A hidden connection is stronger than an obvious one. —Heraclitus of Ephesus

As affordable housing and community development professionals in America, we know that a better future for our communities is based, in part, on overcoming a prior shared history of racial and ethnic barriers to full participation in our collective society. That includes overcoming our patterns of housing and economic segregation. We must address...
both the continuing echoes of our past as well as current systemic issues—issues that continue to make themselves apparent in our Housing Choice Voucher program utilization, which are amplified in some cases in programs like the Small Area Fair Market Rent. Issues in siting through our use of federal housing and new markets tax credits and, even absent past offenses such as redlining, continuing disparate impacts in our mortgage products and in our business development patterns.

Today, access to improved data collection, scientific, medical and neurological advances give us more understanding than we have ever had of the complex web of interdependence and how they impact housing, community and economic development. This has the ability to drive new ways to create community and equity in our society. But to get there, we must first understand ourselves and how our unconscious choices collectively shape our current reality.

Although my local area—the Sacramento Valley and its cities and counties—is a very diverse region, with a high commitment to equal opportunity, we don’t always feel we make enough headway towards a more inclusive community, whether locally or generally. While the world at large has made real strides towards a more equitable society since the 1950s and 1960s, work still needs to be done. Our shared values are not always reflected in the even distribution of opportunities for where people live, the types of jobs and education available and the chance of upward mobility.

How can we address social and institutional disparity? One way is to recognize that these outward patterns are representative of internal, unconscious behaviors rooted in our neuroscience. Before we can fix the world, we must first recognize how we view the world. We must become conscious of the shortcuts our brain uses to handle information and how those shortcuts shortchange us all in our planning and implementation of programs and projects.

This year, I was lucky to participate in implicit bias training through the American Leadership Forum (ALF) Mountain Valley Chapter, and would like to share some of what I learned and how this affected my viewpoint, both personally and professionally.

What is Implicit Bias?

Since the early 2000’s, scientists have known that implicit biases are activated involuntarily, without our control or even our awareness. Implicit bias is very different from explicit bias and from racism, both of which are conscious attitudes and beliefs and which may even be concealed if they are perceived to be socially or politically incorrect. Implicit bias is different. The social scientist, David Williams, probably stated it best, “This is the frightening point: because [implicit bias] is an automatic and unconscious process, people who engage in this unthinking discrimination are not aware of the fact that they do it.”

According to the Kirwan Institute, at the most basic level, implicit bias involves attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner. It is activated without conscious awareness or intentional control. It is an involuntary response that can be either positive or negative. No one is immune and everyone has it.

But, where does it come from? And how is it formed? There has
Implicit bias, if left unchecked, is insidious and it influences every decision we make, every action we take.

The Undiscovered Country—Our Brains

Ironically, implicit bias is an equal opportunity problem that affects all human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, disability, gender or sexual orientation. It comes from the fundamental way in which our brains operate.

The human brain weighs about three pounds, which is about 2 percent of the average body weight of a person. But it consumes 25 percent of our oxygen and burns 20 percent of our total calories. The brain is a busy place, with 400 miles of capillaries (small blood vessels), 86 billion neurons in constant communication and it makes 10 quadrillion calculations every second, give or take a trillion or two. Each neuron, in turn, reaches out and touches other neurons, making connections with others, which adds up to a dizzying 500 trillion connections. Each of these is doing really complex things all the time, such as how and what we feel, how we process images, how we think, how we learn, building and retrieving memory, doing pattern recognition and running our entire personal “eco” system. Is it any wonder the brain creates shortcuts to efficiently handle the information flow?

These shortcuts come in two interrelated forms: system thinking and unconscious association shortcuts. Below is a good example of how your mind creates shortcuts using its processing and cognition tools to solve a problem: 

Read the following paragraph and two statements (from Cambridge University’s MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit)

You’ve probably seen similar tests on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. While it can be difficult to get started, after a very short time, it’s easy to read what’s written. These shortcuts are embedded into how our mind operates. One of the most popular
theories regarding how this works is based on the Dual Systems Theory, also known as System 1 and System 2 thinking. This dual process theory states that thought comes about in two (2) different ways. These processes consist of an automatic, unconscious process (implicit) and a controlled, conscious process (explicit). A good way to visualize this is in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System 1</th>
<th>System 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unconscious</td>
<td>Conscious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Deliberate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effortless</td>
<td>Takes Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formed from mental associations, habits, messaging we receive from the environment</td>
<td>Formed through interaction, study, education, persuasion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why do these unconscious systems matter? According to the Kirwan Institute, only about 2 percent of emotional cognition is consciously available to us. Behavioral economists such as Kahneman have shown that System 1 thinking creates mental shortcuts in decision making. And these processes tend to become more dominant in decision making when people are cognitively busy, under time pressure and distracted. Which is a pretty good description of our everyday world in this modern age.

