



Enhancing Professional Awareness: Understanding Hidden Influences in Practice
Lori Watsen, MSW, LCSW

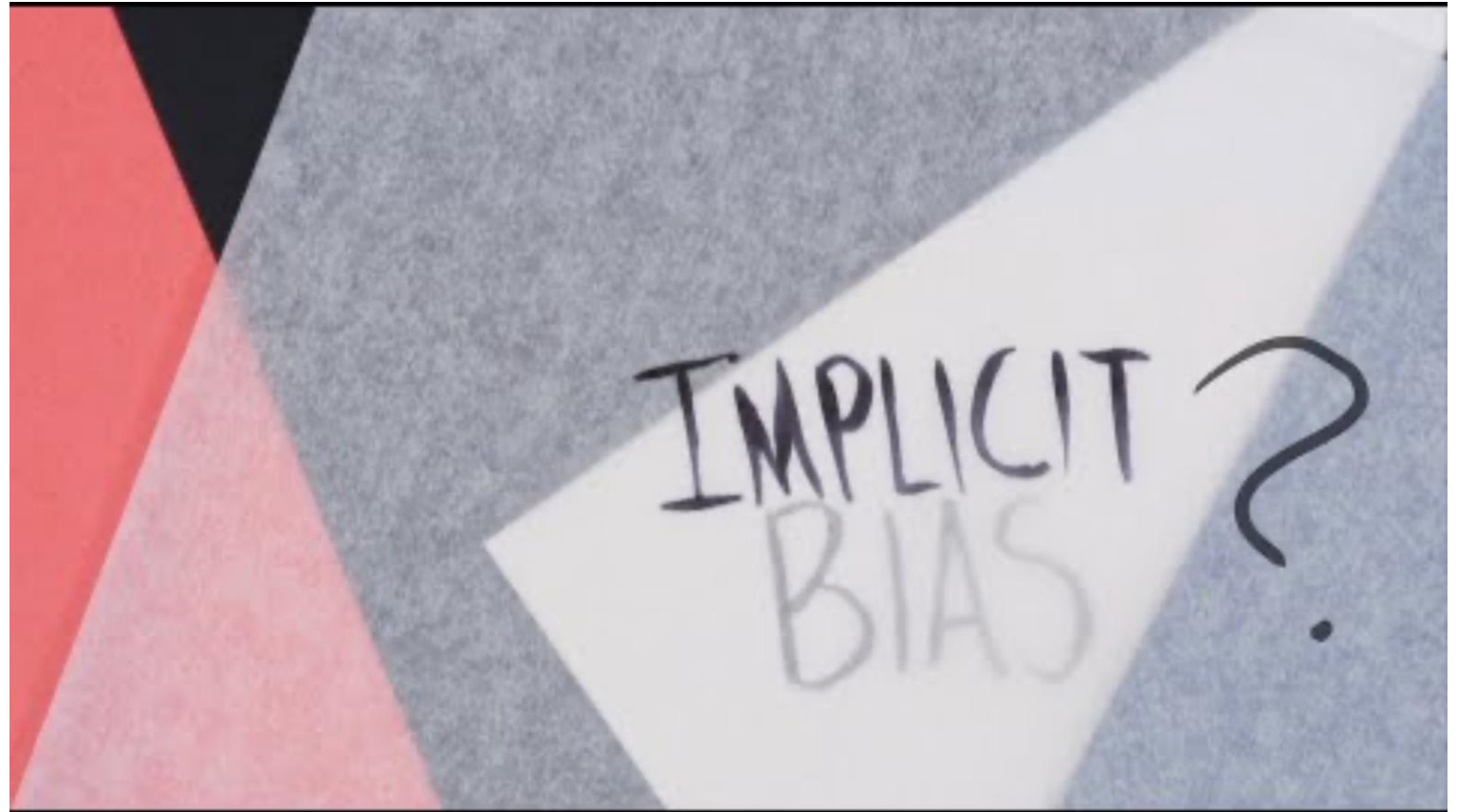
Thanks for being here!

Learning Objectives

At the end of this training, you will be able to:

- Explain what unconscious/implicit bias is and why awareness and management matter for ethical, professional practice.
- Identify situations where bias might affect judgment or communication.
- Practice techniques to pause, reflect, and respond intentionally in client interactions.
- Develop a personal plan for ongoing self-awareness and professional growth.

Implicit Bias



What causes bias?

The human brain can process 11 million bits of information every second.

Our conscious minds, however, can only keep up with 40 to 50 pieces of information each second.

It is not possible to contemplate every possible option 100% of the time, even when asked the simplest of questions. Even with an endless supply of information available to you at the swipe of a finger, sometimes it's easier to take advantage of mental shortcuts.



