

Democracy's College Podcast

Episode 36: Implicit Bias and Policy Practices in Higher Education

Announcer: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P through 20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu. In this episode, Krystal Andrews of OCCRL talks with Dr. Penny Pasque about implicit bias and policy practices in higher education. Dr. Pasque is a professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University.

Host Krystal Andrews: On this episode of Democracy's College, I have the distinct pleasure of speaking with Dr. Penny Pasque, a professor of educational studies at The Ohio State University, where she serves as the director of qualitative methods in the Data Access and Analysis Core in the Office of Research, Innovation, and Collaboration within the College of Education and Human Ecology. Thank you, Dr. Pasque, for sitting down and having a conversation with me today.

Dr. Penny Pasque: Yes, I'm glad to be here.

Host Krystal Andrews: To get us started, let's talk about what drives your passion for the work that you do around implicit bias. So specifically discuss how you define implicit bias?

Dr. Penny Pasque:



I think it's always been a part of what I've been interested in growing up, whether it was in high school or through college and as a young person. And then, I don't know that I could always *name* the words implicit bias or what it meant, how it felt in the world. But then when I was trained as an intergroup dialogue grad assistant at University of Michigan, I was able to start to put language and definitions to the work that I was doing around race, class, gender, gender expression, LGBTQ issues, all the ability issues. It really helped to *ground* my understanding of the definitions. And so you asked me about the definition of implicit bias and it really is about the attitudes or stereotypes that impact our understandings or actions in an unconscious manner. And I think in the ways in which we can really work toward making those unconscious things conscious, then working toward action, *that's* a part of what will make the difference.

And there's a lot of research that's out there. Harvard University has a study where you can actually go take a test and get your own rating on implicit bias

and be a part of their research. And it's absolutely interesting, but as I talk about, it is ingrained. It's a part of stereotypes that we live in. It's kind of like *fog* that is around everybody and you can't necessarily get away with it without growing up with it. And so, really understanding that it's there, it's pervasive, but naming it, and being able to work on it, I think makes a difference, whether it's around stereotypes about oppression or gender or race. I mean, *we grew up with this*. So, really just taking the time to give pause to it and explore, I think, makes a difference.

Host Krystal Andrews: So, talking about implicit bias, you know, with the definition that you've given us, what role do you believe implicit bias plays in the perpetuation of inequity for racially minoritized students and faculty of color on community college campuses?

Dr. Penny Pasque: That's a really great question because, again, it's pervasive, it's everywhere. So, as students go into classrooms, as faculty are in meetings, as administrators work with students in the academic advising office, or if you're in the alumni office, implicit bias is a *part* of every part of what's going on in your college campus. And so, let me give some tangible examples. A dear friend of mine in college, Nkenge, we were traveling, going from Syracuse University back to [the] Detroit area. And here we are in Canada. Stop for a little burger at Burger King and come up to the counter. And here's this white woman who is *clearly* somebody who has not seen a black or African American person in a long time. Her face perks up, she starts to breathe in, and get a little nervous, and then is super perky: "Hi, welcome to Burger King! I'm here to help you." And "I'm not a racist at all" is really what I heard. So, in that interaction, she's overdoing it, and in order to *not* really share explicitly her biases, it's implicit. But then here she's giving her her change and will not touch her hand.

So, here are what William Smith calls [racial battle fatigue](#) in terms of the feelings that Nkenge was feeling, but also some of the work that Stephen Quaye has talked about in those intergroup dialogue interactions. In those interactions, there's *a lot* that can be unpacked. And so with implicit bias, *it's there*. It's as though people are taking a look at someone and then trying to be—I don't like the word blind—but masked; that "I'm not going to actually see your race. I'm not going to pay attention to it. I'm going to try to ignore it," but then *try* to ignore it. What, you can't ignore a hijab on somebody's head. You can't ignore a cross on somebody whose body has a necklace. And so, paying attention and making it explicit and then figuring out where you go from there, which I think we'll probably talk about, is important.

