

Professor sees optimism in prejudice research

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(PhysOrg.com) -- It is a question on many Americans' minds: Is the United States ready for a black president, or will deep-rooted and even unconscious prejudices show at the polls? For Patricia Devine, a UW-Madison psychology professor who researches prejudice, the answer isn't black and white.

"Your conscious mind might tell you to vote for [Obama], but in the privacy of the election booth your unconscious biases may vote differently," Devine says.

However, Devine holds out when she reflects on the outcome of the election. "It remains to be seen but, cautiously, I think America is ready."

It is Devine's rare and constant optimism in people that during the past two decades has changed the field of prejudice psychology.

"Extensive amounts of research have demonstrated the prevalence of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, but where others saw mere statistics, Trish saw an opportunity. The premise upon which much of her research is based is that people desire to be good," says Laura Sheets, one of Devine's students and lab assistants. "In her personality, lectures and research, Trish consistently conveys this message of optimism."

In the 1980s, when equal rights were beginning to become a cultural norm, many pessimistic researchers thought people who responded that

they were non-prejudiced but then acted with bias were simply liars. Devine trusted the people's responses and embarked on journey to find out why people want to free themselves of prejudice but unconsciously act with bias.

"I felt like I was this lone voice in the field saying 'you can trust what people say about their values,' but everybody was incredibly suspicious. There was this clarion call to not trust people's verbal reports because they are going to lie because it is socially acceptable to be non-prejudiced. I thought that was incredibly cynical," Devine says. "It turns out that the work I was doing changed the direction of the field. It caused people to step up and take notice."

Devine started her research as a graduate student at Ohio State University, moving to UW-Madison in 1985 to become an associate professor. She has spent almost 25 years working to put together what she calls her "prejudice puzzle."

The first puzzle piece was the difference between controlled or conscious and automatic or unconscious responses. In the '80s, when prejudice was the domain of social psychology, Devine used cognitive psychology research on intentional versus unintentional responses to explain why people will respond with controlled non-prejudiced answers when they have time to process questions, but will have automatic biased actions without processing time.

First, individuals took surveys to show their conscious level of prejudice. Then they took an Implicit Association Test (IAT), a picture/word association test that asks participants to respond as quickly as possible to whether a face or image or phrase is good or bad.

For example, participants will show black and white faces with objectively good or bad words, such as joy and agony, and will have to

decide as quickly as possible if the face or word is good or bad. Eighty percent of participants showed a preference toward white faces as "good," even though most reported being non-prejudiced.

Devine explains that these biased automatic responses in IATs come from a socialization process that encourages prejudice.

"[Prejudice] is the legacy of our socialization experiences. We all learn these stereotypes and have these biases at the ready whether we condone them or not, whether we think they are good or not, and as a result the immediate reaction is a biased one," Devine explains. "If you are going to respond in nonbiased ways, you have to gain control or override the automatically activated stereotypic response and instead respond in these thoughtful deliberate ways that might represent your personal values."

It is this connection between cognitive versus automatic responses that Devine made in 1989 that changed the paradigm in her field and is cited more than 1,200 times in other research.

"It is almost impossible not to bump into Devine's research — be it an introductory psychology textbook or in other researchers' scholarly publications," says UW-Madison psychology professor Morton Gernsbacher. "What's most remarkable is that Devine's groundbreaking work of the late 1980s and early 1990s has stood the test of time. The findings have been repeatedly replicated, and they have served as a mighty catalyst for further investigation."

Devine explains that eliminating prejudice is like breaking a habit — in the same way that she had to consciously stop biting her nails as a child, people who want to break the prejudice habit every day have to be aware of their own internal prejudice.

"[Eliminating prejudice] is a process. Making that decision is the first

step, but then what you have to do is put some effort into it," Devine says. "Just making the decision doesn't mean you wake up one day, stretch and say 'I'm not prejudiced,' because you have got this whole socialization experience that you grew up with."

To support her view that people with conflicting responses are not liars, Devine broke up participants into two groups: high prejudice and low prejudice. The key difference between the two groups is that high-prejudice people will respond with prejudice and not have internal conflict, but low-prejudice people who respond with prejudice feel guilty afterward.

This guilt, what Devine calls prejudice with compunction, is the key to eliminating prejudice.

"When people's values conflicted, what I predicted is that if they were sincere in their non-prejudicial beliefs, they would feel guilty and self-critical and they would hold themselves accountable," Devine says. "When given a chance, [low-prejudice] people tried to learn from mistakes, tried to absorb material and at the next opportunity when prejudice was possible, they responded in a fair and unbiased way."

By the mid-'90s, Devine was known as a prejudice expert on campus. As UW-Madison began its no-tolerance-for-prejudice policy, Devine was asked to speak to incoming freshmen during orientation. The professor remembers seeing two reactions from the students in the audience. First, clenched jaws and fists from students who resented having to listen to an anti-prejudice speech. And second, students pulling away from the presentation, fearing they would unintentionally be one of these prejudiced people.

Devine knew this was not the way to reach students, so she began to research student motivation for non-prejudiced behavior and how

students could be better reached.

In addition to IAT, Devine used startle-eye blink tests, which places sensors on participants' eyes and then measures their automatic startled-blink response to different faces. Once again the tests proved discrepancies between the reported and automatic response. But what Devine was interested in was the motivations behind the controlled responses.

Devine found that people have both internal motivations (personal values and standards) and external motivations (pressure from society) to act without bias. Through her research, Devine has learned people can be internally motivated, externally motivated or both internally and externally motivated with no correlation between the motivations.

Her research has also shown that it is only the internal motivations that allow people to act without bias in both controlled and automatic responses. People who are externally motivated or internally and externally motivated respond without prejudice on explicit self-report measures but respond in biased ways on implicit measures that do not allow for control over responses.

By knowing the different motivations of individuals, professionals can try to eliminate prejudice via different methods.

"High internal/high external individuals are not good at responding without bias so what they need is help learning to respond without bias. They already have the motivation; we need to give them the skills," Devine says. "For the high external individuals, we need to create internal motivation. That is what will rid them of prejudice over time."

Devine's latest research shows external motivation pushes can cause negative backlash in society, especially on college campuses.

"The low internal/high external individuals, on a campus like this, receive a lot of pressure, and not in a gentle way. People say 'The way you think is wrong and people who like you are stupid.' You start to get irritated and you push the message away," Devine says. "That is one of the things I worry about: backlash. The harder non-prejudiced norms are pushed on them, the more they cement their walls of resistance. For such individuals, reducing prejudice requires finding ways to crack those walls of resistance."

Devine has won numerous awards from her colleagues at UW-Madison and from the American Psychological Association, including the Distinguished Scientific Award for Early Career Contribution to Social/Personality Psychology Award. But in addition to her research, Devine's dedication to teaching has also been rewarded by UW-Madison, UW System and the American Psychological Association.

In addition to teaching both undergraduate and graduate classes, Devine also runs one of the most popular psychology labs in the department. An average of 25 students per semester participate in the lab, many continuing to do prejudice work into graduate school and beyond.

As for Devine, although the possibility of a black president shows a growth in prejudice reduction, she sees 25 more years of puzzle-fitting in her future.

"I couldn't have expected this puzzle because it is an ever-evolving process. I started with a set of ideas and did the best to test them but the results often challenge me and made me go in new directions," Devine says. "The end of the puzzle will only really be when we understand why people are prejudiced and when people learn to rid themselves of prejudice."

Provided by UW-Madison

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