It helps to think of this in an evolutionary sense—in our earlier days, we humans needed to focus a lot of time and energy on not dying prematurely, on not being eaten, on getting enough to eat that wasn’t poisonous or taken from us and on having a safe place to sleep. We needed to make quick decisions about whether something was friendly or dangerous. Today, we think of this as the “fight or flight” response and we often feel it in situations where we feel anxious or at risk. Our System 1 thinking has evolved into a very efficient, but not always correct, pattern sorter: eat/don’t eat; dangerous/safe; outgroup (suspect)/ ingroup (safe); fight/flight.
This base pattern sorter helps create the unconscious associations we keep in our subconscious that cause us to have feelings and attitudes about others based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age and appearance—who is part of the ingroup, who is the outgroup, who is safe and who is suspect. All of which, in turn, unconsciously influences at a fundamental level who we believe is “deserving”; who is and isn’t “dangerous”; who needs to be controlled; who has the “right” to certain things and who doesn’t. And we organize our world accordingly over and over again.

The Unexamined Life Affects Us All

By now you might be saying, “wait a minute, that doesn’t sound right. How could there be two different thought processes going on in my mind and how can I not know that?” Also, you might be feeling anxiety, doubt or even anger—“I’m not racist/sexist/homophobic/ageist/something else and I have never discriminated against anyone.” Congratulations! That is pretty much the natural response of just about everyone everywhere, including me.

Many of us who are well educated or who have been to college, have a graduate degree or have finished law or medical school, have been trained to think logically. As a result, we believe we can be truly objective and we buy into the “myth of objectivity.” In reality, no one is completely objective. We all shape our world through our own perceptions. If you are colorblind, dyslexic, left-handed, or have another cognitive difference, you see firsthand on a daily basis how your perceptions differ from those around you. We all need the unique perspectives of one another to begin to truly understand our shared reality.

Even though implicit bias is hidden, there are nevertheless moments when we can glimpse this System 1 thinking in action in our own lives. Remember that implicit bias is involuntary, unconscious and can be both positive and negative. Good examples of it in action include that moment when you hit the brakes hard and automatically put out your hand to protect your child, even though you consciously know s/he is wearing a seatbelt.

Other examples include when you suddenly think you are driving in an unsafe neighborhood and instinctively hit the door locks. When you move your purse to your other shoulder as a stranger passes you on the street. When you automatically do the mental checklist as you see a police car behind you (hands on the wheel where they can be seen, checking the speedometer, thinking about where your license, registration, insurance are and whether your tags are up to date). In an eligibility interview when you’re sure someone is concealing something from you even when you can’t prove it. When you call people homeless after they’ve moved into their new home. When you can’t understand how those people can live the way they do.

The actions above can be both positive or negative. It’s important to understand that the problem doesn’t arise because of the action, it only arises when those actions happen because of an implicit bias you don’t realize you have and that bias affects your actions and hijacks your decision making. When you put out your hand to protect your child, that has the positive connotation of being a protective parent. When you are a man and the passenger is a female coworker, well, maybe not so much.

If the neighborhood is truly unsafe, you are prudent. But if the only reason you lock your doors is because the people who live there are predominantly a different color from your own, that is your bias showing. When you’re trying to uncover fraud in an interview, questioning is valuable, but if you’re only sure they’re lying because you’ve
“seen it before” with “those people” or if you’ve just gotten in the habit of assuming someone who was homeless still fits the stereotype of homelessness even when housed, then that bias has implications that will carry over into public decision making about who gets services, what kinds of services they get, who gets a termination of assistance and who gets a warning, where you decide to build new housing, who gets different types of healthcare interventions, or the type and length of jail time and social interventions to prevent recidivism in our justice system. If you think these biases don’t have an impact, below is an example of implicit bias in action from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (posted in August by the Southern Poverty Law Center on Twitter):

But where do our implicit biases originate? They are formed from direct and indirect action and messaging in our communities, our neighborhoods, with our coworkers, at home, at church, in the media. It’s in how we present our history, the art we choose and even in the toys our children play with. Studies show that implicit bias begins to form in very early childhood. In the United States, experiments have shown that even small children show implicit bias towards dominant in-group culture (to see it for yourself, check out the YouTube Video “Doll Test Implicit Bias”).

