Transcript

Title: Jessica Good on the Ups and Downs of Multiculturalism
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Chris Martin: I'm Chris Martin and this is Half Hour of Heterodoxy. My guest today is Jessica Good. She's a social psychologist at Davidson College in North Carolina. She received her PhD in social psychology from Rutgers University in 2011 and has taught at Davidson since then. Her research focuses on stereotyping and discrimination. I invited her to the show to talk about her new paper on multiculturalism, which is a contentious topic and the political world in academia. Her new paper is called "Valuing Differences and Reinforcing Them: Multiculturalism increases race essentialism". Her co-authors on this paper are Lee Wilton, who's the first author, at Skidmore College, and Evan Applebaum. Her paper itself is not in the public domain, but there's an article in Pacific Standard that summarizes the paper and you can find the link to that article in the show notes.

Chris Martin: Hi Jess.

Jessica Good: Good morning!

Chris Martin: How are things at the Davidson?

Jessica Good: I got it. It's a little rainy this morning, but should be shaping up to be a nice day. How about you?

Chris Martin: Things are good here, might be a little rainy today. I still remember my summers at Davidson. I spent two summers there working at the library and made good friends with the mosquitoes.

Jessica Good: Yes, it's unescapable. [laughter]

Chris Martin: So, we're here to talk about your new paper about multiculturalism and its upsides and downsides. For a lay audience, can you describe multiculturalism and two ideologies that people often contrast it with, colorblindness and polyculturalism?

Jessica Good: Sure! So, there's a long history associated with these ideologies, but kind of in a nutshell: Multiculturalism is the idea that in diverse interactions we should emphasize and find value in the different social groups that people bring to the table. So, sometimes multiculturalism is operationalized as kind of a valuing differences or emphasizing differences approach, and it's contrasted with colorblindness which I think people tend to be a little more familiar with. But colorblindness is the idea that we should not emphasize differences. And in contrast, think about similarities between people, treat people as sort of exactly the same, exactly equal be blind to the differences between individuals. And those two have really received the bulk of the attention in the psychological literature. In other disciplines, polyculturalism has had greater attention paid to it, but it's the idea that we

should think about interconnections between racial groups. So kind of historical and cultural ways that social groups overlap and have influenced each other, so emphasizing kind of a lack of pure social groups.

Chris Martin: So, would it be fair to say multiculturalism tends to conceive of cultures as sort of like unique spices and a spice rack where each spice is unique and cannot be replaced by something else, but also is valuable in itself?

Jessica Good: Yeah, I think that's a great analogy that multiculturalism says, hey, my group is different from your group, and yet together, we can create something special, you know, particularly tasty, perhaps that even that is better than we could do alone.

Chris Martin: So now, with this particular paper, you were tackling one downside of multiculturalism. Can you talk about what inspired the study?

Jessica Good: Those of us who do work in this area are aware that, although overall the bulk of the literature suggests that multiculturalism is sort of the better superior ideology tends to lead to more positive outcomes. It's not without some negative outcomes as well. And we had all been doing research on diversity philosophies, kind of independently and came together to think about what are some possible negative consequences of multiculturalism. Because the bulk of the literature suggests this is the preferred ideology over color blindness in particular I'd say. And so we started thinking about race essentialism as a potential negative outcome and we are not the first to think about this idea, but we didn't find that had been tested before in the literature.

So, race essentialism is the idea or the belief that racial differences are innate and immutable, so racial category memberships tell us important information about people in those categories. And essentialism is associated with negative outcomes like increased explicit and implicit racial bias, and stereotyping. And so at first glance, it doesn't seem like race essentialism, which overall people would consider negative, would be associated with multiculturalism what people tend to consider positive. But as we started thinking about the ways in which multiculturalism emphasizes differences between people, so it says, well, in order to value these differences between racial groups, we have to emphasize that these differences do exist and that it might carry with it this belief in kind of the inherent or essential qualities of racial group membership. And so, that's what got us started in testing this idea.

Chris Martin: And you contrasted it with color blindness, is that correct?

Jessica Good: Correct!

Chris Martin: Okay. And so with colorblindness, you found that people had lower scores on racial essentialism and that was measured with items like "people who are born of one race generally cannot change the race they're in," or "people who are one race will always be that race." Is that correct?

Jessica Good: That's correct, yeah. So, the flip side of essentialism would be understanding kind of the social constructionism of race.

