



# ND Child Welfare Supervision

## IMPLICIT BIAS:

### WHAT IS IT AND WHY DO WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT IT?

Often when we think of bias, our mind immediately makes a negative connection, and most often this is related to race, culture, or gender. The fact is that bias, and specifically, implicit bias, can encompass much more than that and it impacts all of us.

What is implicit bias? Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes and stereotypes we hold about people or groups, influencing our behaviors and decisions without our conscious awareness. These biases are formed through our individual experiences and upbringings, and they can impact how we perceive and interact with others.

According to Forbes Magazine (2024) our brains “experience 11 million bits of information in one single moment and we can only process 40 bits at a time”. In response to that stimuli, our brains create “mental shortcuts” to help us “comprehend and manage an infinitely complex world.” (Devine, 2022). These mental short cuts are predominately unconscious, and automatic, they require little effort and help us navigate through our day. They are influenced by our experiences from birth to present, impacted by our caregivers, peers and teachers. While these mental shortcuts can help us make sense of the world and guide us in how to differentiate between what is important and what to ignore; they also are prone to error. In our day to day life, the impact of these maybe minimal; however, if they are left unchecked, they may negatively impact the children and families that we work with in very significant ways as well as negatively impact our work environments (Devine 2022).

# Type of Implicit Bias and how it may impact our work.

There are many types of implicit bias but let's take a look at just two different types of bias that may impact the work at different levels.

## **Confirmation Bias**

Devine (2022) defines confirmation bias as our “tendency to find or filter only the information that supports our pre existing view or a conclusion that we have made”. In child welfare, this may mean that once we have formed an opinion about an individual or a situation, we may find it difficult to accept new information that is not in line with our perception. We may therefore avoid getting information from collaterals that would cause us to question our view or we may discredit individuals who provide a different perspective. For instance, if I hold strongly the perception that the mother that I am meeting with has a drug addiction and that is the only thing that I believe to be true, I may not seek additional information from other collaterals, or believe information that is brought forth that does not support that hypothesis.

This also can come into play in the work environment as well. We may have a belief that a worker we are supervising is not committed to the work and is considered a “slacker”. So, instead of looking at his/her performance overall and taking in feedback from others about their work, as a supervisor I only look for information that supports my hypothesis that they are not committed to the work, citing perhaps when they arrive late or leave early, not noting how they are at times working through lunch, assisting their colleagues with after hour placements, or meeting with families in the evening.

## **Affinity Bias**

Affinity bias is our tendency to assess others on “like me” factors. We tend to judge those with similar attributes as ourselves ( i.e. they may look similar, be of a similar age, or be in the same income bracket) as having more positive attributes. This happens to most of us , as we like to surround ourselves with people like us; people with similar values, personalities, interests and cultural backgrounds. In child welfare, if this is not in check, it could lead us to make errors in assessing for safety. We may consider a parent that is similar to ourself, as a “safe parent” despite the fact that additional information may indicate otherwise.

In the workplace, it may lead to a tendency to hire individuals similar to myself (they may look like me or have attended the same college), even though they may not be the most qualified for the job.

It is important to note that when we feel stressed or unsupported, our capacity for critical thinking becomes compromised and we rely more on automatic and unconscious thoughts to drive our decisions. Therefore, this clearly can become an obstacle when we are dealing with situations around safety of children when quick decisions must be made.

# So now that I know about implicit bias, what can i do?

1. **Recognize that our mind uses these mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.** We don't get a choice in whether we have them or not. Recognizing that we all come with implicit bias and having self-awareness to notice when they are impacting our decision is the first step.
2. **Learn about individuals that are different from yourself.** Consider connecting with someone of a different gender, race, culture, orientation or age . Seeing things from other's perspective can help us avoid biased decisions.
3. **Remember that good supervision helps worker's to adjust their perspective,** to question whether or not they have all of the critical information needed, even if it doesn't align with their original hypothesis.
4. **Additional questions to consider within child welfare include:**
  - What's an alternative explanation for the situation or the behavior?
  - What would someone who disagreed with this point say?
  - Are there any essential factors that we have not considered?
  - Have we given too much weight to some evidence and overlooked other evidence?
  - Have we separated facts from assumptions?
  - If you find yourself making absolute statements about others, using strong words like "always" and "all", ask yourself how accurate this is, and whether you have evidence to back up your claim.
5. **Get training and education around bias and how to address it in the work place.** "The more we are aware of our biases, the less likely we are to act on them or let them control us. The right training program can help you change your mindset." (Gouldsberry 2023)

Adapted from: "How cognitive biases derail our decision making in social work, and what we can do about it." ( Devine, Richard; 2022; retrieved on April 7, 2025 from: <https://richarddevinesocialwork.com/2022/07/26/how-cognitive-biases-derail-our-decision-making-in-social-work-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/>; "What is Perception Bias? Definition & Examples" (Nikolopoulou, Kassiani , 2023; retrieved on April 8, 2025 from: <https://www.scribbr.com/research-bias/perception-bias/>; "Unconscious Bias Examples and How to Overcome Them" (Gouldsberry, 2023; retrieved on April 8, 2025 from: <https://www.betterworks.com/magazine/unconscious-bias-examples-and-how-to-overcome-them/>; "What is Affinity Bias and Why Does it Matter?" ( Kratz, Julie; 2024; retrieved on April 8, 2025 from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliekratz/2024/02/21/what-is-affinity-bias-and-why-does-it-matter/dd> a little bit of body text

**Join us in Fargo on May 20<sup>th</sup> to have more conversations around implicit bias.**

**Free Training Opportunity for Zone Supervisors & Directors**

## The Impact of Implicit Bias

As a supervisor, you know that implicit bias can have an immense impact on the individuals & families that are served by your agency. It can derail good intentions & cause unwanted outcomes. Because implicit bias operates unconsciously, we need to be intentional about building the skill to recognize & address it. When implicit bias is at play in program spaces, some people may be excluded, insulted, or experience unequal access to opportunities. This can negatively impact their wellbeing & harm your relationship with them. This session explores the concept of implicit bias & the impact it has on people & systems. Supervisors will learn & discuss what can be done personally & within systems to lessen pervasiveness of bias.

**Register Here**

**NDBSWE CEU's will be provided.**

Join trainers,  
Joel Friesz & Laetitia Mizero Hellerud  
9 am - 3:30 pm on  
May 20, 2025  
Holiday Inn - Fargo ND

To book your room at the state rate, call 701-282-2700 and ask for the "Supervisor Training" group. Room Block will be held until April 19, 2025