Implicit Bias and Structural Inequity

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"Implicit biases come from culture. I think of them as the thumbprint of the culture on our minds. Human beings have the ability to learn to associate two things together very quickly—that is innate. What we teach ourselves, what we choose to associate is up to us."

Dr. Mahzarin R. Banaji

Increased interest in the topic of implicit bias provides an opportunity to open and deepen important conversations in our organizations and communities about equity, belonging, and ultimately justice. Most work on implicit bias focuses on increasing awareness of individuals in service of changing how they view and treat others. However, in order to lead to meaningful change, an exploration of implicit bias must be situated as part of a much larger conversation about how current inequities in our institutions came to be, how they are held in place, and what our role as leaders is in perpetuating inequities despite our good intentions. Our success in creating organizations and communities in which everyone has access to the opportunities they need to thrive depends on our ability to confront the history and impacts of structural racism, learn how implicit bias operates, and take action to interrupt inequities at the interpersonal, institutional and structural level.

Implicit bias (also referred to as unconscious bias) is the process of associating stereotypes or attitudes towards categories of people without conscious awareness - which can result in actions and decisions that are at odds with one's intentions or explicit values. This can lead us to make biased and unfair decisions regarding who we hire for a job or select for a promotion, which classes we place students into and who we send out of the classroom for behavior infractions, and which treatment options we make available to patients.

Some have argued that the surge in popularity of the implicit bias field is because it keeps white people safe and does not require them to be accountable for creating and perpetuating systemic oppression and structural inequalities. We understand this caution. Yet, we believe that recent research findings in the field of neuroscience are ultimately cause for optimism and that the uptick in interest in implicit bias "training" in the fields of education, public health,

social services, law enforcement, government and private sector companies is a hopeful sign. The field of neuroscience has shown us that our brains continue to develop and grow well into adulthood. This means that while we cannot avoid mentally absorbing some of the negative stereotypes about groups of people that permeate our culture, the associations and implicit biases that we internalize are malleable. We can, quite literally, change the physiology of our brain, like adding wiring to a house or building a new road in a city. We have the ability to produce new associations which in turn can produce new, more inclusive and equitable, ways of behaving and reacting.

In order to ensure that learning about implicit bias leads to significant and meaningful change toward creating more equitable and inclusive communities and organizations, we offer these important cautions and considerations.

Consideration #1:   Situate learning about implicit bias in a historical and socioeconomic political context.

We are not born with negative biases toward any particular group of people. The biases we have internalized, both consciously and unconsciously, have been "primed" through our experiences – images and messages we receive every day about who is "normal" or "desirable" and "belongs" and who is "different" or "undesirable" and "not one of us." These messages are neither neutral nor random. In the United States, "whiteness" is the dominant and privileged identity; socially constructed to justify conquest and slavery and reified in laws and policies, both historic and current, that ensure that white people benefit disproportionately from the benefits of society and are protected from more of its harms. White supremacy is baked into our country's DNA. As such, what is deemed good and acceptable is normed to white people and we have all, white people and people of color, internalized an "anti-black and brown" bias. The effects of these biases results in both individual and institutional acts and are pervasive across sectors including education, health, employment, and housing. The negative associations and assumptions we make about people of color have been wired into our unconscious mind over hundreds of years and show up in all of our institutions today.

Consideration #2: Highlight and interrogate the ways that current policies and practices create and reproduce inequitable outcomes that serve to reinforce our implicit biases and the ways in which our implicit biases lead us to reify (and justify) existing inequities.

Access to opportunity has never been equitable or fair in the United States. As john powell points out, since our inception as a nation "We the People" only included some people. Housing discrimination, racial segregation, voter suppression, and disinvestment in neighborhoods where people of color live, are a result of explicit policies which produce outcomes that reinforce our biases – whether we are conscious of it or not. It isn't just the media that reinforces our negative racial biases (which it does), it is also the way we have historically and currently denied people of color access to opportunities in and across our communities that reinforces negative associations (crime, unemployment, crumbling infrastructure). In other words, we design policies and practices that disproportionately benefit white people and exclude and harm people of color and then use the negative outcomes the policies produce as evidence of racial superiority and inferiority.

For example, our inequitable structural arrangements mean that children of color are much more likely to grow up in poverty and attend underfunded, under-resourced schools with other students of color living in poverty. When these students, who have very likely had less experienced teachers, larger class sizes, and fewer extracurricular and enrichment activities score below state standards, the discourse that accompanies this fact most often focuses on what "extra" supports are needed for these students as if the problem is somehow located in *the student* and not in the material conditions of their educational experiences. The structural arrangement produces the outcomes (low achievement for student of color), but the outcomes produce and reinforce associations in our minds between students of color and lower academic performance.