Source: https://online.utpb.edu/about-us/articles/psychology/cognitive-bias-what-it-is-and-how-it-shapes-your-daily-life/#:~:text=The%20human%20brain%20can%20process%2011%20million,%20Cultural%20conditioning%20*%20Availability%20of%20information

Key Points

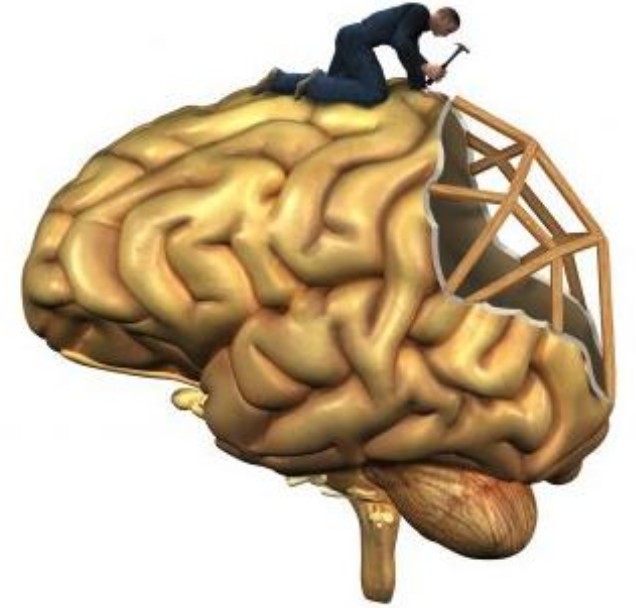


- Implicit bias goes beyond stereotyping to include **favorable** or **unfavorable** evaluations toward groups of people, essentially quick judgments often based on assumptions and what we have been socialized to believe about people.
- Implicit biases are **pervasive**. Everyone possesses them, even 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.

Source: <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>

Key Points

- The implicit biases 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.



Source:

<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>

TYPES OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



Affinity Bias

Feeling a connection to those similar to us



Perception Bias

Stereotypes and assumptions about different groups



Halo Effect

Projecting positive qualities onto people without actually knowing them

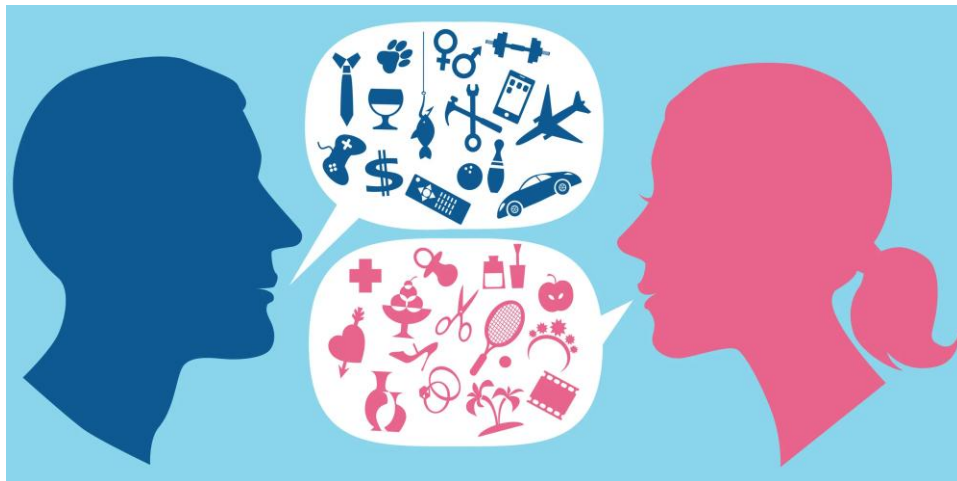
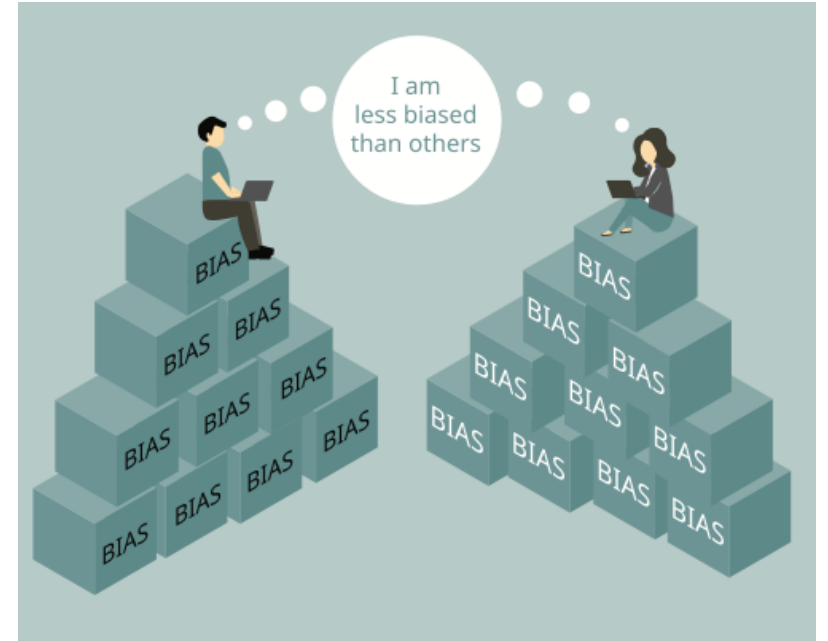


Confirmation Bias

Looking to confirm our own opinions and pre-existing ideas.

Common biases

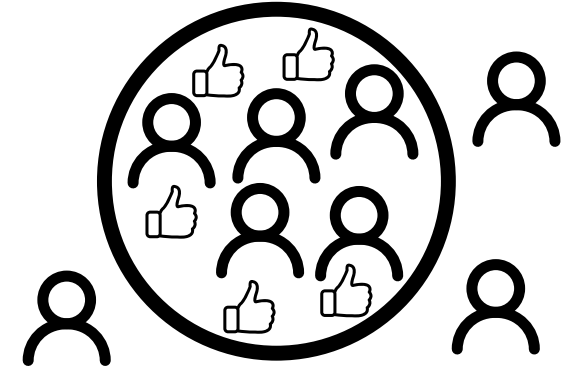
- **Bias blind spots:** Tendency to see ourselves as *less* prone to unconscious or implicit biases, while we see others as *more* prone to them.