Host Krystal Andrews: In that same vein, when talking about experiences kind of with implicit bias and how they dovetail into some issues with racial battle fatigue and microaggressions and micro assaults and all of *those* things, what were your experiences as a student? What were those experiences like for you in college? So, as you said, becoming aware of your surroundings, like living in Detroit, going to Syracuse, which is a totally different space, totally different place, and then going back and having engagement interactions with other people. How

did those experiences help you to develop into having more of a critical lens when it comes to looking at implicit bias and wanting to engage in work that has kind of pushed you to want to tell other people, you know, these are things that you need to kind of account for upfront and, you know, not just say that you're "blind" to something or saying things like, "Oh, I don't see color." What could you say are some of the examples of things that you've heard people say and how implicit bias kind of plays out?

Dr. Penny Pasque:

I actually started as a first-gen college student with a divorced mom who didn't go to college, knew I had to go, but didn't necessarily know how to get me there, and you have to pay for it but you're going to do it. And I'm *so glad* she did. And so, as a student going to Eastern Michigan University, regional institution, ended up going there and then onto Syracuse and, you know, Michigan. And then I graduated with a Ph.D. there. I think that my understanding has developed over time, and has grown or deepened, in part by paying attention to the research and what's there, but also the practice and what it *means* on campuses, in the residence halls, or in academic advising spaces, or you're in an orientation and watching students trying to make sense of their world while they're homesick and trying to figure out my roommate, you know, some students have to give money back to home, some people don't, right? So there's all these disparities that are going on.

So, watching how that plays out and actually the physical toll that it takes on students, I think is compelling if you're paying attention. And so, when I was at Eastern, I think we talked about, I was an RA, I was a resident advisor. I'm *so glad* for the experience, but *here* was an opportunity to *really* have a community of women that was in the all women's residence hall. And 71 women on the floor. And so, here was a space, without knowing what implicit bias was, here was a space where we, collectively, as a floor, not just me but everybody, created a space where it was at least somewhat safe for people of color, lesbian women at the time, which people didn't talk about as much as they do now, to really come and make this floor their space. And so, understanding what was going on then, and then also women who were like, "Hey, I've never seen a person of color really up close." "Really? Okay, let's talk about that. Let's break it down." And having those conversations, I think, make a *difference*. Letting people know that they have a safe space, whether it's in the residence hall floor or in your classroom if you're a faculty, and really *talking* that through and creating those spaces make a difference for people.

Host Krystal Andrews:

What examples do you have of things that you may have heard to where people are making statements that kind of show implicit bias, whether it be, you know, through your experiences as a student or at any level? So, for any one of the campuses you've been on, or, you know, as a professional, any of your professional roles, ways that you've seen kind of implicit bias invade spaces.

Dr. Penny Pasque:

There's ways in which I think the term "objectivity" gets used in a way that, to me, I don't really believe in objectivity. It's not necessarily a real thing. Everybody has their own perspective worldview, as they should, and come to

department meetings with that view, come to classes with that view. There's a way in which I've seen people express implicit bias trying to talk about objectivity. "Well, if we are objective about this" or "Why can't we look at the numbers? There's more white men in this class than anybody, so I *really* feel like that should be the dominant. And so when we talk about history classes or when we talk about English classes, why can't this be the focus? Why do you always have to have black feminist thought or indigenous methodologies in your classes? Why are we learning all these different places? This should be a bit more reflective of who we are."

But then when you actually look at the student population, when you actually take a look at the students who are in our community colleges, we've got almost *half* of undergraduates are in our community colleges. And they are more and more *diverse* as we're moving forward. And so, relegating Black History Month and black feminist thought or indigenous methodologies to a specific day or a week or something is not necessarily reflective of who we are. And the white experience is not an objective experience. It is an experience. So, naming that, calling that out, I mean, those are the ways in which I see it happen on a regular basis, whether it's through little things or large things where people are trying to center their own perspective.

Host Krystal Andrews: What role do you believe implicit bias plays in the perpetuation of inequity for racially minoritized students and faculty of color on community college campuses?

Dr. Penny Pasque: I think it plays a huge role. I think it's really pervasive, like a *fog*. The stereotypes that we have learned, growing up as a kid, watching on TV, being engaged in just regular life. You absorb these stereotypes that I think are really important to pay attention to, and then also to dissect and then make sure that you're acting or have an action plan about not always responding to that, or understanding the ways in which they've been perpetuated in order to keep people down, in order to perpetuate issues of oppression and privilege and power in society.