Similarly, we now live in neighborhoods that are more racially segregated than they were in the 1960s. This means that many white children grow up with very little interaction with people of color. It may also mean that the primary way white people learn about people of color are through media depictions which often serve to perpetuate harmful negative stereotypes. To complicate things further, in their own segregated communities, they may only see people of color working in lower paying service positions such as gardeners, house cleaners, dishwashers in restaurants, security guards in their schools, lunchroom supervisors, or bus drivers. What are they learning? What messages are being reinforced unconsciously every day by simply walking around in their communities? What children see and experience every day attaches to messages about "those people" that are fed to their brains without their conscious awareness. In this way, white children (and people) living in racially segregated neighborhoods are primed to make associations between people of color and violence, crime and lower status positions.

This plays out within racially diverse schools as well. For example, in schools we often see the majority of African American and Latino kids placed in the lower track classes while "honors" and "gifted" classes are most often filled with white students. As a result, our mind consciously and unconsciously starts to associate African American and Latino kids with being less intelligent, less capable. (Note again that student placement patterns are the result of both the structural arrangements and policies governing schooling and the discretion of individual teachers and counselors.) Now picture a new student of color walking into the school. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we may assume that student should not be placed in the honors track. Even if we consciously and intellectually understand that intelligence is malleable and evenly distributed across the human race, what our mind sees day-to-day in our communities and schools are conditions that create associations that reinforce negative assumptions about the academic ability of students of color. When, based on this implicit assumption, we place the new student of color into a lower and less rigorous track, we reproduce the inequity and the vicious cycle of structural racism and implicit bias continues.

Another example relevant for educators is the issue of student discipline. We are barraged with images of African American and Latino men and boys' mug shots in the media. There have been numerous studies (IAT and others) that show that we associate black and brown boys with aggression and violence; we have been primed to do so since before the United States was a country. As early as preschool, we are viewing the same behaviors very differently for different groups of children, attributing aggression to boys of color. One preschool study showed that when teachers were told there may be challenging behavior in their preschool classroom, they watched black boys significantly more than other children even though all the children were behaving well. Black preschoolers are more likely to receive suspensions than white preschoolers. Throughout their educational experience, African American and Latino students are more likely to be disciplined harshly and sent out of class. We walk by the school office and we see African American students sitting there - in trouble. Consciously or not, our mind begins to make associations between African American and Latino students and misbehavior in school. When we interact with these students, we carry those associations and assumptions with us. We don't consciously THINK we are doing this, but we are. We perceive the same behavior from a student of color in the classroom as threatening and disruptive and are more likely to send that student out to a system of harsher punishment.

PRIMING, ASSOCIATIONS, ASSUMPTIONS

HISTORY, POLICIES, PRACTICES

For Example:
- *Voting Rights*
- *FHA Loans*
- *Residential segregation*
- *Access to education, green space, resources, safety, healthcare, etc.*
- *Jobs, hiring and advancement*

Implicit Bias

Structural Racism

INEQUITABLE OUTCOMES & RACIAL DISPARITIES

Dominant narratives about race (family, media, society) coupled with racialized structural arrangements and differential outcomes by race all **prime** us to believe that people of color are inferior to white people, create and maintain harmful associations, and lead us to make harmful assumptions, consciously and unconsciously, about people of color
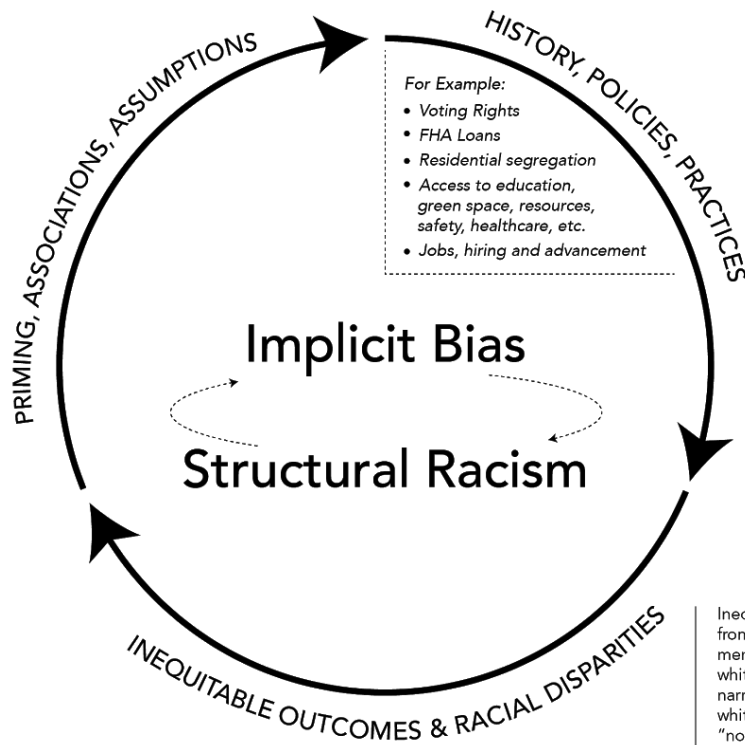
Race is created to justify enslaving people from Africa (economic engine of country)

