

“Moving Past Time Itself to See Changes Happen”: Faculty Interview with Dominic Walker

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On the corner of Dominic Walker’s desk lies a neat stack of books. Juxtaposed against each other, two of the titles read, “Best of the Best” and “Unequal Childhoods.” These books, decorative elements on an otherwise barren desktop, were a humble display of the larger questions that occupied Walker’s academic research and personal life.

At age 26, Walker, a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Columbia University, is pursuing research on the interwoven systems of privilege that give rise to inequality. Originally from Baltimore, Maryland, Walker draws extensive inspiration from his upbringing in drastically different school systems. Growing up in a single-parent household, Walker first attended a public elementary school in Baltimore, earned a sponsorship to an all-boys Catholic middle school, and then left home to attend a prestigious, all-boys boarding high school in Virginia. With each move, Walker became more acutely aware of the reason for his departure.

“In terms of the prospects for young black boys in Baltimore city, it felt like I needed to leave. And people would tell me to leave—to make it out as soon as I can,” Walker said. Tucked in a wooden seat in his office in Kent Hall, Walker wore a faded gray shirt, with its long sleeves rolled up to his elbow.

He spoke slowly, with pockets of silence in between thoughts.

“It’s something that gives you pause, that the way of reaching success for young black boys in Baltimore city was to leave your neighborhood and leave your family and leave your everything behind,” he said.

The distinct racial, geographical, and socioeconomic makeup of each school introduced Walker to the different ways his peers interacted in social situations and probed him to think more deeply about the root of these disparities. Although his elementary school was predominantly black, Walker did not develop any conscious notion of race, not knowing, in his own words, that his neighborhood was “a very particular place.”

But the further he tried to leave behind his familiar surroundings, the more he began to have questions.

“I noticed race, class, and gender all at once,” Walker said. His middle school, which was completely subsidized, required its students write to their sponsors twice per year. In the process of learning about the school’s financial situation, Walker struggled deeply to understand why the students’ families could not afford the education themselves. “In terms of class dynamic, it was very much clear in our interaction with the teachers that what we were getting were not something we could afford ourselves. Even if we didn’t hear that from our parents, we heard it from the school.”

The confusion he could not articulate culminated in a petition campaign he initiated in an afterschool program—to buy a playground for his school—which was, in retrospect, his first instance of using sociological thinking to battle against systemic inequality in his neighborhood. At the time, in the absence of a playing field, recess everyday very much looked like children running around on asphalt, which was particularly dangerous. The process of making the petition introduced Walker to the embedded, unspoken meaning behind his school’s lack of a playground.

“I started to understand that no one saw it important to invest money on our school to get a playground,” Walker said. “From there, you ask yourself, why is *this* school not important enough for the children to have a playground? And from there, it became clear that it was not a funding priority to sponsor recreation in a safe way for students from lower-income families.”

The experience of petitioning to the city, which resulted in a million-dollar grant, was a cornerstone to which Walker often returned. Today, in deciding to pursue research in sociology and to use knowledge to challenge inequality, Walker often thinks back to that critical moment in his youth when he took it upon himself to stand up for his community.

“The younger version of me didn’t like the idea of ‘role models,’ because I didn’t really like the idea of seeing myself as someone else,” Walker said. “These two spaces—my elementary school and the afterschool program—nurtured me to be a leader the most in my own way. And the

[petition] experience was really powerful, because it took a lot of sticking with it and being able to remain committed to a project. Things don't change easily, especially because people are waiting for you to become disinterested and to move on. Sometimes, you have to move past even time itself to see changes happen."

In pursuit of his ideal to one day transcend the boxes that society prescribed for him—and for those who grew up with similar backgrounds—Walker dedicates much of his time to interacting with children and finds immense joy in the process. Not only did he commit a large portion of his time as an undergraduate student up to 2013 to helping out at a children's camp—a space where he says he can “loosen up and just be goofy”—his current research in sociology, which started in 2015, is also centered on children.

By focusing on a pipeline program that recruits students from New York City public schools and prepares them for private high schools, Walker aims to follow the students during their transition from middle school to high school, essentially creating ethnography.

“It's a bold and ambitious project, because it requires students moving through time and three different spaces,” Walker said. “Methodologically, it's new, because the project focuses on the construction of identity across time. The project has made it more and more clear to me that something is happening that we don't have a language for yet. Sociology has helped me so much in finding a voice, so I wonder, ‘Can I build language now? Can I build a language to help us understand this issue better?’”

Walker aims to build the foundation for this language through the data he will be collecting from interviews with students, their parents, and their teachers at various institutions. Beyond obtaining quantitative figures from interviews, he will be observing the students interact both at school and at home, as well as collecting documents and artifacts—such as mission statements—that help explain the goals of these private institutions. Walker is also considering the possibilities of creating activity-based focus groups, where he asks students to analyze mission statements, which in itself creates social interaction in real time.

As an interdisciplinary project, Walker's research draws from African-American Studies, too, because the larger questions of race and socioeconomic class have been extensively explored in this field since emancipation. For instance, Walker refers to W.E.B. Du Bois's more literary-focused texts on the concept of "double-consciousness," using the notion as a framework to think about ways to reconcile an identity that is both American and black.

"It's an area of research that is still very young, but in some ways my research in sociology is about my life—in the lives of other kids going through similar situations." Walker said. "I'm trying to begin a conversation on what are we doing with schools: why there is a phenomenon of sending kids off to get cultural, social, and academic education from institutions that make demands on their *identity*? What do we mean when we say 'getting educated' in the U.S. context, and what are its consequences for black and brown students?"