I'll give you some examples of where I've seen implicit bias on college campuses, and I think a good example is in search committees. Search committees, you can lay it all out in terms of the job description and then people turn to the word "objectivity." Let's be objective as we look at all the candidates. Well, this candidate doesn't have a Ph.D., they have an Ed.D. This candidate doesn't have great experience in terms of traveling to different conferences or studying at the *right* institution. And so, the ways in which this coded language or this fog gets stated in search committee is where you're shooting for objectivity. But really, to me, that's coded language about racism, sexism, classism, about the intersections of that. This person doesn't look a certain way. Those things are ways in which implicit bias, I think, gets perpetuated.

Host Krystal Andrews: Those are very real. I've participated in my own search committees, and the objectivity of trying to make sure that the search was done in a timely and

respectable fashion, to make sure that the candidates that were most qualified—there that word is, “qualified”—the language that we use to be a code word for “Are they up to par? Are they up to snuff? Is there a fit?” What does fit mean? Those things, I've experienced that.

Dr. Penny Pasque:

And who gets to decide, what is fit? And so, if it's the people in the room and it looks a certain way, then “fit” is going to be perpetuated in *that* certain way. And so, breaking out of that. When you take a look at community college students are over *half* of the undergraduate population as well as more and more diverse and as well as the student population is not always reflective of the faculty and staff. So, one question I ask search committees often is, “What are the demographics of your student population?” And then, “How do you make sure your faculty or staff reflect the student population that you have?” And often, it's not even close. And why couldn't we have more Latinx advisors so that the *one* or *two* representative Latinx faculty are not getting *taxed* over and over in terms of mentorship and all that.

Another way that it comes up is study groups, people putting together study groups in their classes on community college campuses in a classroom. “Okay, I want to make sure that there's at least one person of color in every subgroup.” And what does that do? We know when groups are majority white and then there's one person of color, the students look to the person of color to give that one perspective as though it's mono and not diverse, as well as students of color will actually speak up *more* if there's two or three students of color in a group. So, why does it always have to be about splitting up the students of color in a group? I think that there's some ways in which faculty give pause and think about study groups or working with alumni, working with student groups, making sure people's voices are heard.

Host Krystal Andrews: So, rolling into our next question: What are some action items or strategies that administrators and faculty can take to interrogate campus cultures that perpetuate the usage of implicit bias and how to have discussions about race?

Dr. Penny Pasque:

Thank you for that question. I'm going back to the research that I've done on higher ed for the public good, conversations with community partners, university presidents, grad students, legislators across the country who came together to talk about is higher ed doing the public any good, or not? And in those conversations—shocker—women, students of color, graduate students, community partners, voices were silenced or relegated to the margins in policy reports, the end of the year reports for these events. And so their voices were not listened to. And so, part of what I argued is we need all voices to make change. If we haven't addressed issues of oppression, and we've had these stats and we've had this history for so long that we're not doing it right. So paying attention to all different voices matters, but I also hear you taking it one step further: What do you do? What are your *action* steps?

And I think, with implicit bias, one of the main things is to know who you are, understand that, and then go from there in terms of working on issues of

implicit bias. And so, thinking through your own social identities. Ximena Zúñega has a lot of work on intergroup dialogue, and that's one of the first areas is to really understand who you are and do some trust-building, but also to think through, what are your identities regarding ability? What are your identities regarding LGBTQI? What are your identities about gender, gender expression, *all* of your identities? Thinking that through, understanding what that is, and *then* approaching the work about what's going on, how are you witnessing it, and what ways are people being silenced in spaces?

I have provided an action-planning worksheet for people. One of the examples that came up and in of the sessions was women of color doing the work behind the scenes *and* not necessarily getting credit. So let's take that example. First, there's a whole historical piece that comes with this, whether it's black or African American women; and the history with African American men, whether it's Latinx women and men. There's cultural, historical aspects at play. Indigenous communities have very different gender relationships going on, right? So, here's the historical that's coming.

