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#377: Ways of engaging: Challenging harmful ideologies in belief and practice

VOICEOVER

This is Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

PETER MARES

Hello. I'm Peter Mares. Welcome to Up Close. Why is it that certain myths and misconceptions persist despite all the evidence that they're fundamentally wrong? Take racism for example. The assumption that skin tone determines who a person is, what they can do and how they'll behave is easily disproved. Similarly, with sexism and stereotypes about what women can or should do.

The facts tell us these beliefs are false, and yet they remain pervasive. What's worse, such powerful and damaging ideologies give rise to behaviours that entrench injustice and oppression, so that women and people of colour are, for example, at greater risk of suffering acts of violence and experiencing discrimination in accessing essential goods such as housing or employment. But if an ideology is immune to evidence and reasoned argument, then how are we to combat it? That's a question our guest has been thinking about deeply.

Sally Haslanger is the Ford Professor of Philosophy and Women's and Gender Studies in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. She's published widely in the fields of metaphysics, epistemology and feminist theory, and here recent focus has been on the social construction of race and gender. Sally Haslanger is a 2016 Miegunyah Fellow in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne.

Sally Haslanger, welcome to Up Close.

SALLY HASLANGER

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

PETER MARES

Now, let's start with this term ideology. What do you mean by an ideology when you use that word?

SALLY HASLANGER

I like to begin with a quote from Stuart Hall, who is a cultural historian in the UK. He says of ideology it has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilise a particular form of power and domination, or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. So I think it's important to recognise that there are different ways that inequality or injustice can be entrenched. One way is through repression.

PETER MARES

So physical power.

SALLY HASLANGER

Physical power. So entering slavery there was tremendous repression. People were coerced.

PETER MARES

Whips and chains.

SALLY HASLANGER

Whips and chains. But another way that inequality or injustice can be entrenched is by infiltrating the conscious awareness of people so that they form a practical orientation in the world that guides them not in a way that's completely deterministic, but it guides them to perform certain kinds of practices, to engage with people in certain ways, and so you develop a kind of social fluency - or we sometimes even call them social skills - that enable people to get along in society and coordinate, but the terms of co-ordination are unfair or unjust, but that's not always obvious to the

people who are acting and performing those practices.

PETER MARES

So we could give a practical example of this if went, say, to women in Victorian England in the 19th century. On the one hand you had the suffragettes campaigning for women to get the vote, and on the other hand you had women saying no, this is not the proper place of a woman to vote or to work outside the home or any of those sorts of things.

SALLY HASLANGER

Right. The women who were socialised to occupy the domestic sphere would be very uncomfortable in the public sphere. It would feel awkward and difficult for them. Likewise, the men in the public sphere would find it very difficult to have a woman come into that space because the etiquette countered against it. They wouldn't know how to interact with each other.

PETER MARES

And yet this is an oppressive situation, obviously, because, for a start, even at the most basic level, women aren't getting a vote. So what you're saying is this is where we can see ideology in operation, ideology about how women should behave, what women's proper place is, and it's one that women themselves inhabit, as it were.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes. Often there's a mix of between repressive mechanisms and the ideological mechanisms. So part of what happens is that if you begin to diverge, then repression will sometimes show its face. You will be pushed back into that place. And there will also be cases where - for example, in racism in the United States - that the people of colour are not caught up in the ideology. They very well know that this is unjust or unfair, but oftentimes the people who are in charge, so to speak, they are caught up in the ideology. So repression is more common because the people are resistant.

PETER MARES

So we might see that in the very high rates of incarceration of African Americans in the United States. The view might be this is just because African Americans break the law more, and that's why there are more African Americans in jail.

SALLY HASLANGER

Exactly. It's important to note also that ideology isn't always about beliefs. I think very often people think of ideology as a republican ideology or a Christian ideology or something like that, where it seems to be a theory or a set of assumptions or something?

PETER MARES

The world view.

SALLY HASLANGER

A world view; where the way I'm using the term it's more this idea of a practical consciousness or practical orientation in the world. It's a knowhow for getting around in the world, and so it can be expressed. Sometimes an ideology does take explicit form and the people can argue about it and disagree with it?

PETER MARES

So people might say African Americans are more prone to crime than other Americans or something like that, and then you can argue about the facts of that or whatever.

SALLY HASLANGER

You can argue about the facts of that, and that would be an explicit ideology, but there is, I think, a deeper level, a kind of ideology that guides us. So what happens is that many white Americans are afraid of black Americans. They're afraid of housing projects. They're afraid of being in places where they're in the racial minority. That, I think of as ideological, even if they wouldn't assent to the belief that African Americans were more dangerous or people of colour are more dangerous.