As you can see from the media example above, bias and cueing in social constructs can be seen on the Internet. It’s on television, in our books, at our dinner tables, with the conversations you have with your friends and in the word choices used by the media. While the examples chosen for this article highlight examples from the dominant U.S. culture, implicit bias is no respecter of race, ethnicity, culture, age, gender or sexual orientation. It affects us all. For some good information and links, check out the 2015 CNN article: “4 Ways You Might Be Displaying Hidden Bias in Everyday Life.” www.cnn.com/2015/11/24/living/implicit-bias-tests-feat/index.html

To begin to understand your own implicit biases, I recommend the Harvard Implicit Bias test (also known as the IAT), which you can find at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html. Like many others who have taken the test, you might be surprised by what you learn.

**Next Steps:**

**Debiasing and Interventions**

If implicit bias is so hidden and insidious, how do we uncover it and adjust for it? How do we adjust our programs and projects to account for it? The way to begin is first through implicit bias training. The use of interactive exercises allow participants to experience the workings, quirks and limitations of their own brain. As someone who has been through this training, it’s truly enlightening. This training also provides an understanding of the cognitive processes that create bias in ourselves and in our social institutions. These institutions are the structures and anchors of our reality.

The second tier is to interrupt the decision-making cycle at the
unconscious level where bias exists so that more thoughtful and questioning processes can ultimately lead to more equitable outcomes. According to the Race Equity Project, interventions fall into these broad categories:

1. Interventions to change an individual's implicit associations;
2. Interventions to debias a process.

**Interventions to Reduce Individual Bias**

- Raise awareness of implicit bias. Below is a good example of using a meme to raise awareness of Implicit Bias and thereby change the conversation.
- Create a foundation for understanding implicit bias.
- Provide ongoing training for staff.
- Cultivate and maintain a diverse applicant pool and staff. Use internship or fellowship opportunities that use the same hiring criteria as a way to improve hiring opportunities for diversity.
- Foster and reward collegiality and not hierarchy in working groups. Allow diverse leadership in working groups.
- Challenge staff to recognize stereotypes and work on conscious control. Replace stereotypical responses with non-stereotypical responses. Interrupt the automatic deployment of stereotypical associations. This is especially valuable in project design, eligibility determinations and program termination processes.
- Make time to use the implicit bias tests (IAT) to uncover your own personal implicit biases. If you are aware of your internal bias, you are less likely to act on it.

**Interventions to Debias the Decision-Making Process**

The graphic at right is a great example in a meme of what not to do. But to create non-biased group decisions, the following are some good starting places:

- Internal motivation to good decision making is more effective than fear of external judgment.
- Encourage a desire to be fair. Maintain clarity of purpose.
- State or restate equitable goals that counter activation of automatic stereotypes. Have clear criteria.
- Challenge too much in-group comfort. Create doubt about individual objectivity—encourage individuals to be skeptical about the process.
- Work consciously to close opportunity gaps.
- Be mindful. Implicit biases are stronger when automaticity kicks in.

Equity, resilience, community improvement and personal achievement are the hallmarks of our housing programs. We provide hope and stability. But our programs have also been marred by continued patterns of unequal application, racism, segregation and ostracism. We are in the midst of great change, but our mission to improve the lives of our community members must continue—and we need to do it without precon-
ceptions, without easy answers, without bias.
We can, and we must, move forward together. We can, and we must, overcome our history and prior patterns. But if we are not aware of our inherent and implicit biases, if we only continue to function at the level of task driven understanding to solve immediate issues without thinking deeper, blinded by the myth of our own objectivity and anchored in our institutional and personal biases, we will continue to endlessly repeat past failures. We can do better. And the answer lies within all of us.

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