Policies and practices that consolidate and protect power bestow unearned economic, social, cultural, and political **advantage** to people called "white," and unearned **disadvantage** to people of color

National narrative (ideology, belief system) about people of color being "less than" human (and less than white) justifies mistreatment and inequality (white supremacy)

Inequitable outcomes and experiences resulting from policy decisions in health, housing, employment, education, and life expectancy - reinforces white supremacist beliefs and ideology; dominant narrative uses disparate outcomes as evidence of white superiority, promotes whiteness as "normal" and desirable and justifies inequality

Consideration #3: Understand that structural racism, othering, and exclusion have become normalized and result in policies and practices that ensure access to opportunity for some and exclude others.

Part of what allows these harmful associations and assumptions about people of color to endure is the fact that we have come to accept the structural and institutional inequities we have created as normal. We see neighborhoods with vastly different resources and most days we carry on with our lives accepting that this is just "how it is." We have come to accept the current inequitable conditions – it's the water we swim in. But the current conditions are NOT NATURAL and are not normal. We created them through laws and policies that have created advantage for some particularly white people and disadvantage for others particularly people of color. By default, we accept these structural inequities as normal and we mostly try to help kids and families of color survive, and maybe do a little bit better, while living under inequitable conditions in a system that was not designed for their success. As educators, social

workers, nurses, doctors, we are doing our best to meet the needs of the populations we serve. This is our job and the work that we do matters. However, it is critical to periodically step back and problematize the current structural conditions that have produced the inequitable outcomes and therefore the harmful associations and biases. Our work as advocates and providers is to make these inequitable conditions visible and consider the ways in which our programs and services may be designed without sufficient consideration of how different populations are "situated" to opportunity in our communities and how implicit bias may be playing out in our own policies and practices.

Consideration #4: Don't confuse the fact that "we all have implicit biases" with immunity from responsibility as the benefactors of the current inequitable structural arrangements.

It can come as a relief to white people to find out that people of color have also internalized negative racial biases. It shouldn't. While it is true that none of us are immune to the negative narratives and images we receive via the media, our families, in our communities, in literature, etc., the fact that we have all internalized these biases makes us no less responsible for their negative effects. Awareness of how implicit bias operates requires us to become even more vigilant and comes with an even greater level of responsibility to interrupt biases when we see them, in ourselves and others, and to dismantle the structures that created and perpetuate systems of othering. Understanding how implicit bias operates within each of us does not let us off the hook, rather it illuminates the ways that we may be unknowingly contributing to inequities at the interpersonal, institutional, or structural level and pushes us to think critically and creatively about how to create inclusive communities in which everyone belongs and has what they need to thrive.

Consideration #5: We are all connected – our fates our linked. Working for social justice is not about "helping those kids" or "those communities", but

about dismantling structures that exclude, increasing access to opportunity and building healthy, inclusive communities in which we all belong and can thrive.

Now let's connect all of this to the concepts of "belonging" and "othering." Belonging is more than just "feeling included." john powell makes the case that "in a legitimate democracy, belonging means that your well-being is considered and your ability to design and give meaning to its structures and institutions is realized."   Our need to connect is as fundamental as our need for food and water. Across many studies of mammals, from the smallest rodents all the way to us humans, the data suggests that we are profoundly shaped by our social environment and that we suffer greatly when our social bonds are threatened or severed. This is why our brains evolved to experience threats to our social connections in much the same way they experience physical pain. By activating the same neural circuitry that causes us to feel physical pain, our experience of social pain helps ensure the survival of our children and ensures that staying socially connected will be a lifelong need, like food and warmth. Deep down we know that belonging is essential to survival and we resist any attempts to be divided from each other. However, although we are hard wired for belonging, we have become soft wired for othering.