PETER MARES

That they would still cross the road if they saw an African American approaching wearing a hood or something like that.

SALLY HASLANGER

Exactly.

PETER MARES

There'll be that shortcut in their brain which is operating on the basis of this deeply entrenched ideology.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, that's right.

PETER MARES

That helps to explain then why these things persist even though they've been outlawed. We have now antidiscrimination laws and so on, and yet the behaviours persist.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes. Maybe it would be helpful to say a bit about my background. I was born in the New England area. When I was young I moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, which is in the south. This was in 1963. Jim Crow was still pretty much in place.

PETER MARES

So Jim Crow?

SALLY HASLANGER

Jim Crow is a set of laws that instituted racial segregation between blacks and whites. There were black toilets and white toilets and black water fountains and white water fountains, and blacks couldn't go into certain restaurants et cetera.

PETER MARES

And they couldn't play games together.

SALLY HASLANGER

Couldn't go to school together.

PETER MARES

There were very explicit laws. I remember reading some ordinances from Birmingham, Alabama. They specify exactly the height of the partition - seven foot six inches or something - that must exist between the white dining area and the African American dining area in a restaurant.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, that's right. It was very legally enforced, and it was a form of repression, I think, of repressive system.

PETER MARES

Explicit.

SALLY HASLANGER

Explicit. I didn't really understand all of this. I was quite young. So I would go about doing things that people were horrified by.

PETER MARES

Because you came from a different part of the United States where this didn't exist.

SALLY HASLANGER

Where this didn't exist. I didn't have the knowhow. I was too young to have any explicit beliefs about this. I just had this knowhow of living in a less segregated community. I'd go into segregated community and, literally, I would get in the front seat of a car with a black person, and people would drag me out of that car and say no, you can't get in that car.

I'd go why can't I get in that car? Excuse me? I don't think that in the moment that they were dragging me out of the car that they were thinking to themselves, oh, black people are violent, and so this is a risk to this person's well being. It was just this is not done.

PETER MARES

This was the ideological shortcut that deeply entrenched - way in which they were culturally wired to respond.

SALLY HASLANGER

That's right.

PETER MARES

That is really tricky, isn't it, because it suggests then that the traditional approach to these kinds of issues, like racism or sexism, is to say let's educate people. Let's show them that their beliefs are wrong. Let's show them that women can do things that men can do. African Americans can become the President, and that this will solve the problem.

SALLY HASLANGER

Well, I think that there's two ways of showing people. One way of showing people is arguing with them, giving them evidence and facts and such like that. But people are very invested, and understandably, in coordinating with each other. We need to coordinate with each other, but in order to coordinate with each other we have to have practices that become routine so that we don't have to think every time we want to interact with someone how to coordinate with them.

PETER MARES

Establish shortcuts and rules.

SALLY HASLANGER

Exactly, and practices. What happens is that those practices are often very convenient and important for us. Someone might tell us, oh, but there's this background belief you have that's false, but that doesn't change the fact that when I go to the store or when I walk down the street, or when I go to the swimming pool, there's still a set of practices that I've relied on to communicate with people.

So think of it in this way: that in order to coordinate we have to distinguish signal from noise. We get lots and lots of information in the world all the time. We can be overloaded with that information. So to coordinate with each other we have to be able to signal each other what we're going to do and when we're going to do it and

how we're going to do it. So what culture does it provides us that symbolic frame for interpreting each other.

Now, that symbolic frame is in place even if people change their beliefs. So I can change my belief about what it means to have dark skin or something like that, but when I walk down the street that dark skin - it's still a signal for me, whether I want it to be or not or whether I'm conscious of it or not.

So when we are trying to show people that things are not as they seem, you have to do more than talk to them about it. You have to bring them in a new community. You have to teach them new practices. You have to find ways for them to engage with each other on different terms so that they can begin to see that their old practices don't work, that the signals that they thought were meaningful are not signalling what they thought it was meaning. That kind of showing I think we need to do a lot of.

PETER MARES

What does that look like in practice? Can you give them an example then of how you'd go about doing that showing rather than telling and explaining? What might it look like?

SALLY HASLANGER

I can just give you a simplistic example, but it's, again, dear to my heart. My husband and I adopted African American children. My father-in-law was not enthusiastic about this. The first time we went to visit him after we adopted our son, who was four weeks old, we came up to him and said here, meet your grandson, and put him in my father-in-law's arms.