Stereotypical bias: Tendency to remember things that are stereotype consistent even when they are not accurate.

In-group/Out-group biases

- **In-group favoritism:** Tendency to trust and have positive feelings toward and to favor members of our own “group.”
- **Attribution error:** Tendency to attribute good performance of ourselves and of an **in-group member** to their personal qualities and characteristics, and poor performance to situational or external factors – giving them *benefit of the doubt* and attributing poor performance of an **out-group member** to their personal qualities and characteristics, and good performance to situational/external factors.



When someone messes up



When you mess up



Stigma & Discrimination

Stigma: Thoughts, attitudes and beliefs (including negative unconscious bias & assumptions)

Discrimination: Behavior or actions taken because of stigma or biases/ Examples of discrimination experienced by people from marginalized communities include:

- Other people avoiding or rejecting them
- Getting denied or receiving substandard services in healthcare, education, housing, or employment
- Verbal and psychological abuse
- Physical violence



Source: <https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/health-equity/stigma>

Image source: <https://www.kirafonteneau.com/types-of-discrimination-explained/>

WHY DO WE AT TIMES PERPETUATE STIGMA AND LET OUR BIASES INFLUENCE OUR BEHAVIOR?

- To maintain distance
- To express disapproval
- To feel superior
- To feel safe
- To promote agendas
- To control others
- To express fear
- To hurt others
- Because we are human



Though often unintentional, behavior influenced by bias has negative impact.

Source: Esp, Susan (2020). People First: Identifying and reducing stigma in the SUDS field.

WHAT YOU SAY (YOUR INTENT)
CAN HAVE AN IMPACT (HOW THE
OTHER PERSON HEARS IT) THAT
CAN BE EITHER NEGATIVE OR
POSITIVE DESPITE YOUR INTENT.

- We can cause unintentional harm or treat people unfairly when we are not aware of or are not actively managing unconscious / implicit bias and taking steps to change or manage its influence.
- Interestingly, some research shows that when we think we aren't influenced by bias, we are more at risk of it impacting our thinking and behavior.
- Extensive research has documented the disturbing effects of implicit racial biases in a variety of realms ranging from classrooms to courtrooms to hospitals.

Microaggressions:
Everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental **slights, snubs, or insults**, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

Source: Derald Wing Sue, PhD.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4&feature>

Image Source: <https://www.rpharms.com/recognition/inclusion-diversity/microaggressions>





- Microaggressions may invalidate identity, demean on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.
- The most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group.
- Research indicates microaggressions have a powerful impact on the psychological well-being of marginalized groups and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in health care, education, and employment.

Source: Derald Wing Sue, PhD. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4&feature=youtu.be>



As service providers, we exert power and influence

- Your work can impact the way others are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Judgments can follow people long-term and cause harm.
- Stigma can also be internalized by your clients.
- Focusing on a person or family's strengths can build them up (and also help you see them in the best light!).
- Acknowledging and highlighting the complexity and context that impacts social problems can help increase empathy and reduce victim-blaming.





Discussion, with a partner.

If comfortable:

- Can you think of a time when bias and/or assumptions might have affected a professional decision with or about a client?
- What helped you recognize the influence of bias? What did you do?