Chris Martin: Okay. So, the message behind this paper seems to be that there really is no one philosophy or one ideology that works in all situations, but the answer is moderated. Is there other research going on about what the moderators are?

Jessica Good: Yes. So, sometimes a moderator might be context. You could think about situations in which a blind policy might be preferred. So this is, you know, going kind of beyond the research, but think about a gender blind policy. Well, in hiring that might be a positive thing, but in healthcare might be a negative thing. Right? So certain situational context can influence whether a colorblind or multicultural approach might be best, and then also our social group membership. So there's work finding that multiculturalism might be most effective for racial minority participants and white participants who are already low in racial bias, but it can backfire with white participants who are high in racial bias where they're going to reject that view and actually exhibit higher bias in response.

Chris Martin: Okay, now have people try to instantiate these ideologies and corporations and also found similar effects. In other words, your experiment was in the lab, but is there any generalizable evidence that this might be happening in the world?

Jessica Good: So there is some work, and this is extending a little bit beyond mine, but this is the work by Evan, looking at the types of diversity statements that corporations will publicly post, and so he's looking at kind of the way that, I believe he's looking at law firms and to the extent that they emphasize multiculturalism or colorblindness and when they emphasize multiculturalism, they tend to have lower attrition among white women, but emphasizing colorblindness tends to have lower attrition among people of color.

Chris Martin: So, is Evan also studying polyculturalism or are any of your colleagues looking into that whether the idea that culture is influence each other. So, there's no such thing as one pure culture, something in opposition to the spice rack metaphor, whether that ideology is being instantiated anywhere by any kind of corporation.

Jessica Good: I don't know. I don't know whether Evan is working on that. I am not directly working on polyculturalism and I think one of the challenges has to do with realistically implementing polyculturalism in a corporate or educational setting. So it's often talked about in educational setting and you could see how in history, curriculum, art, English, things like that, it would fit really well to talk about kind of historical interconnections between racial groups and cultural groups and how those groups have influenced each other over time. It's a little more challenging to think about how polyculturalism would be implemented easily and in a corporate or educational setting beyond those sort of typical disciplines. So for example, I have an NSF grant right now where I'm looking at the way instructors use either a colorblind or multicultural philosophy in science and math classrooms and how that impacts the performance of women underrepresented minorities in STEM.

And one of the pieces of feedback that I get from instructors a lot is that in teaching a science course, they say, well how am I going to talk about diversity at all? It's just chemistry here, it's just physics, right, there's no opening to talk about social group memberships and representation in historical overlap and things like that. So, I don't know of work that's happening right now on polyculturalism. That doesn't mean it's not happening, but I'm not aware of it. And I think part of it has to do with just kind of feasibility of implementing that in kind of a quick intervention either educationally or in a corporate setting.

Chris Martin: I've seen something similar when you read papers on polyculturalism, you often find examples from the world of the arts, dance, music, painting, that sort of thing. Or you find examples related to food and cuisine, but it's often hard to find examples that related to science and engineering and I'm sure they're out there somewhere, but it is pretty hard.

Jessica Good: Absolutely! And some of the work on polyculturalism, you could think about positive prior interactions and connections between racial and cultural groups and you can certainly think of some negative prior interactions and connections as well. And to my understanding whether or not it's necessary, it's sort of superficial to only talk about positive, you know, historical connections. So is it sufficient to balance positive and negative, or if we only highlight negative prior interactions and connections, is that going to still create the same positive outcomes that we would hope to find with polyculturalism?

Chris Martin: There's one downside that you just mentioned about polyculturalism, which is that you might have to gloss over the negative interactions. Are there any other downsides to it or is there any situation where it's actually worse than multiculturalism or colorblindness?

Jessica Good: I don't know, and I would say that's not probably because the work in the psychological literature comparing polyculturalism to multiculturalism and colorblindness is really not there yet. The bulk of the work really compares colorblindness and multiculturalism. They're definitely, so I've just submitted a paper actually with a colleague of mine, Kim Bourne and where we're looking at how positivity influences the way that multiculturalism and colorblindness are received. So one of the most common ways that these two diversity philosophies are operationalized is with kind of these essays that participant read as they did in the paper that we're talking about today. And the multicultural essay tends to be rated more positively than the colorblind essay.

So, Kim and I have been conducting a series of studies where we're looking at whether – when diversity philosophy or ideology is confounded with positivity, does that influence the overall results that we might get when exposing people to those two diversity philosophies. And we find that in a lot of literature, multiculturalism is inherently viewed as more positive than colorblindness. And so that may or may not explain why multicultural tends to have more positive effects in terms of reducing bias and greater engagement.