Othering is defined as "a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities." Othering is artificial; we have created it. For example, racial discrimination in our laws, real estate practices, and banking industry meant that people of color have not had access to home ownership, the primary driver of wealth accumulation in the United States. This form of othering has become institutionalized and its harmful effects can be seen in every major city today.

Yet, it is NOT in our nature to "other." One can see evidence of this during natural disasters. When a devastating earthquake hit the San Francisco area in 1989, the impulse to help other human beings superseded any biases about one another's differences as people helped each other out of the rubble. When the World Trade Center towers fell, people helped each other without regard to race as they ran from the ashes. These are the times when we truly experience our linked fates and our hard wiring kicks into action, human being to human being.

With this in mind, the health and well-being of our communities can be measured by the extent to which all of its members experience a sense of belonging and have access to and benefit from the opportunities available. Numerous studies from across the globe have shown that when we have inequality, it is not just the marginalized who suffer, but rather exclusion hurts us

all. Extreme inequality reduces quality of life, life expectancy, and social cohesion which in turn lead to greater isolation and increased rates of poverty and racial tension. As we delve into an exploration of implicit bias, we are called to look at the extent to which our policies, practices, and ways of communicating create a sense of belonging for every member of our communities and to identify those policies, practices, and narratives that create or perpetuate othering in any form.

Consideration #6: Any effort to interrupt implicit bias and its impacts must be accompanied by efforts to dismantle structures that exclude and build structures that provide access to opportunity or create new opportunities.

As we have seen, inequitable structural arrangements produce and reinforce implicit biases. Therefore, any effort to mitigate implicit biases and interrupt their harmful effects must include strategies focused on changing *structures*. Yes, we need to increase our self-awareness and interrogate how biases may be playing out and shaping our interactions and decision making. We need to actively work to change the narrative about people and communities, to actively do stereotype replacement, and intentionally build more relationships and connections across differences to build new neural pathways. However, in order for any of this to lead to meaningful change toward equity and justice, we must also dismantle the policies and practices in our organizations and communities that create and perpetuate inequities in the first place.

About the National Equity Project

The **National Equity Project** (www.nationalequityproject.org) is a U.S. based leadership and organizational development non-profit committed to increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated, and just communities. Our mission is to transform the experiences, outcomes, and life options for children and families who have been historically underserved by our institutions and systems.

About the Authors

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As Regional Director, Kathleen supports a team of staff to provide coaching and strategic advising to leaders in school districts, non-profits, foundations, and national networks who are committed to designing equitable policies and practices and leading equity-focused system change efforts. Kathleen has provided executive leadership coaching and organizational development consultation to non-profit leaders in the fields of education, youth development, social and health services, philanthropy, and cross-sector initiatives aimed at improving the experiences and outcomes for youth and families who have been marginalized by historic and current policies and practices. Her work has focused on the intersection of racial and social justice and the development and implementation of policies and programs that facilitate belonging, whole child wellness, adolescent identity development and learning. Prior to joining the National Equity Project in 1997, Kathleen worked as a School Social Worker and Project Facilitator for the Comer School Development Program in the Chicago Public Schools where she led the development of school-community partnerships and facilitated multi-disciplinary teams responsible for meeting the academic and social emotional needs of children and families. Kathleen has also served as a bilingual kindergarten teacher and has done extensive research on educational approaches aimed at meeting the needs of racially and culturally diverse learners. Kathleen earned her undergraduate degree from the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio and a Masters in Social Work from the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.

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Hugh is a Senior Associate with the National Equity Project with responsibility for developing and expanding the leadership for equity work throughout the country. Previous to the National Equity Project he co-founded the Todos Alliance Building Institute, and organization dedicated to creating youth activists who worked to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression in their schools and communities. Hugh has also served as Executive Director of the San Francisco Education Fund, an organization focused on equity in education. He has worked with hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals to address issues of race, gender, class and other social divisions throughout the county. Hugh is a primary cast member in the award-winning film *The Color of Fear*, a documentary that has advanced understanding of issues of race and privilege throughout the United States and was invited to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show. He has authored a number of articles on race, community building, and culture and is a national speaker with Speak Out, a non-profit dedicated to social justice education. Hugh has a Masters Degree in Social Work from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He resides in the San Francisco Bay area.