Beyond Bias: An Introduction to Implicit Bias

Defining Implicit Bias

Also known as implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.

The implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance. These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. In addition to early life experiences, the media and news programming are often-cited origins of implicit associations.

A Few Key Characteristics of Implicit Biases

- Implicit biases are **pervasive**. Everyone possesses them, even people with avowed commitments to impartiality such as judges.

- Implicit and explicit biases are **related but distinct mental constructs**. They are not mutually exclusive and may even reinforce each other.

- The implicit associations we hold **do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs** or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse.

- We generally tend to hold implicit biases that **favor our own ingroup**, though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our ingroup.

- Implicit biases are **malleable**. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques.

Source: Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review* 2015