Chris Martin: Tell me a bit about your future research on these ideologies?

Jessica Good: So right now, I'm about to launch some data collection where we are recruiting students from across the country. [Inaudible 12:42] as they're entering college first year students and we're having them take an online science and math course; so chemistry, physics, math. And the instructor will espouse either a colorblind or a multicultural classroom management policy. So when thinking about how students should interact with each other in their classroom, they will promote similarities or promote differences. And then students will proceed to take an online course and complete a comprehension test, and measures of belonging, validation, and perceived bias of the instructor. And the goal is to see whether instructors can make small changes to the way that they explicitly talk about diversity in their classroom that might promote greater feelings of belonging for underrepresented students and whether that might in turn lead to greater persistence and greater performance in STEM classes.

Chris Martin: And who are you collaborating with on that study?

Jessica Good: So, that is part of an NSF grant that I have right now. And I've been fortunate to involve several undergraduate students in my work. So, as you know, as a graduate of Davidson, it's an undergraduate institution and so the focus is really on involving students in the research process and showing them kind of firsthand what it means to be a psychologist, to be a researcher. And so right now, I have a lab Manager, Kim Bourne who's working with me, as well as a handful of students who've been ongoing on the project.

Chris Martin: Well, before we jumped to a different topic, how are you measuring belonging? Is it mostly through self-report scales?

Jessica Good: In this instance, it's self-report. So I'm trying to get a national representative sample of students. Again, being at Davidson, I'm in a small town in North Carolina and so I don't have access to in person a lot of entering college students. So I'm recruiting online which means I need to use kind of self-report for belonging at this point.

Chris Martin: Now, apart from the NSF grant, do you have any other projects in the works?

Jessica Good: So apart from work on diversity philosophies, I do work on confronting, and so I've been working with Julie Whittaker and Kim Bourne. We've been looking at what people want to get out of an interaction when they confront racism or sexism, and then what they do get out of the interaction. So we've been at this point, surveying people to find out, hey, when you have confronted or when you've personally been confronted, how did you respond? How did you want the other person to respond? Is there a match there in terms of, you know, I hope to get this outcome and the outcome that I received or I wanted to respond to being confronted this way, but here's how we actually did respond. So it hasn't been a lot of work on how people respond to being confronted and that's kind of the direction that we're exploring right now.

Chris Martin: Is there some kind of typology of confrontation strategies out there. So you can look at confront or a particular type of confrontation and say, okay, that's type A, type B.

Jessica Good: I would not say that there's consensus on a particular typology. I mean certain researchers have used various coding strategies when we're looking at their data, but I wouldn't say there's kind of a widely accepted typology. And even in terms of what constitutes a confrontation in experimental research, looking at evaluating confronter, things like that, confrontation is usually a pretty explicit verbal response of saying that's racist or that sexist or you know, that's inappropriate, something like that. But in practice, people might use much more subtle confrontation strategies to try to minimize embarrassment or conflict or other kind of interpersonal negative outcomes. And so, I don't even know that there is consensus about what would necessarily constitute a confrontation. I think people define that pretty differently.

Chris Martin: So, you remind me of Mike McCullough' work on – Mike McCullough and Everett Worthington work. Everett is at VCU, I'm not sure where Mike is, but they do work on forgiveness and relationship maintenance, and why some people forgive and why some people try to enact revenge, and it often has to do with how long you want the relationship to last or whether you're invested in the relationship, so I can imagine that people are very invested in our relationship and it's a small infraction, they might not confront at all. Whereas if it's moderate to large, but they're invested at and they still want to be friends with the person they do confront, but at that point it varies a bit depending on their personal style and whether they're willing to end the relationship completely.

Jessica Good: Right! So how severe the offenses whether this is the workplace, so within your family, your interpersonal relationships, whether you're going to have to continue to see that person and/or wanted to interact with that person long term, or whether this is just a one off comment that someone on the street may to you, you're going to react pretty differently to that.

Chris Martin: You have some sense of how often these confrontations are even happening in the real world?

Jessica Good: Less often than they happen in the lab. So there's definitely work suggesting that people in sort of scenario studies, people overestimate their likelihood of confronting in comparison to if you actually put them in that situation, they're much less likely to confront and confronting rates tend to be low when we're talking about research that directly puts people in a racist or sexist situation, and when we're talking about retrospective research that asks people to kind of recall their past experiences of racism or sexism in what they did, confronting rates tend to be low.

