Part 1: Understanding & Overriding Unconscious Bias

Resources in support of the CIC BELONG Network & ACUE Webinar Series, *It Takes a Village*, Part 1: What the Campus Community Can Do to Mitigate the Impact of Biases and Increase Belonging

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Back in 2012, I attended a large three-day diversity conference in New York City, where I had the opportunity to meet and have meaningful discussions with all kinds of people, similar to and different from myself. I'll never forget what happened on the subway after leaving the conference on the third day. I was riding in a crowded car totally exhausted from the three days of engagement and I just happened to look up and see a young Black man wearing a hoodie. At that very moment, he happened to reach into his pocket. And, I kid you not, the first split-second thought to pop into my head was *gun*. Luckily, the second thought to pop into my head was "Marlo, don't be an idiot and you watch too much TV" (I had in fact been re-watching *The Wire* around that time). I was horrified to realize how automatically my brain associated 'young Black man' with 'gun.' Thus, began my learning journey into the topic of unconscious bias.

I've been learning about and facilitating workshops on unconscious/implicit bias workshops for about seven years now. When I first started, my workshop was 60 minutes long. Because I have continued to read research and do my own internal work over the years, I now need three 90-minute sessions to effectively cover the topic. This 4-part series of articles summarizes what I have learned and what I teach people about understanding and overriding implicit bias.

Part 1: The basics (spoiler: You have biases!)

Part 2: Recognizing your amygdala in action (aka, micromanaging your personal TSA agent)

Part 3: Understanding the impact of fast-thinking on decision-making (aka, learning to mistrust your co-pilot)

Part 4: Strategies for mitigating and overriding implicit bias (spoiler: It's never-ending work!)

Let's start with the basics.

Unconscious bias or Implicit bias? In the literature, the terms unconscious bias and implicit bias are used synonymously (and often simultaneously). In other words, using the term *implicit bias* or *unconscious bias* seems to be a matter of personal or disciplinary preference rather than

any conceptual or practical difference. While it seems impractical to have two words that mean the exact same thing, that's where we are now, so take your pick. I go both ways myself.

You have unconscious biases! This is not insult. It doesn't mean that you are racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise. It simply means that you have a brain. We all have both positive biases and negative biases. Some of our biases are preferences we are fully aware of, such as my bias for any dessert containing chocolate. But the issue we are concerned with here is the problematic nature of our unconscious biases (or blindspots) because they can operate outside of our conscious awareness, yet have an impact on choices we make and things we do.

All biases are not bad! In fact, we need these biases to get through the day**.** Unconscious biases are automated cognitive shortcuts that our brain uses to sort and make sense of a lot of sensory input and information very quickly. Researchers have identified almost 200 types of mental short-cuts (also called heuristics), which you can see summarized in this **nifty graphic**, that we rely on to guide us through the myriad of decision points that we encounter each day. Some decision points are fairly inconsequential such as where to go to lunch, where to sit in a coffee shop, which line to stand in at the supermarket. Our biases also impact more important decisions related to hiring, evaluating, providing services, recommending, disciplining, etc. Most of the time, our cognitive shortcuts work pretty well. However, under certain conditions our unconscious biases can lead to faulty decision-making, sometimes with harmful consequences. More on this in the next few articles.

The impact of bias in decision-making is cumulative and systemic. Negative and positive biases are reoccurring over the lifetime of a person in a wide variety of contexts (employment, education, healthcare, etc.). People who are subject to positive biases often find doors opening for them, while people who are subject to negative biases at best have to open the door themselves, at worst they find it locked or have doors slammed in their face.

And when people in a particular social-identity group, such as women or people of color, are widely and consistently subject to negative biases, it creates systemic disparities in all areas of society such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, and so on. I'll share some research on the impact of biases on important decision-making in a later article.

Our unconscious biases can conflict with conscious feelings. This is the worst part and why many of us are resistant to acknowledging our biases. That's why the White father of a Black adopted daughter **posted a video on Facebook** a few years ago when he realized that even though he loves and cherishes his daughter, he still caught himself making unconscious negative assumptions about a Black man that he saw on the street. He judged the man based on his skin color, the very thing he is worried about happening to his daughter. It was a wake up call for him that he graciously shared with the world.

Not only do we harbor unconscious negative biases towards groups of people who are different from ourselves, we can also unconsciously internalize negative biases towards our own identity groups. So, women can hold implicit biases against women. Black people can have negative implicit biases about Black people. It's hard and horrible to confront these truths, but the reality is that we are all socialized into a society that, from the day we are born, feeds us ideas,

images, assumptions, and stereotypes about groups of people…who is good and respectable; who is dangerous or untrustworthy; who is beautiful; who is a leader; who deserves to be at the bottom. These harmful ideas come at us from all sectors of society, schools, family, and most insidiously through the various types of media that we consume.

So, although we may consciously reject the idea that black men are dangerous or that women are weak, for example, our brains still store this harmful information because we are repeatedly subjected to it through various outlets. Unfortunately, our brains are not trained to seek out complexity, but rather to reduce people to the most easily available information stored in our brain; and sometimes this easily accessible information is garbage that we consciously know not to be true. Luckily, this understanding of how our brains function (and dysfunction) can inform strategies for overriding biases as will be discussed in the next articles.

The good news/bad news is that biases can be overridden, but not overwritten. In other words, our implicit biases exist in deeply engrained neuropathways that cannot be erased. However, through ongoing effort, we can learn to recognize, override, and not act upon our biases…and eventually they get weaker, but they are still there. And so, as I have learned from personal experience, this is ongoing work for a lifetime.

One thing I now always tell people in my workshops is that a one-off workshop is not likely to have any long-term effect (no, you are not cured of your biases by attending my workshop). In fact, research on anti-bias training suggests that such interventions can only be effective if you are:

- aware that you have implicit biases, what they are, and how they function;

- concerned about the impact of biases and are motivated not to act on them;

- engaged in ongoing work to develop a "chronic awareness of bias" (Devine et al., 2012)

Ready to learn more? You can start with **the next article** in the series and/or by taking a few of the **Harvard Implicit Association Tests**, which were designed to measure attitudes and beliefs that may be lying below the surface of your awareness.

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