

# Q&A with Nilanjana Dasgupta

**SPEAKER IN THE WOMEN AND STEM SERIES TALKS ABOUT HOW SHE BECAME INTERESTED IN STUDYING PSYCHOLOGY, CHOICE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

I sat down with Dr. Nilanjana Dasgupta, Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to discuss her influential research on the effect of role models on women's interest in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). She talked about the path that led to her social psychological research, provided some advice for graduate students, outlined her current research directions, and discussed the role of choice in understanding why women may or may not enter STEM fields.

**What drew you to the field of psychology?**

*I started as a biology major and had never taken psych as an undergrad. I went to a liberal arts college, and my pre-major advisor suggested I take*

*a variety of courses; so, I took psychology and loved it. I think the thing I loved about it is that we think we know ourselves, but we don't really. I was fascinated by the idea that you could study the mind using science, not opinion. I didn't want to give up biology, so I ended up doing a psychology major and a neuroscience minor. So when it came to deciding what I wanted to do, I knew I wanted to do research and again I wanted to do both psychology and neuroscience (social cognitive neuroscience didn't exist at the time). I had to make a choice and I chose social psychology because it is the social mind aspect that I liked the most.*

## **How did that lead you into becoming an academic?**

*I went to graduate school because I was interested in social justice. Part of this interest came because I went from being a majority group member in India and then I came to the U.S., and I suddenly was a minority group member. There were very few people who were brown, and I felt like I stood out. In some sense, my experience of immigration was like being a participant in a pre-test/post-test study where I had previously been in the “high-status condition” and post-immigration I was in the “low-status condition.” I got interested in social justice and psychology allowed me to answer questions about social justice. These were questions that I wanted to ask due to personal interest, but now I was able to ask and test these questions more broadly and scientifically.*

*In the first year of graduate school I began to really wonder if doing research was the way I wanted to pursue social justice or if I wanted to do something grassroots or NGO related. I decided, alright – I would go and do my masters and then I would decide if this was something I really liked or not. After I finished my masters, I liked it enough to continue, but it wasn't until my third year that something finally clicked and I got it; I realized I was good at empirical research, I loved it, and was no longer floundering. Of course, there was a big gap between the change I wanted to see and the research I was doing. However, that gap exists in a different way between grassroots action and*

*actual change. I realized I wanted to pursue social change in terms of research.*

## **How did you get interested in STEM?**

*I am interested in when and how societal stereotypes become a part of our own choices and decisions and when people do things that defy societal stereotypes. My own research has had a lot to do with changing stereotypes and attitudes toward other people (outgroups) but I became more interested in the other less studied and more politically difficult question – When do people fall into stereotypes and, without realizing it, carry them out in their own decisions – especially when they feel like personal choices? I can easily imagine studying it in terms of any underrepresented group in any life domain – in business, in law, in science, academia, sports, etc. Women in the sciences are clearly an underrepresented group so I thought I'd start there and later broaden to other groups.*

## **What do you say to those, specifically with women in STEM, who say it's just a woman's choice to not be in the field and that it's not stereotypes or stigma, it's a choice.**

*I think in our lay understanding of choices, we think of choice as being entirely free. That anything a person chooses, by definition, is something that is guided by that person's intrinsic motivation, by their talent, or any factor they choose. Either way it is their choice and that justifies any group differences we might observe. However, I*

*don't think women's professional and academic decisions in STEM fields constitute a free choice in the way that non-psychologists think about choice. I think it's a constrained choice, at best. This is likely to be true for many other groups that are either underrepresented in a profession and about whom there are these doubts about ability. For majority groups in the same professions who are not burdened by negative stereotypes, the choice is less constrained and more free. If we can equate this and give everybody equal freedom to choose their intellectual and professional paths, then however we end up, we could live with that. There's a lot we can do to make it a freer choice for women and underrepresented minorities in STEM and that's the goal of my research.*

## **What else are you working on in terms of research at the moment?**

*These days, my professional interests are about taking the work I do on implicit bias or implicit stereotypes and applying it to different domains outside of psychology – to law, natural sciences, education, and policy. The most fun time I have is when I go and talk about the work I do to legal scholars and judges about how implicit bias informs anti-discrimination law. I also enjoy talking to school principals and superintendents about how kids might get more or less interested in science depending on who teaches the subject or because of things that happen in the classroom. I then use their help to enhance my research. They*

*will have some insights that I, as someone who doesn't work in the schools, don't have. I can use their insights to test more questions. A lot of what I do is really interdisciplinary these days.*

*Secondly, with some of my graduate students, I've become really interested in 1) the effects of multiculturalism and colorblindness and similar ideologies on people's attitudes, and support or opposition to public policy. Of particular interest is the general assumption that multiculturalism is a good thing and colorblindness is a bad thing. That's the narrative we tell. But my students, and a lot of other research, are showing that it isn't as simple as that. Multiculturalism leads to positive effects for some groups and does nothing for other groups. Colorblindness leads to positive effects for some groups and negative effects for others. Also, colorblindness has different components. There is colorblindness in terms of ignoring race and there's colorblindness as in we are all part of the same national group. The implications of the two different versions are very different. We are interested in the different, and sometimes non-obvious influence of promoting each of these ideologies and their effects on people's policy support and attitudes.*

### **What are your thoughts on the field of psychology and how it's changing?**

*I think the field of psychology is changing in two ways, and both of them are good. One is that we are becoming more interdisciplinary. It's not as*

*much about basic behavioral research using just psychological theories. Now we are going into many more directions like psychology and neuroscience, law, health, computer science, linguistics, etc. All of those interdisciplinary sub areas really benefit our field because they bring in new ideas, research, methodology.*

*Secondly, there is a better connection between basic and applied research today than there was 15 years ago when I was in graduate school. I am a big fan of this. I think that research which takes a basic finding grounded in theory, and then applies it successfully to a specific problem out there in the field is a huge benefit for our field and our theories. Sometimes, things work out very well, and other times we see that things aren't so clear which require modifications to the theory. In the work that I do, I have ended up doing research where some of it is in the lab and other parts of it are in the field. I package them together in the same paper. I start with a question that I think is interesting, then I do some lab experiments and test parallel field environments. I think it's good because it allows us to test our theories, and ensures our work will have more of an effect in the domains where we want it to have an effect.*

### **Who were some of your mentors and who you really looked up to.**

*The first and obvious person who had a big effect on me going into a research field was my mother, who was a professor of physiology. I think my in-*

*terest in biology came from her, but I think I didn't want to go into research because I wanted to be different from her, but I ended up doing what she did. Very ironic.*

*My interest in the human mind over anatomy came from four key people. The first two were my undergraduate advisors: Fletcher Blanchard, a social psychologist, and Brenda Allen, a developmentalist. Fletcher was interested in race and prejudice, and so it was through him that I got interested in prejudice and stereotyping. The two of them were incredibly good undergrad mentors and got me interested in the nitty-gritty research. The third very important mentor who refined my interest in social psychology was Mahzarin Banaji, my graduate advisor. My enjoyment thinking about interdisciplinary ideas and speaking with interdisciplinary audiences comes from Mahzarin. She is a "big ideas" person who is great at translating our science to different audiences. Watching Mahzarin speak to (and write for) different audiences had a huge effect on me in graduate school. Finally, the person who taught me about self-discipline in research and writing is Tony [Greenwald]. Tony has a way of working where he is able to screen everything out and get things done. That is a very important skill I learned from him.*

**Ines Jurcevic is a Graduate Student in Social Psychology in the Department of Psychology at UCLA.**