[00:11:49] He's all black power based on Jack the Ripper about all that was bottled up silly and had sliced a lot of people are. But this is just people. This analysis. This follows examine the reactions to the bites repeated and generated in the media in reporting on his own and how the story went back to his race and not just this Vanderlip in Boston was committing Biden's ego of patients and those soon acting terms were gangbangers local gangsters. And that black neighborhoods are somehow dangerous new neighborhoods and that one shouldn't be in a black neighborhood. Be honest and up to date. Those ideas haven't gone away. As we find them. Something must have been changed and monitored and the news is since unfortunately that's like the of that mentioned. Is this just went back to the Tuskegee study. That was the idea of our deepest challenge. They wasn't the black community. Actually it was not the social conditions that was leading to a high rate of evidence in Africa. So there was that one in that sense was umboh story. Even the history of racial blackness that speak is that it refused to acknowledge that race was an element in the study which sounds ridiculous says articulates that it is laughable today that the speeches have nothing to do with race. Dr John Heller who at one point in time had left the study in 1972 said and I quote There was no racial type of bias. It just happened to be a black community unquote.

[00:13:57] Now even if you take it at face value it and be seen as colorblind racism that even if you take it at face value that yes it just happened to be there and there was no way to fight it can be seen as colorblind racism which is that one is perpetuating a racist act. But without acknowledging that race has ended with it. But I'm not sure if I buy into that argument that this had it had no racial side to it that it just happened to be in Macon County Alabama. Why is it that it was not in a predominantly white county in Connecticut or in Washington or New York. You know why is it that what happened to the making of the album and that it had no racial side that it was met by a predominantly white staff of doctors and officials and all the people on both subjects in the study were all black and that nobody noticed race in the in the in the middle of it. So I'm not sure if I agree with the help. You know I'm not buying it. So. So there is this idea that again was a blind spot. Race race that race was absent in the comments. On the other hand as we talked at length Negro Project we were actively wrestling with race dynamics in trying to figure out how this project in a way that would make it most effective and efficient. They were talking to black people and black leaders but working out ways in which that would develop educationally that most suitable for African-American community. They acknowledged that they did not have the same approach for white people and black people. So they did not have a balanced form Blindspot with rates.

[00:15:51] One can argue that there was in the past. But one cannot argue that they were not King Mobley's and in John Dr John Harris was they were not thinking about bullies at all. Even if you buy into them. Finally I do want to mention is that historically during times of slavery and even post slavery black men were lynched and castrated and that wasn't an unusual occurrence unfortunate and and many times that that lynching of castration came out of the idea of black men as being criminal deviants being dangerous traitors society and a sexual threat to white men. Yes there are

many examples of that in history. History that's not too distant when black men were lynched to be seen as a sexual danger to a white woman or like an engine. And some of have talked about the idea about symbolic castration. So even though castrations like the times of slavery of white picket they are not as keen today. There is this idea that the symbolic castration with black masculinity is the little German example example. This is the result that by constructing black men as animalistic as lacking in intelligence as naturally anatomically inferior that somehow their bodies they were going to get this disease then Ramandeep meant that once they had this disease it went viral. And that meant that idea by giving them access and sexual health services can be viewed as as a symbolic castration by instructing them as somehow subhuman animalistic devious dangerous hypersexual much as that of keeping them away from sexual health Samsons can be seen as symbolic castration. Do you think that's happening today.

[00:18:07] The African-American community and black men in particular are being kept away from health services. I don't think they can help themselves. I do think though that we know that the access to health care is not every day that communities of color ethnicities living in poverty of less access health healthcare services as young men and communities who I was and she got mixed with. So we are not living in a Ekwu because we know that and we also know that it's misuse of us. So I don't think that African-American people of men are being raped themselves. I do think though that there's still a chance that a racial and racist do play a role in limiting their access. Yes. And not just healthcare services or a variety of welfare as examples black fathers and this is this idea and I'm moving away from this project and speak up that somehow they are a hopeless case that they are deadbeats to begin and therefore doesn't sound very mean engines that are actively welcoming when black fathers and teenage black fathers especially in getting them involved in the parenting building that. Because of that. One of which I think is this idea that this case because girls got the same vicious circle that hypersexual that it is possible that they are in is making babies. And those who would listen. Then there is also the point about how black men especially Esten as dangerous. There are people who talk about these memoirs about how example of that in some ways this issue is that as as this person walks by the wall of the windows we have the first natural stuff in flow. I think racism in health services are such better services in general.

[00:20:29] They is not as rapid as is the case. I do think though what lot of stereotypes and myths about race based on african american in men and asking not and therefore limiting the access. So with that in mind what are you calling social workers practitioners policymakers and researchers. What are you calling them to do. I am calling attention to this because I mean especially in social work. We have not paid as much attention in history as we need because again convinced. I challenge us. History on how people live their lives today. For example let me think of that example that lack Maston was belittled denied the challenge of slavery and the crow in either seeing it as dangerously aggressive and masculine or seeing it as an idea blackness is dangerous. The blackness of the speech was Elater either. As good as animalistic Anges are by the of music such as Hambo a boy. So I was in view or was this aggressive dangerous. It was never equal was never natural was never no. And we find the same kind of. This was the economy. That example is dance dance. The bit about the media and majors and deals done sensibly of loopholes which in their words is the larger solution involving the Aborigines. The successful of that because of the laws that axis of wax is winding up. He's one that is limited then sometimes he will cheat on her son us that eventually success. So for example the idea of violence among black men and their involvement in Poland one that when opportunities for social and success as men are caught he bent in other ways.

[00:22:59] The men are men he is by being violent because that is a gender normative experience. That meant that as men are seen as aggressive violent more violent equal than women and other agents in the fall. This idea that when a man can be successful in the traditional way in different rapes you know by being academic concessive by being successful in terms of well there has been those opportunities that got me sometimes. What that means is people using other ways have been

successful as men and in a lot of those. That success is measured by Watson's aggressive aggressiveness and yet that leads us to develop some of the connection. The involvement of black men on the patients bill of rights and racism and that is not just anyone who is violent Wolden but in the larger society in creating that social structure which needs the opportunity and incitement for getting involved and I actually heard that argument related to young women who have limited educational and economic opportunities. There still is the drive to express themselves as women. And so when other opportunities are denied there still always the fallback of motherhood. That's something uniquely feminine or something that women can do and that makes a statement. And so people may ask well why are these teenage girls getting pregnant. Well that is it's one way to show that you're a woman. How big an actualise there is femininity and these are 13. So yeah that's the point. Coming back to the relevance of that to social workers. I think one is paying attention to this history so decline that our compliance that is important is in is based on intersectionality.

[00:25:09] And that is very important. It's not just pork and it's class gender and not just that to pay attention the intersections for example in this case Atlantic invention section masculinity and Blanton's that's all that matters which I think is an audience understand low access. What might be gender mistrust of these words helping us. So I think intervention intersection in the park is something you must not and are white. So I think it's important to acknowledge the idea that legacies of oppression and modernization aren't family act nice that there is this idea which in my opinion is harmful that we are moving post racial out of sight that because we have a president of color. We move away from racism that because a woman can have a job as a professor at a university or as secretary of state we have no way and we are now not through. There's a lot that has been achieved and accomplished. There is a lot that needs to be done and I think it's really important to you're the post operations site and that other post history society. So we appreciate you taking the time out to discuss your work with us. Thank you so much. You've been listening to Alankaar Sharma discuss the intersections of race gender and public health and living proof. If you missed part 1 of this podcast please check out Episode 58 Alankaar Sharma Tuskegee and the Negro Project Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast.

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