Now we're coming into play in this institution, and here you are, getting asked to do all the behind-the-scenes things without getting credit. So, being sensitive to the contemporary and the historical, certainly, but then thinking through, "Okay, how am I going to address this?" Going through the action steps: Who are my allies in the room? How can I have a conversation with you about this? Then what can *we* do to strategize? What are our resources? Maybe you need to have a little funding for a lunch gab every month to really form a group, to really have a sense of cohesion, and *then* approach it together.

My girlfriend was very good at humor, so she was always like, "Hey, speak into the microphone, Joe. That's really sexist. You're asking me to do that again?" Whereas I would, somebody who will sit down, tell you how that made me feel. Tell me how the impact is. You got to find your own *style* to doing that. But I also understand that when you're working on action steps, if you have three kids, you need the job, you can't get fired, and that's going to really put you in jeopardy if you confront this issue—that's *real* for people. You *can't* lose your job, so you've *got* to figure out a different strategy. So go back to the beginning, work with your resources and allies, and then move forward. The Kirwan Institute at the Ohio State University has some language around being an active bystander, what you can say or do when situations come up so that you just don't remain quiet, but that you have language in your back pocket to pull out to confront things when it happens.

Host Krystal Andrews: And so for our last question today: What advice do you have for people who are interested in engaging in research and work around advancing racial justice and equitable outcomes on college campuses? And if you would like to tailor it to community college campuses specifically, feel free.

Dr. Penny Pasque: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think paying attention to how you're feeling in the moment is important. And that changes every day. So, I'm working with

LaVonya Bennett, Ph.D. candidate right now, soon to graduate, on insidious trauma and the trauma that women in particular—it's from the national study on Women in Higher Ed and Student Affairs. So, working with women and this trauma that they're experiencing, you're not always in a good place to address things, *or* it's not always a good day to address things. And so, knowing how to keep yourself healthy is important. And so, I think that it's vital that individuals do that, but that it's not always relegated to the individual to figure out how to do that for themselves.

I think it's important that administrators, that the institutional level, picks up that responsibility to say, "Where are we creating spaces for people of color? Where are we creating spaces for people of color *only*?" There are spaces, as a white woman, second-generation and the state Sicilian-American on one side and second-generation Italian on the other side—there's spaces, as a white person, don't need to be in—I have no business being in. And making sure that there's spaces for people of color, making sure there's spaces for women, making sure there's spaces for people to really talk about things as well as to make sure that they are okay; they have a support system.

But again, not always the individual. It's the institution's responsibility to do that. And if, as a leader, you haven't been thinking about those *active* places on campus for you to create that because you may or may not belong to that community. I think that now's a good time to do that, to think about what are the steps *you* put into place on your own community college campus to make a difference for people. It's going to have a ripple effect, where you can't always see it. It starts, but then the benefits continue to ripple out. I think it absolutely matters.

Host Krystal Andrews: I would agree. I think that everything that you said definitely matters in terms of taking care of yourself when doing any sort of work that engages you in negotiations around being critical about the way that folks engage; the way that they enter in or exit certain spaces within higher ed, particularly community college campuses; and I think this is a very fruitful conversation. I think it's a conversation that definitely needs to be had more. Definitely talking about, as you said, the "fog" of implicit bias and where it falls and how to kind of work your way through that. But also being able to navigate it as knowing that implicit bias translates itself into language—so paying attention. I would say implicit bias work is about paying attention and about really doing the work for the students, for the people of color, for there to just be a fruitful space where we're able to learn, we're able to work, and not have to experience trauma in order to be able to do so.

Dr. Pasque, thank you so much for your time and providing such a rich insight into implicit bias, and I'm sure that the information that you provided today will be very helpful for our listeners.

Penny Pasque: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Announcer:

Tune in next month when Dr. Marci Rockey of OCCRL interviews Betsy Barefoot and John Gardner of the Gardner Institute. Their work at the Institute involves supporting higher education institutions in advancing equitable outcomes for students, especially as it relates to transfer. The Gardner Institute is a nonprofit organization that works toward advancing equity, social justice, and mobility in higher education.