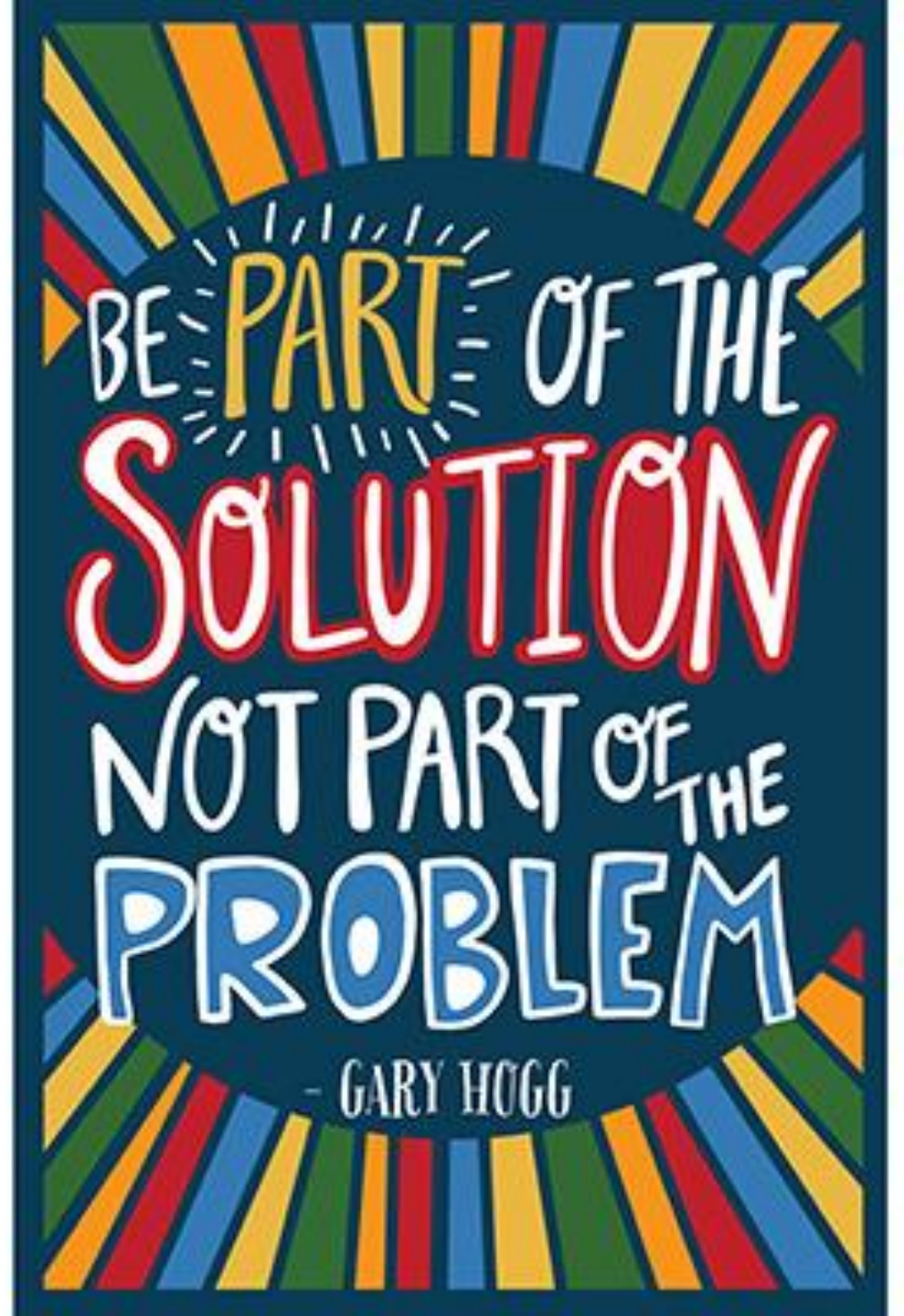
Less vulnerability required:

- What information has been most interesting, compelling, or confusing so far?

Bias Management & Ethics

- Bias awareness supports honoring the dignity and worth of each person.
- It helps prevent discrimination and promotes equitable service delivery.
- It strengthens cultural competence and humility in practice.
- It reinforces professional integrity through honest self-reflection.
- It improves ethical decision-making by reducing distorted judgments.
- It protects client self-determination by separating worker values from client values.
- It supports ongoing professional competence through learning and supervision.
- It helps prevent harm and unequal outcomes across populations.
- It builds trust between communities and social service systems.

**What can
we do?**



Acknowledge that implicit bias is real and has real consequences

Be humble – we are all vulnerable to biases. We are all susceptible to our socialization and our brain's shortcuts (they are hardwired). This does not mean we are “bad” people, just human beings with specific worldviews and unique contexts.

“Growing up in the USA, we have absorbed considerable misinformation, specifically negative information, about people who are ‘different’ from us and our families. Because racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia (as well as other forms of oppression) are so widespread, we have been imprinted with negative beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes about groups of people we barely know.

This began to happen when we were young, when we couldn't distinguish truth from stereotype, before we could recognize misinformation or object. Now that we are older, we all have a responsibility for looking at what we have learned and making a commitment to dismantle oppression in our lives.”

Source: Dismantling Racism

- Numerous studies have shown that infants as young as 6 months are able to categorize people by both gender and race (Katz & Kofkin, 1997).
- By 2 years, toddlers use their recognition of race to reason about people's behaviors. During toddlerhood, children *notice and reason* about differences, but studies also show that toddlers do not *act* on observed differences.



- By age 5, children express preferences for their own race (Kinzler & Spelke, 2011).
- It is through daily interactions and observations of others' comments and verbal and **nonverbal** behaviors that young children attribute particular meaning to race, culture and other forms of diversity. By the late preschool years, such understandings inform behavior.

“What if we honestly assessed what we have come to believe about ourselves and each other, and how those beliefs shape our lives? And what if we did it with generosity and forgiveness? What if we did it with mercy?”

-Ross Gay

Some Thoughts on Mercy



How can we do better?



- Be honest about frequency and impact of bias.
- Be internally motivated to treat people fairly, to see their strengths, and to “do the right thing”.
- Be mindful of cognitive load. Ask for help and set boundaries when overwhelmed or overworked.
- Slow down.
- Notice and critically evaluate our own thoughts, reactions, use of language, and behavior. (Transformative learning theory)
- Invite and ask others to hold us accountable when we say something insensitive, commit a microaggression, or treat people unfairly.

“Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better.”