Chris Martin: I think there might be some interesting cross cultural variation here. I'm from India and in India there's more power distance, so it's actually easier for a boss to confront their employees, probably in other countries too. So, you do have a boss who's sensitive to these issues. They're probably less likely to suppress their emotions and say, well, this is an egalitarian work environment and maybe I shouldn't step on that person's toes. So even a power distance has some downsides, I think one of the upsides to kind of like the army where just the people at the top do you have good values, they can be very direct about enforcing those values.

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Jessica Good: Yes, in fact, Leslie Ash Bernardo has some work looking at power differentials in the workplace. And so the corollary to what you just said, so employees are less likely to confront their boss, someone who has power over them for doing something inappropriate as opposed to confronting a coworker, someone at their same level. So if you've got a boss with great values, they might be able to confront employees working under them, which would be great. But if you've got a boss that is doing inappropriate activities or making offensive statements, their employees probably feel less comfortable confronting that person.

Chris Martin: And I think the words you use might matter too, because the word racist has a very strong stigma associated with it. I think John McWhorter said like in this day and age, calling someone a racist, it's like calling them a child molester. It's still very young accusation. I can imagine that sometimes actually not using the word racist might be more effective. Do you see any harm, is there any research supporting that idea?

Jessica Good: So Julie Whittaker, she's at Washington University. She has some work recently that she's got that's putting people into a situation where a confederate says something sexist and looks to see how they respond and no one's said, they anticipated they would say like that sexist, but no one actually did label it as sexism. Instead, they said, oh, that's interesting that you mentioned gender, and it kind of left it there. Right? So they sort of brought it up but didn't explicitly label it or label the person certainly as a sexist. So I think there are ways that people try to kind of subtly confront or emphasize that they don't necessarily agree with what was just said, or they want that person to check their behavior a bit without labeling someone, because that can come off, that can make someone really defensive if someone says you're sexist or you're racist, immediately you're going to put up this wall, I'm in defense.

Chris Martin: It reminds me a bit of relationship research where stonewalling is a problem. It's one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse John Gottman calls it, so I guess you call someone racist that could initiate stonewalling on the other person's side and then you have no progress there. So that sounds like interesting research [inaudible 21:20] myself on inclusion and diversity, so I'm looking into using a work from John Gottman to see if that can help people in dyadic interactions working in dyads and groups and classes, and so maybe for dyads, some of that helps. So in terms of polyculturalism, would you say it's – you said it's not researched that much in social psych and what disciplines are people paying a lot of attention to it?

Jessica Good: It has been written about more within educational context and thinking about kind of incorporating cultural curriculum into schools. It's been sort of history or sociology. I think the difficulty of cleanly and quickly instituting some kind of polycultural intervention is what has led it to not take hold within social psych as clearly. But this could be my own ignorance as well as of the research that's going on and it hasn't come out yet looking at polyculturalism, and so perhaps as people are getting more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism and colorblindness that people will start to investigate polyculturalism being to some extent a blend of the two.

Chris Martin: Is there any other research project in the works apart from the two you've already talked about that you'd like to talk about?

Jessica Good: No, I mean, at the moment, I'm in year two of this grant and so that tends to our biggest focus is trying to investigate how people are talking about diversity in the classroom and whether that has any impact on students, you know, feelings of belonging, their retention in STEM, whether there's a way that we could use what we know about diversity philosophies to help instructors who are well intentioned, and who want to promote, you know, an environment in their classroom that facilitates success for all students. And how we could help them think about ways to signal inclusivity, signal belonging for their students who might be feeling threatened in those contexts.

Chris Martin: Well, thanks for being on the show.

Jessica Good: Thanks Chris. I appreciate it.

Chris Martin: You can find out more about Jess at Davidson College homepage and you can reach her by email at jegood@davidson.edu. My next guest on the show is Rob Quinn. He's the executive director of Scholars at Risk. In September, I'll have two episodes, one with Jason Stanley about his new book on fascism, and another with Jon Haidt and Greg Lukianoff about their new book, "The Coddling of the American mind". The show was produced by Heterodox Academy. You can learn more about us at heterodoxacademy.org. And you can follow us on Facebook and twitter. Our twitter handle is hdxacademy.

Thanks for listening!

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