I'm not sure my father-in-law had ever touched a black person. It was something that was utterly unfamiliar to him. But it's very hard to remain steely or resistant or hostile?

PETER MARES

With a baby in your arms.

SALLY HASLANGER

?with a baby in your arms. That's a simple example of a change of practice, but I think it had a tremendous effect. My father-in-law loves our children, and I think he's changed dramatically since he was put in a situation where he comes to our home and breaks bread with us. So I think a lot more of the breaking bread together, where that may be family to family or one to one.

I think that there's a way in which finding opportunities for people of different races to just do ordinary things together - eat together, go to the park together and have their children play together. So that was part of the motivation for the desegregation laws in the United States, was desegregate and put people together and they will have more opportunity to really know each other.

PETER MARES

So the idea was you'd make sure African American kids and white kids went to the same schools, for example. But there's a lot of resistance to that as well, isn't there?

SALLY HASLANGER

Yeah.

PETER MARES

Is this a fairly fragile way to go about it? In Australia, often you might come across someone who is hostile towards Asian migrants, for example, but they exclude from that hostility the neighbour who they know. Well, they're not like other Vietnamese or whatever it might be. So you get the accommodation. These prejudices, this ideology, can accommodate certain exceptions.

SALLY HASLANGER

I completely agree. In fact, after desegregation in the United States in the mid '60s there was a tremendous white flight from the inner cities. I'm not sure if this still true, but there was a period not long ago when schools were more segregated now than they were under legal segregation.

PETER MARES

White families took their children out of schools when the black kids came in.

SALLY HASLANGER

That's right. So there's this combination. One is that you avoid contact and you just try to get away from it, even though people are trying to encourage it. And the other is that you have an exception, you have a token or an exception that you will feel comfortable with, but say that they're not like the others.

That's why I think we need something more like social movements. I just gave you an example of a one-on-one change, but one-on-one changes only go so far. I'm a big believer that we need cultural change. We also need to change laws. We need to change institutions. We need to change policies and all of that, but?

PETER MARES

So you have to tackle the structural stuff.

SALLY HASLANGER

Structural stuff.

PETER MARES

But the cultural change, that's the hardest part in a way.

SALLY HASLANGER

That's the hardest part. That's why, when we looked at desegregation, the structural stuff was changing, but the hearts and minds weren't changing. You can't do that necessarily one at a time. That's why I think that social movements are our best hope. I think Black Lives Matter - I think that that's an important social movement [unclear]?

PETER MARES

That's the social movement in the US in response to the high numbers of police shootings of African Americans.

SALLY HASLANGER

That's exactly right. Bringing to the attention of the majority this kind of police brutality through cell phone videos and other kinds of videos. So, again, it's not just telling people about it, but it's saying look what we're dealing with. Look what happens to us. This is not a rare occurrence. This is not an exception. This is not deserved. I think that that kind of a movement can begin to change broader numbers of people.

PETER MARES

Sally Haslanger, when we talk about ideology - I'm thinking of another kind of ideology: the caste system in India. Centuries old. Clearly oppressive in terms of the way the lower castes are treated, but how are we then to say to Indian Hindus, for example, look, this is an ideology that needs to be corrected?

SALLY HASLANGER

As I understand it, there are interesting differences and similarities between race and caste. Race, as I understand it, is about the foreigner, the person who has come. This is one of the reasons, at least in the United States - we talk about Asian Americans or Hispanic Americans or African Americans.

PETER MARES

And you don't talk about English Americans.

SALLY HASLANGER

You don't talk about English Americans. They had this - certain assumptions about geography or otherness or other whereness. Caste is not like that. Caste is - at least, traditionally, one version of it has been more functional. There are different roles that people play in a division of labour. They have the priest and the warriors et cetera.

PETER MARES

And at the bottom the people who do the unclean work.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, that's right.

PETER MARES

The cleaning and so on.

SALLY HASLANGER

The cleaning and such. I believe that, of course, there are different tasks that have to be performed in society, so we have to begin to think very critically about the division of labour. In our contemporary societies there will be people who have to do

unpleasant labour. That's the way our industrial society has evolved. There is unpleasant labour.

PETER MARES

Someone has to clean the toilet. Let's face it.

SALLY HASLANGER

Someone has to clean the toilet. Someone has to clean the toilet at home, and someone has to clean the toilet, so to speak, in the broader city. So we're going to have to think about divisions of labour and whether those divisions of labour should be marked by kinds of people who occupy them.