– Maya Angelou

Be intentional
about using
person-
centered
language

The Most Respectful Way of Referring to People is as People

Current	Alternative	Reasoning
Clients / Patients / Consumers	The people in our program The folks we work with The people we serve	More inclusive, less stigmatizing
Alex is an addict	Alex is addicted to alcohol Alex is a person with a substance use disorder Alex is in recovery from drug addiction	Put the person first Avoid defining the person by their disease
The terms listed below, along with others, are often people's ineffective attempts to reclaim some shred of power while being treated in a system that often tries to control them. The person is trying to get their needs met, or has a perception different from the staff, or has an opinion of self not shared by others. And these efforts are not effectively bringing them to the result they want.		
Mathew is manipulative	Mathew is trying really hard to get his needs met Mathew may need to work on more effective ways of getting his needs met	Take the blame out of the statement Recognize that the person is trying to get a need met the best way they know how
Kyle is non-compliant	Kyle is choosing not to... Kyle would rather... Kyle is looking for other options	Describe what it looks like uniquely to that individual—that information is more useful than a generalization
Mary is resistant to treatment	Mary chooses not to... Mary prefers not to... Mary is unsure about...	Avoid defining the person by the behavior. Remove the blame from the statement
Jennifer is in denial	Jennifer is ambivalent about..... Jennifer hasn't internalized the seriousness of.... Jennifer doesn't understand.....	Remove the blame and the stigma from the statement



Southeast (HHS Region 4)

ATTC

Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



PhoenixCenter
Prevent • Treat • Recover

FAVOR SC
FACES AND
VOICES OF
RECOVERY

Person-centered language:

Examples from the American Psychological Association

TERMS TO AVOID	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVE	COMMENT
the poor low-class people poor people	people whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold people whose self-reported incomes were in the lowest income bracket	Many people find the terms “low-class” and “poor” pejorative. Use person-first language instead. Define income brackets and levels if possible.

Questions? Reactions?

TERM TO AVOID	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVE	COMMENT
birth sex natal sex	assigned sex sex assigned at birth	
born a girl, born female born a boy, born male	assigned female at birth (AFAB) assigned male at birth (AMAB)	
hermaphrodite tranny transvestite transsexual (unless being used medically)	LGBTQ+, LBGTQIA+, etc. transgender people trans and gender nonbinary folks or folx genderqueer queer*	The term “tranny” is considered a slur. *Consider your audience when using the term “queer”; not everyone receives this word positively; many members of the LGBTQIA+ community have now reclaimed it.

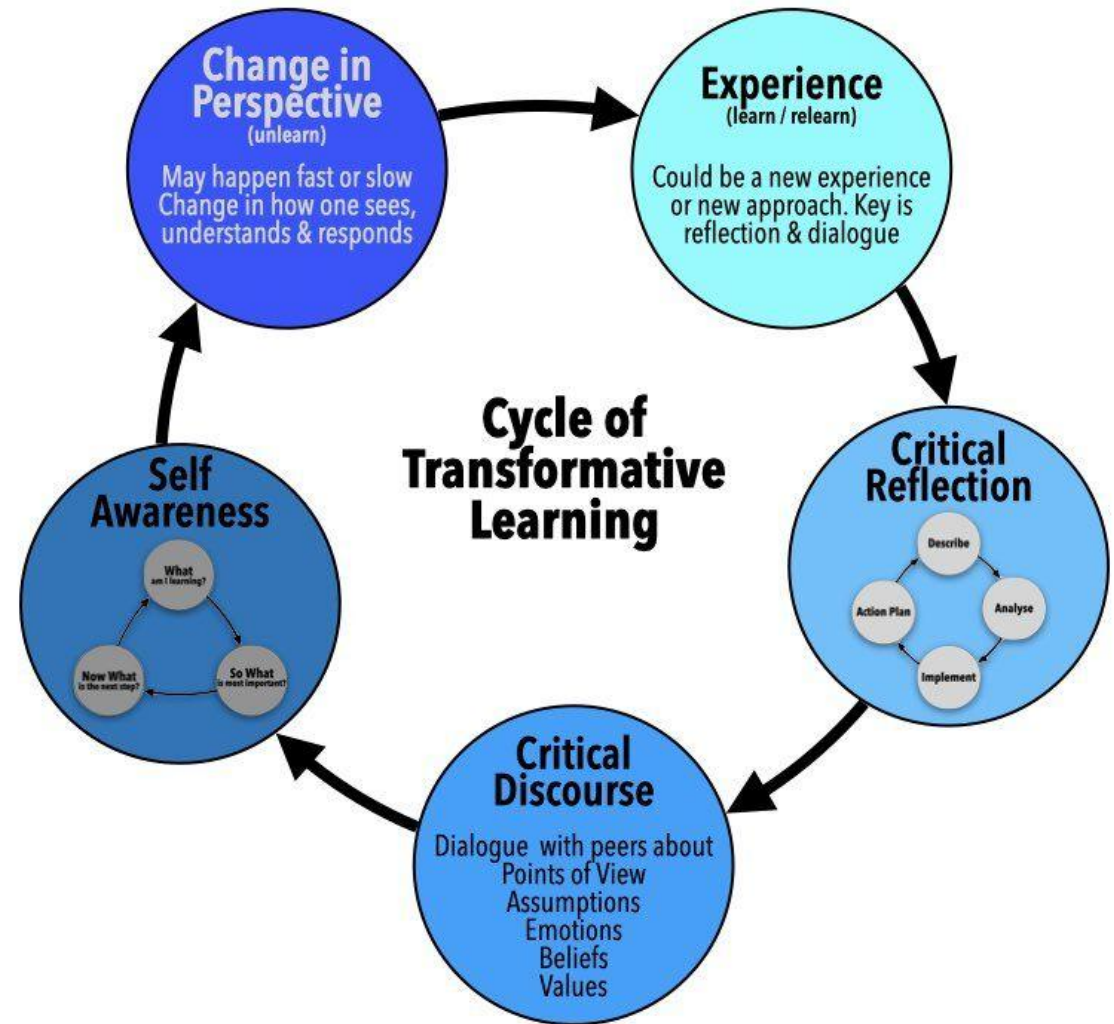
Questions? Reactions?

