Breaking the Prejudice Habit

U. of Wisconsin psychologist wins notice for her research into the process of overcoming bias

By Ellen K. Coughlin

Patricia G. Devine came by her interest in stereotypes early, when she realized that to a lot of people, she was the product of having an Irish surname and seven siblings. And, yes, she was raised a Catholic.

Now a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, she has turned her personal interest into professional gold. For more than a decade, she has studied the psychological processes of stereotyping and prejudice. Specifically, her research addresses questions about why people who should be considered the same sometimes behave in prejudiced ways, and how they can overcome those biases.

ATTENTION AND AWARDS

At the time that her work came along—she did her graduate research at the Ohio State University in the early 1980s—the prevailing notion in psychology was that such people probably were not as tolerant as they claimed; they simply were biased in subtle ways. As long as there were stereotypes, a lot of experts said, there would be prejudice.

Something about that didn’t sound right to Ms. Devine. “It just didn’t square with my experience,” she says.

Over the last dozen years, she has assembled a variety of evidence suggesting that prejudice is not inevitable. Instead, as she likes to put it, prejudice is like a bad habit—automatically activated in certain circumstances, but capable of being broken with conscious effort.

That insight has won her the attention of her peers and several awards. The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues has honored her twice in the re- search described in her dissertation and in one of her earliest and most frequently cited papers. In August, she received an award from the American Psychological Association for a distinguished body of work by a young scholar.

“There are a few dissertations that come along that really reorient a field. Her dissertation was one of those,” says Susan T. Fiske, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and one of the judges for the award. “It was an odd combination of being obvious once you hear it and being completely path-breaking.”

INDIRECT INDICATORS OF RACISM

Stereotypes and prejudice have been major topics of psychological research for many years. Following the upheaval of the civil rights movement, however, race became such a sensitive matter in the United States that psychologists hesitated to investigate racial prejudice directly, assuming that subjects would be inclined to provide only socially acceptable responses.

Instead, some researchers began to measure indirect indicators of bias—like eye contact or body language. Studies of such relatively unconscious behaviors suggest that even people who say they are not prejudiced often exhibit racial bias. Such findings seem to support what a lot of people think: that in the post-civil rights era, racism is no less prevalent, only less overt.

Ms. Devine takes a more optimistic view. She acknowledges that she does not know what prompts some people, and not others, to try to overcome their biases, and her research does not address that. But she believes there are individuals for whom being unprejudiced is an important value, and she is inclined to take them at their word.

“It can’t be that all prejudiced responses are either repressed or relegated to the unconscious, and that people’s verbal reports really have no validity whatsoever,” she says.

It was in that seed of doubt that Ms. Devine found her dissertation topic. She reasoned that people carry around with them certain cultural stereotypes, which are automatically activated when they encounter a representative of a stereotyped group. She calls this the “default response” and argues that in the first, unthinking instant, it tends to be the same in both “high-prejudiced” and “low-prejudiced” people. Given time and the ability to consider the situation, however, people who are relatively unprejudiced will be able to get past the stereotype and respond without bias.

Demonstrating that people do, indeed, have what she calls “automatic” and “controlled” responses to stereotypes was what formed the core of her dissertation. Many researchers found her model of “stereotype activation” compelling, and it quickly became influential in the field.

Ms. Fiske of Massachusetts, who also specializes in research on stereotypes, says the implications for laypeople are just as compelling. “One thing you get from Trish’s work is that you have a self-concept as an unprejudiced person and you have a knee-jerk, stereotypical reaction to somebody; it’s not necessarily a reason to kick yourself. It’s what you do with that that’s important.”

“What you do with that” has been the theme of all of Ms. Devine’s subsequent research. Working with her graduate students at Wisconsin, she has investigated how people feel after they have had a clearly prejudiced response to someone, whether they can make use of those feelings to change their future behavior, and how those feelings play out in specific interper- sonal encounters.

THE AMERICAN DILEMMA?

Her experiments have focused both on racial prejudice and on bias against homosexuals, but it is in race relations that her work is considered particularly important. The citation accompanying her award from the A.P.A. took special note of the light her research sheds on “contemporary manifestations of the American dilemma.”

In a series of studies that she did with Margot J. Montemay, Julia R. Zuverink, and Andrew J. Elliot, for example, research subjects (in this case, white undergraduates) were presented with several scenari-
Can the Habit of Prejudice Be Broken?

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are inevitable. "Those were the best ideas I had in 1989," she says. "I never expected that they were the answer." What does seem to surprise her is all the attention her research has received, even outside the discipline. She gets letters from people who have come across her work and tell her, in effect, that they now understand their own reactions better. A couple of years ago, she says, she got an e-mail message from a student at Wisconsin describing how she had learned in another class coincidentally had been assigned Ms. Devine's 1989 paper and had been chagrined about it the previous evening. "They were just talking on the phone as two friends and found that paper interesting and relevant enough to talk about it," she says. "When I learned that, I thought, 'That's cool.'"