PETER MARES

Because this is a real problem. If we have rising levels of inequality - as we've seen in the United States, in Australia, indeed, in many countries around the world - that inequality is sometimes overlaid, or overlaps with ethnicity or migrant status or whatever, so you can see a segmentation of the labour market and income by race. Does that make it then much harder to combat the ideology?

SALLY HASLANGER

Oh, definitely makes it much harder. Part of it is because the people often - as you say, the immigrants are people who've historically had less education, historically had less affluence, historically had less opportunity. They're going to be the ones who are targeted for these less pleasant jobs, for the more drudge work.

So we have an ideology, so to speak, of self-improvement and education and things like that, but it's very, very difficult to overcome the economic challenges in order to gain those opportunities. What happens is those jobs are not respected and the people who occupy those jobs are not respected. So at the very minimum I think that we have to have a tremendous effort to change the labour laws and labour conditions and provide insurance for people in those positions so that they can live a decent life.

In fact, I'm in favour of something like guaranteed minimum income because I think that to just force people to accept drudgery as a way of life because they can't do anything else violates the notion of human autonomy. Going back to the issue of respect, it's coercive to coerce people to do drudge work that is demeaning. To coerce them to do that work is unacceptable within, I think, a liberal framework.

PETER MARES

This is Up Close. I'm Peter Mares in conversation with Sally Haslanger, Ford Professor of Philosophy and Women's and Gender Studies in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT. We're discussing ideology, what it is, how it operates and how we can go about countering it.

Now, we've talked a lot about racism and also sexism. Sally Haslanger, these ideologies aren't fixed, are they? It's not like there's one idea of racial superiority that persists through time. How does ideology shift?

SALLY HASLANGER

I think it's an excellent question. One of the things that I've worked on some is the transition from biologically based racism to culturally based racism. Traditionally, racism was the view or the form of life that suggested that racial differences marked differences in personality and values and abilities and such like that. We know that that's not true anymore.

Fortunately, that belief has taken hold, that many people no longer accept the idea that race carries with it these cultural personal differences, but we can notice that cultural racism has replaced it. Now, what is cultural racism? Start with the idea of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the idea that my ethnicity, my culture, is the best. It's maybe the only or the most civilised et cetera, like that.

PETER MARES

You can understand that people feel that about their own ethnicity.

SALLY HASLANGER

Of course, because this is the one that they've grown up in and the others seem strange. It's like the Greeks. They called the barbarians the barbaros because they were imitating the sound of their language. It was bar, bar, bar, bar, bar. It wasn't civilised. It wasn't really a language. This was?

PETER MARES

Whereas, really, it was just that Greeks couldn't understand it.

SALLY HASLANGER

That's right. It's easy when you have been insulated from other cultures to think that your culture is the most civilised, the most wonderful, the only, but, of course, that's not true. So when cultures come into contact, ethnocentrism is one of the points of conflict of whose culture is better, whose culture ought to dominate this milieu. How are we going to deal with that?

You can have cultural racism when people are interpreted as having a particular set of beliefs or values et cetera just by virtue of what they look like. Again, it has the element of racism that you attribute certain characteristics or traits or values or abilities or something based on appearance, because in the old day that was because you thought that they were biologically based. But now, after the biological assumption is rejected, there's this idea that, well, no, you can look at a person and assume that they're of a certain culture, and then take that culture to have brought along with it certain values, assumptions and things like that.

PETER MARES

So if I see a woman wearing a hijab, that's, firstly, a symbol that she's a Muslim but, secondly, it might suggest to me all sorts of other things about her life - that she's oppressed by her husband or that she's restricted in her movements - which may or may not be true.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, that's right. Also there is a group in the United States that has been working to create a new term: AMEMSA - Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian - because there's an appearance of people of that region of the world that triggers for people an assumption that they're all Muslim. I have friends who are from India, and they are assumed to be Muslim by other Americans and are slandered or?

PETER MARES

When they could be Hindu or Sikh or Christian or anything.

SALLY HASLANGER

Or anything.

PETER MARES

Atheist or anything else.

SALLY HASLANGER

Anything. Most of the ones that I have in mind have lived their whole lives in the United States. They have no association with any of those regions except through ancestry. This is a racialisation of a group, that their appearance alone - not even the hijab; it's just how they appear - triggers for people assumptions that they are terrorists or they're dangerous or they're maybe someone who's planting a bomb or whatever like that.

