



JAY JACKSON



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MIND OVER MATTER

In a world seemingly fueled by social prejudice and knee-jerk reactions, it's reasonable to start asking why we act the way we do.

IPFW Professor of Psychology Jay Jackson has been asking this question for a long time—in relation to both global human-driven events and our day-to-day interactions.

“The work that I do and what others do in psychology is called basic research or theoretical research,” Jackson says. “What we're doing is searching for new knowledge. Our job is to discover things that no one has ever discovered before. It's testing abstract, theoretical principles and asking how different abstract constructs relate to one another.”



A CASE STUDY

Originally from Indianapolis, Jackson grew up in what's now a suburbia—when he lived there, the area was relatively rural.

He started out at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) as an undergraduate. Jackson was initially a business major until he discovered that he wasn't particularly interested in the field—what he really loved were his psychology classes.

“I switched majors to psychology after that,” Jackson says. “I also loved anthropology. I love learning about new cultures and the whole field of anthropology is still very exciting to me—so I minored in anthropology.”

“Those experiences turned out to be crucial.”

Jackson actually surprised himself during college—he hadn't thought he would be very skilled in the academic world because he hadn't been the best student in high school. That all changed for him in his new university environment, so much so that he continued on to graduate school.

“The Osgood Laboratory for Cross-Cultural Research was being run by Dr. Oliver Tzeng at that time and that was a really important experience for me,” he says. “I also got experience working on a volunteer basis in a psychiatric hospital because, at one point, I thought maybe I wanted to go into the clinical side of things. Those experiences turned out to be crucial because I ended up loving the lab work and not so much the clinical work.”

Jackson earned a master’s degree at IUPUI in applied social psychology with a focus on interethnic relationships, child neglect and abuse issues, and a few other related topics. He went on to Purdue West Lafayette to get his doctorate in experimental social psychology and then landed his first job in the field in Glenville, W. Va., where he primarily taught college classes. He also met his future wife there.

“She’s a developmental psychologist,” he shares. “We were the only two psychologists on campus, so we ended up striking up some conversations and one thing led to another—we ended up getting married. We ended up going to Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. for a year after that.”

Ultimately, the couple wanted to get back to the Midwest to be situated closer to their families. Jackson applied for and received a position at Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne, as did his wife a year after. Jackson has now been at IPFW for 18 years.

“It’s been a real blessing and a great community to live in. It’s a great university,” he says. “I’ve seen it grow quite a bit along with our family—we have a couple of kids now. It’s just been really good.”

POSSIBLE SELVES

“In psychology, there are two general domains,” Jackson says. “One is the basic theoretical domain and the other one is the applied domain.”

By training, Jackson is a social psychologist. His area of expertise is understanding how people behave, think, and react emotionally to social situations—primarily involving other people.

“I teach a variety of classes,” he says. “I teach the history of psychology. I teach introductory methods in personality in social psychology. I conduct research in a variety of areas, but I’m primarily interested in intergroup relations. That’s how people from different groups perceive each other, behave towards each other, and have thoughts about each other.”

One branch of Jackson’s research touches on intergroup bias, which is how group memberships influence our perceptions of other people and actions towards them. Intergroup contact theory indicates that as two people from two different groups (racial, religious, or otherwise) meet and get to know each other better in a positive way, the probability increases that their attitudes toward the group each person represents will be more favorable than they were before.

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has ever discovered before.”**

During Jackson’s doctorate years at Purdue he got a lot of experience conducting lab research on scenarios like these—including those that focused on group dynamics, intergroup perceptions, and social dilemmas.

“This has been well-established in literally hundreds of studies now,” he says. “There have been three meta analyses conducted on the contact hypothesis. What we’re doing in our lab is trying to identify some of the conditions and attributes people have that lead them to have favorable intergroup contact experiences. For example, we’re looking particularly closely at the variables of openness and agreeableness in new experiences. People are high on this trait and tend to be naturally curious. They have a great tolerance for ambiguity and they’re culturally interested in trying new things.”

ACTION POTENTIAL

The Department of Psychology’s program for students who are interested in research is always expanding the experiences students can gain from multiple labs and projects during their academic career. Jackson’s research assistants came from that program and show a great deal of motivation when the right research project comes along.

“I guide them through the research project,” he explains. “They usually develop a proposal and I review the proposal and give them feedback. We work together on developing the rationale—you have to have a good theoretical rationale before developing the stimulus materials. Then once the stimulus materials are developed and the rationale is set, we’re able to run some pilot tests. They are very involved and have the opportunity to present their research at the IPFW Research Symposium every year.”

The university has been consistently supportive of the department—either through travel funding for professional conference trips, funds for laboratory space, or from a number of other outlets the department needs to do their best work. Moving forward, Jackson hopes to continue this level of research and start getting more answers to their questions.



“I am most proud of my students,” Jackson says. “It’s a joy to work with them—especially the students who have become my research assistants and whom I get to know so well. We have some of the most fantastic students you can imagine. They’re hardworking and motivated. They’re bright and they keep me on my toes because they ask so many good questions and are so enthusiastic about it. They’re a joy to work with, and I’m proud of the way they represent my lab at conferences and how they represent the department and the university.”

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