TERM TO AVOID	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVE
victim, survivor	person who has experienced... person who has been impacted by...
wheelchair-bound	person who uses a wheelchair
mentally ill	person living with a mental health condition person with a mental disorder person with a mental illness
abusive relationship	relationship with a person who is abusive
addict	person with a substance use disorder
homeless person	person without housing
prostitute	person who engages in sex work
prisoner, convict	person who is/has been incarcerated
slave	person who is/was enslaved

Questions?
Reactions?

- Practice **transformative learning** (TLT).
- TLT transforms our existing paradigms by disrupting assumptions and then engaging in critical reflection and dialogue to interpret the disruptions.
 - Practice curiosity and generous interpretations.
- TLT may move learners to an “inclusive, self-reflective and integrative frame of reference”.

A structured reflection worksheet will be provided with the slides so you can practice!



Debiasing

Scrub your brain of implicit biases – seek out counter-messaging

- ([Flip it to Test It – Kristen Pressner](#))
- [Verna Myers: How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly toward them](#)

Stereotype-Replacing

1. Recognize a response as stereotypical.
2. Label the response as stereotypical and identify why the response may have occurred.
3. Consider alternate responses for use in the future to avoid the stereotypical response. Use these alternatives as unbiased replacement responses.

Decoupling

- Break the causal link between bias and behavior.
- Design structural and institutional processes to help manage bias (staff education, panel reviews, training hiring committees)

Sources: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI0GenWu_iA&feature=youtu.be;

<https://www.justice.gov/file/1437326/download#:~:text=Stereotype%20Replacement,automatic%2C%20non%2Dstereotypical%20responses>.

Create SPACE to reduce impact of bias and see a more nuanced person and situation:

Slow down

- Take a breath

Perspective Taking

Ask Yourself

- What is influencing this person's circumstances? Are the factors individual? structural? in their control? 5 Whys analysis – we almost always come to complex factors, often impacted by systemic oppression

Cultural Intelligence

How is culture influencing this person's world (and my perception of it)?

Exemplars / Expand

- What is the bigger picture?

Source: <https://cultureplusconsulting.com/2018/10/17/six-proven-strategies-for-managing-unconscious-bias/>

Be curious and consider generous interpretation and contextual factors when you find yourself judging someone.

The slow driver story.





-
- Consider your high-risk situations and circumstances.
 - When are you potentially most at risk to be influenced by bias?
 - What might you do to mitigate potential negative impact.



PRACTICE

Picture in your mind a low-income, non-white, single mother of young children. Her kids are not consistently making it to school. Concerns have been expressed about their well-being.

What snap-judgment assumptions might we make about this mother? What labels might we use to describe her? What assumptions might we make about why she is...

- ...living in poverty...

- ...struggling to meet the basic needs of her children...

that may perpetuate stereotypes about people living in poverty or perpetuate stigma she likely already experiences?

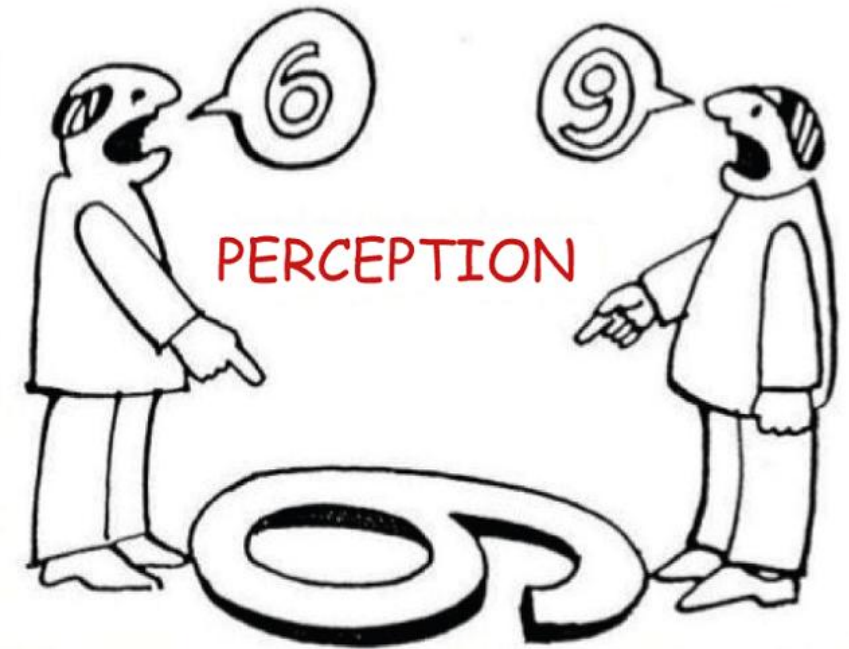
Expanded/Contextual view

What else might be impacting this mom and the family's circumstances?

