You're Biased

But that's okay. Everyone is, and you might be able to jettison some of it.

By Jim Paterson

Like it or not, research shows time and again that despite our best intentions, we make assumptions about others—judgments based on sweeping cultural or racial stereotypes, preconceptions our parents quietly fostered, or even someone's clothing style or resemblance to a middle school bully.

And to make matters worse, we often don't even know we're doing it.

Researchers, however, also are finding that while it's hard to identify and dismiss all these assumptions, we can grow to understand and combat them with some work, which is important when we're making judgments about young people and their futures every day.

"We are imperfect and have preconceived ideas about people," said Lisa Sohmer, director of college counseling at Garden School in New York City, and a former NACAC board member and college consultant who has been involved in the issue of equity. "So it's important for us to be honest and to be clear about the assumptions we make."

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Experts say counselors in most cases can likely temper intentional, visible "explicit" bias, but subtler "implicit" bias, which occurs in a different part of the brain entirely, is much harder to avoid. "It's not something we 'live' with, but it is something that is 'triggered' within us from time-to-time," said Rakin Hall, associate director of admissions at the University of Southern California, who has studied the issue. Implicit bias involves "quick brain thinking" and likely comes from personal experience, he said.

For example, one counselor might *explicitly* determine at some point that students from Nebraska just don't as a group have the ability to do college-level work and judge them that way. Another might be magnanimous toward Nebraskans, but have been threatened by a gang of Nebraska students or been raised in an environment where they were disliked—and therefore *implicitly* assess them all unfairly without even knowing it.

A CHECK-IN FOR YOU

In an effort to find a solution to implicit bias, researchers found "people must be *aware* of their biases and *concerned* about the consequences before they will exert effort to eliminate them." They also reported they should understand when they are likely to occur and ways they can replace them.

Here are some potential solutions:

- **Lighten up.** Tight deadlines, stress, or high emotions tend to cause us to show bias along with a lack of focus. Recognize your emotions and take notes or summarize and make sure you clearly understand the things a student says are important to them.
- **Look inward.** Think about your bias. Become aware of feelings you have about a student without reason. Think about what it felt like when you were once pre-judged. Think about the conditions or environment when it occurs. Some experts recommend "counter imaging"—intentionally developing an entirely different thought or image of an opposite assessment than your first impulse suggests.
- **Get info.** Not having good information about specific student or the criteria under which you should be assessing them can cause your biases to have more power. Getting to know more about cultures, races, or other groups of people is a good way to diminish your preconceived notions. Have genuine interaction with others who you might not normally. Ask questions. Change up the geographical and socioeconomic places or types of students you work with if you can.
- **Check on yourself.** Often we are aware of our bias to some degree, and by talking about them and asking others we can understand them better. Researchers found making mistakes and showing a bias—then correcting—helps us become more aware.
- **Be upfront.** If you know something about yourself, consider telling the student or family you are working with when appropriate, reassuring them that you can objectively help.
- **Look back.** Think about your history, personal circumstances, or the situation you are in and how they affect your perceptions—a bad day, a threatening environment, a student late for an appointment, or a group of students who acts casually when you are used to more order.

In the exhaustive report *The Nature of Implicit Bias*, psychology professors Curtis Hardin of City University of New York and Mahzarin Banaji at Harvard say the distinction is important. "The common view of prejudice is incomplete, even dangerously so," they say. "Prejudice and stereotyping in social judgment and behavior does not require personal animus, hostility or even awareness. In fact, prejudice is often… unwitting, unintentional, and uncontrollable—even among the most well-intentioned people."

They found, in fact, that an overemphasis on very conspicuous explicit bias causes us to ignore subtler assumptions. Other research shows that implicit bias may be even stronger and more stubborn.

But the two researchers say while this tendency "remains stubbornly immune to individual efforts to wish it away," they are optimistic that we can change (see sidebar above).

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IT HAPPENS

Marie Bigham, a former NACAC board member and college counselor, and now director of college counseling at the Isidore Newman School in New Orleans, has seen various types of bias, including gender assumptions at a student recognition activity where girls were uniformly praised for soft skills such as their "willingness to ask questions," while boys were recognized for being competitive, aggressive, and determined.

She notes that she often received contrary guidance about career choice as a half Irish/Scottish and half Vietnamese woman. "There were two very different conflicting messages: As an Asian you must be good in math or you are lazy. As a girl, you can't really be good in math. It was very confusing, and later made me think hard about this and how I'm judging students," she said.

She believes that beyond big issues of gender or race, a simple negative interaction with a certain type of person can influence us, especially during formative adolescent years.