So there's a kind of racialisation of a group. Again, it's not assuming that these people are biologically determined to do that, but it's assuming that they have a culture which is promoting that, so there's a kind of cultural racism.

So here's an example of where biological racism has given way to a cultural racism, and it's hooked up with this ethnocentrism because there's an idea that there is a homogeneous culture there and this is what the homogeneous culture says and does et cetera.

PETER MARES

So this is how people will behave. This term, AMEMSA, who coins this term? Who uses this term? Is it coming from outside that group?

SALLY HASLANGER

No. There's a small group who is recommending that this be a term that we start to use to recognise this panethnic racialisation. A panethnic group is a group, for example, like Asians or Hispanics, who are multiple ethnicities, but by virtue of racist ideas group them all together as one. But, of course, this group is tremendously heterogeneous. People from Latin America are tremendously heterogeneous culturally, but they're grouped together as if they have a single culture, and that's a problem.

PETER MARES

How important is language here, as the scaffolding of ideology, if you like, of oppressive ideologies?

SALLY HASLANGER

I think it goes both ways. I think language can be tremendously harmful to people when, for example, everyone from the Asian continent is called Asian and they're just treated as a lump of - one amorphous group. That's very damaging and problematic,

but I think that there are ways that people can take back the language and use it.

Black Power was an example. I think AMEMSA is an effort to take some power in saying, yes, this is the group you're talking about and notice it represents that diversity of people to suggest that this is not a homogeneous group.

PETER MARES

So your conclusion, if I can put it this way, is that education and argument are necessary, but not sufficient to enable us to combat ideology, and that there'll always be some kind of cultural framing, some way in which we have shortcuts that enable us to get on together and signal things, but we can make these more just, more egalitarian, more free rather than less. Is that understanding you correctly?

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, it is, but it's important to see that in my view these cultural frames don't come out of the blue. They emerge in practice, because what these cultural frames do is, again, they provide us ways of interacting with each other, ways of recognising each other and such. So if you try and hand someone a cultural frame with no new practice, they're going to go back to the old practice because they've still got to interact with people.

PETER MARES

That's just going to be foreign to them.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, right.

PETER MARES

It has no meaning.

SALLY HASLANGER

It has no meaning and it doesn't affect their behaviour. What you have to do institute new practices, have ways of engaging people in different ways on different terms so that they see that their old frame for interacting with people doesn't work anymore, and they see that it needs to change. So they start developing new patterns of

behaviour that are guided by a different practical consciousness, a different practical orientation.

PETER MARES

So you have to challenge people but, presumably, not confront them so much that they withdraw into their shell and become defensive.

SALLY HASLANGER

Yeah, that's an important part of it, is you have to find a middle ground here. I mean some people should be challenged, and it's important to challenge them even if they do freak out, but I think?

PETER MARES

You mean there are certain lines you have to draw?

SALLY HASLANGER

Yes, exactly, certain lines.

PETER MARES

Say this racism is wrong and just combat it.

SALLY HASLANGER

Just combat it. There are other ways in which I think we can work more effectively to create new ways of living together. This is hard work because it's not as if Sally the white girl is going to tell us how we all ought to live together, because it has to come from bottom up. It's a participatory process. It's a process where you enter into a space where you're uncomfortable and you try to figure out how you can interact with people.

Hopefully, they will welcome you, but they may not welcome you. Then you back off for a bit. It's a slow process to find different ways of living together, but it can start in a household. It can start in a neighbourhood. It can start in a town.

PETER MARES

Workplaces, sporting organisations.

SALLY HASLANGER

Exactly. Academic disciplines. I've been working a lot on our discipline, and it's the sort of thing that if you can build coalitions with other people who are doing it in their neighbourhoods, then, hopefully, you can get momentum. Then the momentum will build. So it's not just oh, let's change our culture, I'm going to give you a new term, but let's change our ways of interacting together, and let's change it together.

PETER MARES

Sally Haslanger, thank you very much for joining us on Up Close.

SALLY HASLANGER

Thank you. It's been a tremendous pleasure.

PETER MARES

Sally Haslanger is the Ford Professor of Philosophy and Women's and Gender Studies in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT in the USA. She's the author of *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. It's published by Oxford University Press, and you'll find more information and relevant links on the Up Close website.

Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia, and this episode was recorded on 11 August 2016. It was produced by Eric van Bommel, with audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. I'm Peter Mares. Thanks for listening. We hope you can join us again soon.

VOICEOVER

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