Consider meaning, history, CONTEXT, power, possibility (Janet Finn's Just Practice Framework)

How We View Poverty

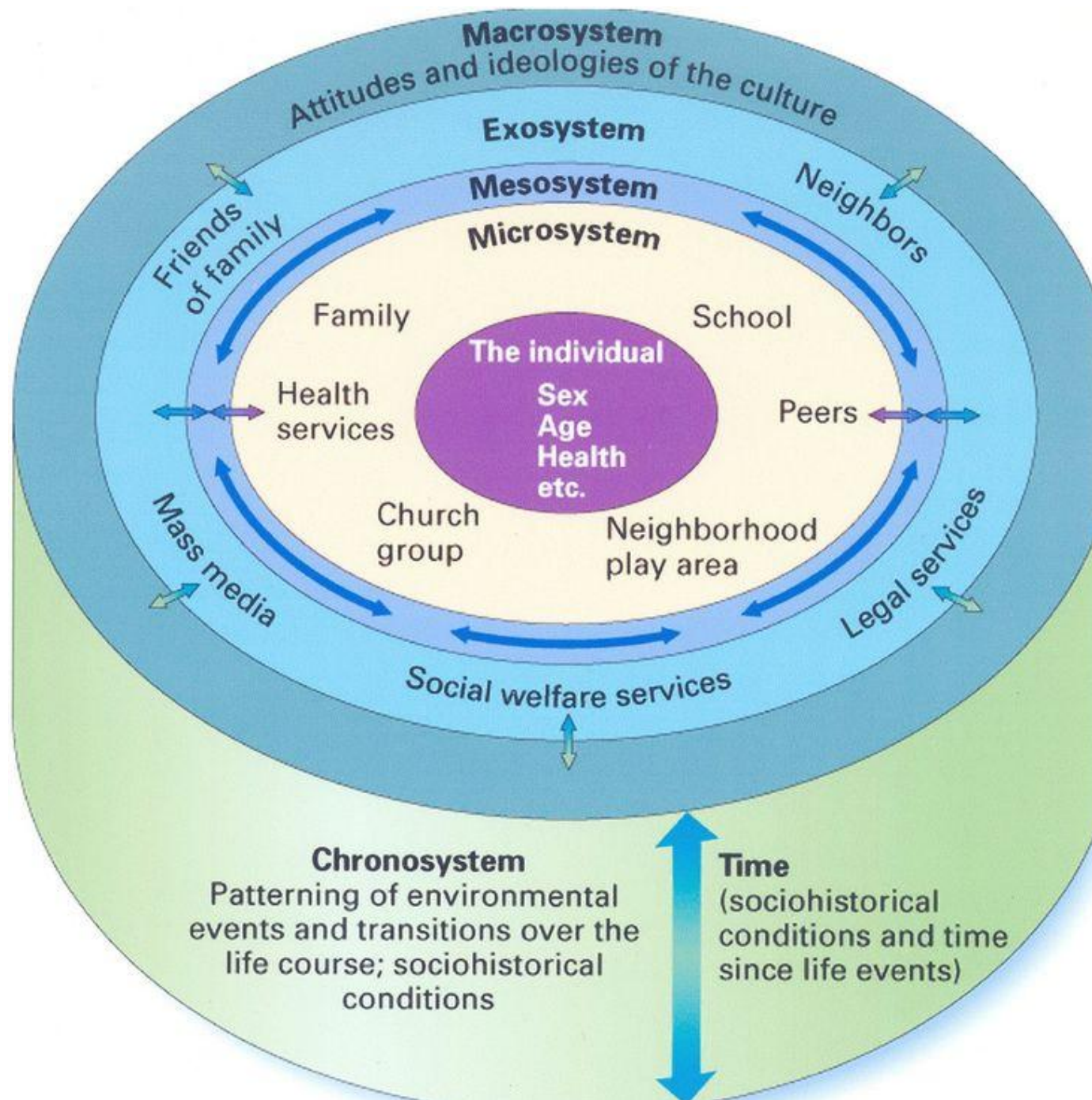
- “How we view poverty is critical in determining how we will address it. Part of America’s ineffectiveness in reducing poverty during the past three decades stems from a skewed and incorrect perception of impoverishment.” (Rank, 2006)
- How we view poverty also influences how we see and treat individuals and groups who are experiencing it / most impacted.
- In the U.S. there is a pervasive perception that people living in poverty are individually responsible for their circumstances.
- This leads to many of us having implicit bias about people living in poverty and contributes to ongoing discrimination and lack of compassion.



Causes / Explanations for Poverty

- High unemployment
- Poor physical health
- Physical disabilities
- Emotional problems
- Extensive medical bills
- Alcoholism
- Addiction
- Large families
- Job displacements due to automation
- Low educational level
- Households w/young children headed by females only
- Lack of cost of living increases for people on fixed incomes
- Racial discrimination
- Being labeled as an “ex-convict” or “crazy”
- Residence in a geographic area where jobs are scarce
- Divorce, desertion, or death of a spouse
- Gambling
- Budgeting problems and mismanagement of resources
- Sex discrimination
- Consequences of being a crime victims
- Anti-work-ethic values
- Underemployment
- Low-paying jobs
- Having a cognitive disability
- Retirement

Note: Even causes that may seem “individual” are often impacted by structural issues (inadequate supports, insurance tied to employment, etc.) – yet we STILL tend to blame those who are living in poverty for their circumstances and negatively judge them.



Practice, take two!

Picture in your mind a father who is struggling with addiction and has temporarily lost custody of his children. What snap-judgment assumptions might we make about this father? What labels might we use to describe him? What assumptions might we make about why he...

- ...has lost custody of children?