"If a woman had a bad experience with a guy on the lacrosse team, she might view lacrosse players differently. I was a glass blower in college. In college admission, if a glass blower came into the room, I'd recommend him. I know it."

Sohmer said we might assume that students who are from a "bad neighborhood" will lack certain skills or preparedness, or that first-generation parents who don't communicate with counselors or attend their events won't support their child, when they simply may be busy at two jobs or embarrassed about their language skills. She said counselors also may expect an average student can't do better, or that an athlete isn't smart or that a studious-looking high school senior will enjoy rigorous STEM classes, while a student with blue hair and tattoos should be in art.

Meanwhile, Trey Moore, associate director of diversity and enrichment programs at the University of Oklahoma and formerly an admission officer who has worked a wide range of socioeconomic regions, is concerned about assuming that a student from an affluent suburb doesn't need financial aid or enrollment processing support.

"There are many ways we assume things. It is very hard to keep an open mind," he said. "We all have very different perspectives and life experiences."

Researchers at the University of California, Berkley spotted bias among college admission staffs who automatically assumed that a high GPA meant a student was well qualified, despite evidence to the contrary, calling it "correspondence bias." Hall noted counselors may be affected by several

other types of bias, including confirmation bias (trying to confirm a belief), in-group bias (following the beliefs of a group you're in) and status quo bias (trying to maintain the current situation).

Perhaps even more importantly, research has shown when we display such implicit bias—even more than explicit bias—it often leads others to behave in the manner we assume, according to Hardin and Banaji.

WE CAN CHANGE. SOMEWHAT.

David Amodio, a psychology professor and neuroscientist at New York University who has studied implicit bias, explains that our natural "fight or flight" responses develop in a small interior part of the brain called the amygdala and trigger the automatic alarm or distrust behind implicit bias. Evolution has also expanded our brain to let us override those reactions in the way a basketball player racing down court can adjust motion to direct the ball to the hoop at the last minute, he writes, but it takes patience and practice.

"We have to let the amygdala do its job, and then train ourselves to help the neocortex do its job. We really don't have a choice—so many other aspects of life depend on our quick reactions and snap judgments, and it is a system that is designed to be relatively tamper-proof," Amodio writes.

Certain circumstances make such work harder. A study done to help the courts reduce bias among judges and jurors found that we are less likely to be objective when we are emotional, distracted, pressured, ill-informed, or lazy.

"I think using big data, mission, and departmental goals and having regular conversations regarding admission decision trends helps," said Hall.

Bigham said she believes it is important to confront a bias when you spot it and think about where it came from and how new experience has dispelled it. She even tells a student or parent about her potential bias to make them feel she is being honest and forthcoming and to reinforce it with herself.

And Ari Worthman, director of college counseling at the Lakeside School in Seattle, said he also likes to talk to a student or a colleague about a bias (especially if they're from a group about which he feels it) to see if they can help him better understand. He also talks to students more thoroughly when he detects a bias to get an even better understanding of them personally and develop more empathy.

A CHECK-IN FOR YOUR DEPARTMENT

On opposite coasts, two university admission offices are facing potential bias in the admission process head on.

Deb Shaver, dean of admissions at Smith College in Massachusetts, said her staff annually meets with an official responsible for equity on the campus to hear new thinking about such issues, and then before reading applications she holds a "lens" exercise where they self-reflect then informally chat about their implicit bias.

"You always have to be thinking about it and working on it. It is so important in our jobs. As we read applications, we just have to be as fair, generous, and unbiased as possible."

She admitted that as a struggling, low-income, nerdy girl who regrets having dropped out of Girl Scouts to be cooler, she has to avoid favoring studious, serious girls—and those who she admires for *sticking with* Girl Scouts. Others on her staff have expressed a wide range of familiar and not-so familiar assumptions, including two staff members who have precisely opposite views about athletes and their seriousness about school.

"It forces us to confront our biases—and when we know everyone else's lens we can call them out about it. It changes our thinking and creates a conversation about this."

Rakin Hall, associate director of admissions at the University of Southern California, said admission counselors at USC are told to "keep university goals in mind and to discuss personal and department stereotype biases openly." They also use data to compare the applicant pool to other demographic information, stick to rubrics to assess applications, and look at "decision patterns" in application readers.

It is important, he said, for everyone to know that having a bias is normal and confronting them is important.

But, he warned, it is easy to *feel* you've been objective when the work is more authentic—like a one-on-one meeting—than symbolic. "Intentions don't mean impact," he said.

Jim Paterson is a writer and former school counselor living in Lewes, DE.