

# AHA Advocate Talk: Margo Monteith



**Could you take us down your journey into psychology and how you ended up teaching at Purdue University?**

I received my BA in psychology (also majored in sociology and minored in English) at Minnesota State University (then Moorhead State University) in 1986, and my Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December of 1991. I started my first academic position as an assistant professor after that at Texas Tech University. I was there two years and liked the university, department, and my colleagues, but I did not want to “settle down” in that area of the country. I applied selectively to jobs in 1994 and was hired at the University of Kentucky. I stayed there until 2006 (going from assistant to associate to full professor), and in 2006 I accepted a position in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Purdue University.

**Your focus is within stereotyping and prejudice. Your work begins with the proposition that prejudice responses often occur due to unintentional or unconscious influences. What does this mean and could you give us a few examples?**

Our minds are built to categorize in order to simplify the world, which includes the formation of social categories. Traits and evaluative associations (e.g., *good* or *bad*) become “marked out” and associated with social categories through social learning (e.g., the media) and other basic

cognitive and social processes. The associative processes that give rise to trait and evaluative pairings with social categories (e.g., gender, race) do not care about the truth value of the associations. These associations are easily acquired and at early ages, and they lay the foundation for the automatic activation of bias. For instance, a White child may see Blacks paired with violence and so have feelings of negativity and fear and constructs related to violence activated whenever s/he sees Blacks, and without intention or conscious awareness of their activation. Of course, once activated, the constructs can influence responses (e.g., avoid or run away from other Black children). These readily acquired associations are not easily replaced or overridden by conscious thought processes.

**Your work on proneness to prejudice-related discrepancies has led to the development of an instrument that can be used for measuring prejudice-related discrepancies. Could you expand upon this instrument and how and what it detects?**

The Should-Would Discrepancy Questionnaire has two components: 1) A measure of Woulds: Participants imagine themselves in various situations where they may have biased responses and indicate the extent to which they believe they *would* respond with bias in the situation. For example, one item asks about crossing the street when a Black man is approaching. Would you do this? 2) A measure of Shoulds: Participants imagine themselves in the same situations but this time indicate the extent to which they *should* have the biased responses. Should you cross the street? A participant might indicate a 6 on the would item (I likely would cross the street) but a 2 on the should item (really, I should not cross the street). We take the difference between each should and would rating for each situation described and sum these differences across items to yield an overall discrepancy score. This score indicates the extent to which people realize that they have responses toward the outgroup that are more negative than they personally believe is appropriate. When many people think about these discrepancies, they experience feelings of negative self-directed affect (i.e., discrepancy-associated negative affect). They are disappointed in themselves; they know they do not want to respond with prejudice, and yet they do.

**What are some of the ways people can overcome subtle forms of bias and or how can people work on deconstructing the processes that frequently give rise to prejudice responses?**

The discrepancy-associated affect I mentioned above is very important for instigating self-regulatory processes that facilitate people's ability to eventually learn how to inhibit and control their biased responses. When people catch themselves in their own bias (e.g., for Whites, laughing at a joke that plays on stereotypes; clutching their purse or wallet just because a Black person is present) and feel guilty, the mind naturally notes stimuli that were present when these discrepant responses occurred. For example, one White student described to me a situation

where he held on tight to his wallet and ipod in an elevator because there were a couple of Black guys in the elevator too. The Black guys turned out to be really friendly and invited him to a game of basketball, and the White guy ended up feeling really bad about his initial reaction. This experience caused the White person to associate stimuli present – such as being in an elevator or being alone with other Black men -- with his discrepant response and the negative feelings he had about his discrepant response. Consequently, these stimuli can act as triggers to the brain to slow down and “think twice” before doing something prejudiced in future, similar situations. This is a way to learn how to de-automatize one’s prejudiced and stereotypical responses, so that non-biased responses can be provided instead. My research shows that this strategy works very well for people, that people can be effectively trained to use this strategy, and that it ultimately helps to train the brain with new, unbiased automatic associations.

**Within your research you have also focused on looking at the minority perspective. It is often times that we as a society look at the racial attitudes of whites, but seldom do we look at the side of minorities. What did you find within this research? You also are working on researching the concept of out-group favoritism effect? Could you expand on what that means?**

Minorities frequently get the same simple lessons from the media and their social environment as non-minorities that provide the building blocks for negative implicit biases in relation to their own groups. For instance, many Blacks are well aware of the negative stereotypes of their group from a young age. Even if they do not personally believe these stereotypes to be true, they might be automatically activated and influence Black people’s responses in the same way as Whites are influenced. This can result in an actual outgroup preference effect, where more positive associations are held in relation to Whites than to Blacks among Black individuals. We have found that the extent to which Blacks hold these outgroup favoring preferences predicts a couple of important outcomes. First, it has predicted preference for a White over a Black partner to complete an intellectually challenging task. This would be like me finding something wrong with a woman running, let’s say, for president. I may consciously believe that females can be effective leaders, even of our country, but when it comes down to making a choice, the woman may just not “feel right.” This is likely because I have automatically activated preferences for male leaders over female leaders. A second finding we have obtained with Black participants suggests those who are more prone to the outgroup favoritism effect experience lower levels of psychological well-being (e.g., lower feelings of life satisfaction, greater depression). Seeing the world through lenses that disfavor one’s own group is a difficult personal reality.

**An important issue, that is not often examined is what happens when people are confronted for having such prejudices about people. What has your research shown so far and how does your research suggest how people act?**

My research indicates that people generally do not like to be confronted about their prejudicial biases, and they are not fond of confronters, but that confrontations are effective getting people to curb their subsequent biases. Confrontations are very important for two reasons. First, they help to increase the salience of norms against responding in biased ways, which ultimately encourages people to stop behaving in biased ways. Second, they make people aware of biases that otherwise may have gone undetected. Have you ever responded in a biased way but not realized it? Many people have, and so confrontations can be useful learning tools, particularly if they are conducted in a non-threatening manner. However, an important thing to note is that people who are not members of stigmatized groups are much more effective confronters than people who are members of stigmatized groups. For example, when men confront sexism or Whites confront racism, they will promote more prejudice reduction than when women confront sexism or Blacks confront racism. This is because members of stigmatized groups are regarded as overly sensitive and “just complaining.” So people should keep this in mind and do their best to promote non-biased environments by confronting on the behalf of stigmatized group members.

### **What recent news article made you squirm or angry?**

There are articles daily ... from the last couple of days:

A man who slapped a 19month old boy who was crying on a Delta Air lines flight. The toddler was Black, and the man yelled “shut that n-word toddler baby up” before slapping him in the face.

A man who was granted a request that no African American nurses care for his (White) child in the hospital.

### **If you could sit down with any activist, alive or passed away, who would it be and why?**

Maya Angelou – She is an absolutely amazing woman with remarkable life experiences. She is a civil rights activist, poet, novelist, educator, filmmaker – a “Renaissance woman.” She was born in the late 1920s and experienced pre-civil rights American racism, was active in the Civil Rights Movement with and helped Martin Luther King Jr. She is a strong voice for equality, while maintaining expressions of faith and peace. She captures the problem of prejudice as only a poet can, as in the following quote: “The plague of racism is insidious, entering into our minds as smoothly and quietly and invisibly as floating airborne microbes enter into our bodies to find lifelong purchase in our bloodstreams.”