How I got into sociolinguistics, and what I'm (still) tryna get out of it

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In this talk, modeled after Labov (1987), I will discuss how I came to graduate with a self-designed undergraduate BA in "Sociolinguistics" in 1971 from UC Santa Cruz, before going on to my MA (1973) and PhD (1979) in Linguistics at Penn.

Researching and "professing" in sociolinguistics for 44 years (1974-80 U of Guyana, 1980-Stanford) has been a fascinating and rewarding career, but as I approach retirement, I find myself still struggling to get something substantial out of it that would make a positive difference in people's lives, something akin to the interest in improving the education of creole speakers that drew me into sociolinguistics in the first place. I still AM interested in educational issues, and will talk a bit about my tutoring an AAVE speaker using the 'versatility' approach of Rickford and Rickford (2018), and the *Reading Road* and *Bounce* materials developed by Labov and his colleagues and students at Penn.   I'll also briefly discuss my ongoing research on poor reading levels in African American communities, and their relation to increasing (re-)segregation, which reverses the achievements of Brown v. Board of Education, 1954. But I have become passionately interested in language, policing, and courtroom justice, especially since my work on Rachel Jeantel's testimony in the Zimmerman trial for the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin (Rickford and King 2016). I'll discuss some of the work that I and others (colleagues, students) have done since then, including the research of Stanford colleagues (Voight et al 2017) on the variable expression of "respect" shown to Black and White motorists stopped by Oakland Police officers wearing body cameras. The newest findings in that research (not yet published) have major implications for understanding how and why escalations to violence and death sometimes occur, so the opportunities it offers for us to help society benefit more from (applied) sociolinguistics are considerable.

References

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Voight, Rob, Nicholas P. Camp, Vinodkumar Prabhakaran, William L. Hamilton, Rebecca C. Hetey, Camilla M. Griffiths, David Jurgens, Dan Jurafsky and Jennifer Eberhardt. (June) 2017. Language from police body camera footage shows racial disparities in officer respect. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences [PNAS]* www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1702413114.