**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.

**Implicit Biases Predict Behavior in the Real World**

Extensive research has documented the disturbing effects of implicit racial biases in a variety of realms ranging from classrooms to courtrooms to hospitals.  Consider these examples:

* A 2012 study used identical case vignettes to examine how pediatricians’ implicit racial attitudes affect treatment recommendations for four common pediatric conditions.  Results indicated that as pediatricians’ pro-White implicit biases increased, they were more likely to prescribe painkillers for vignette patients who were White as opposed to Black.  This is just one example of how understanding implicit racial biases may help explain differential health care treatment, even for youths.
* Other research explored the connection between criminal sentencing and Afrocentric features bias, which refers to the generally negative judgments and beliefs that many people hold regarding individuals who possess Afrocentric features such as dark skin, a wide nose, and full lips.  Researchers found that when controlling for numerous factors (e.g., seriousness of the primary offense, number of prior offenses, etc.), individuals with the most prominent Afrocentric features received longer sentences than their less Afrocentrically featured counterparts.
* This phenomenon was observed intraracially in both their Black and White male inmate samples.

**Barriers to Opportunity: Implicit Bias & Structural Racialization**

As the Kirwan Institute works to create a just and inclusive society where all people and communities have opportunity to succeed, we have become increasingly mindful of how race and cognition factors such as implicit bias can operate in conjunction with structural racialization.  Together these two powerful forces create barriers that impede access to opportunity across many critical life domains such as housing, education, health, and criminal justice.

As convincing research evidence accumulates, it becomes difficult to understate the importance of considering the role of implicit racial biases when analyzing societal inequities.  Implicit biases, explicit biases, and structural forces are often mutually reinforcing.  The Kirwan Institute is committed to raising awareness of the distressing impacts of implicit racial bias and exposing the ways in which this phenomenon creates and reinforces racialized barriers to opportunity.

“Understanding Implicit Bias.” *Implicit Bias.* The Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. Copyright 2015. Accessed Sept 19 2017.

<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>. Accessed Sept 19 2017