- ...is struggling with addiction?

that may perpetuate stereotypes about people struggling with addiction and/or perpetuate stigma he likely already experiences?

ADDICTION RELATED STIGMA

- Addiction related stigma is a powerful, shame-based mark of disgrace and reproach.
- The stigma attached to drug use may be reinforced by the fact that it is an illegal and covert activity, and there is no legal protection available to people who use drugs.
- There are common stereotypes of drug users such as “junkies” and “bad” people when in fact many drug users are employed, raising families, are financially stable, and are good neighbors and friends.
- Individuals who are stigmatized often internalize inappropriate attitudes and practices, making them part of their self-identity.

This all happens despite growing knowledge and consensus that addiction is a DISEASE with multiple complex causes and impacts.

Source: Esp, Susan (2020). People First: Identifying and reducing stigma in the SUDS field.

How can we expand our view of this father to reduce the impact of bias and stigma?

Addiction 101

Addiction can happen to anyone. Let's talk about it.



Slow down

Perspective Taking

Ask Yourself

Cultural Intelligence

Exemplars / Expand

The power of acknowledgment and repair

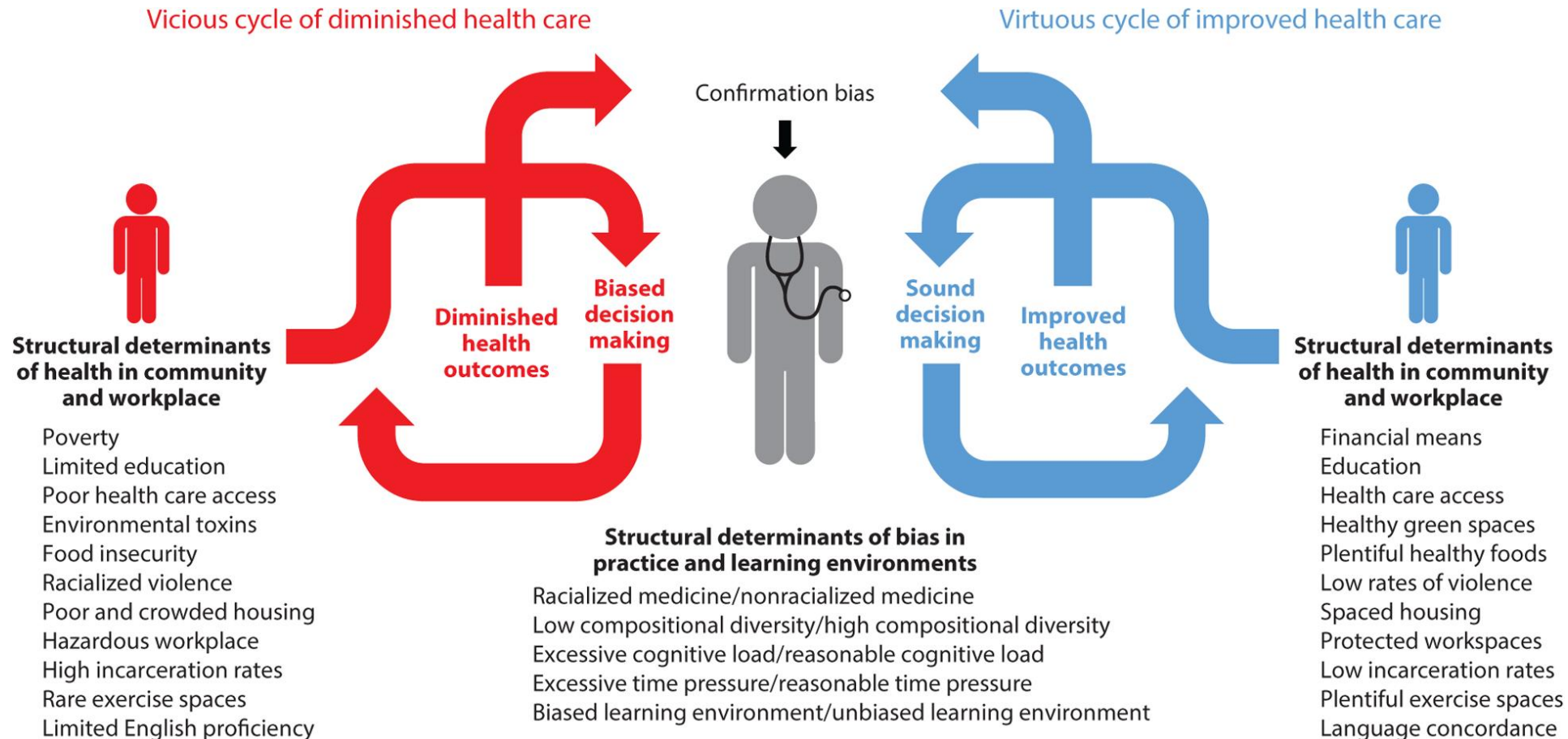
- When evidence that implicit bias has impacted an encounter surfaces, that is the inflection point where clinician **action**, or **inaction**, can affect the outcome of the clinical encounter.
- At that inflection point, evidence demonstrates that **ignoring** that impact leads to **mistrust, avoidance of future healthcare**, and other negative consequences.
- Verbal *acknowledgement* of that impact could lead to positive outcomes **similar to if implicit bias had never impacted the encounter in the first place**
- We **can** implement skills to address the impact of implicit bias and restore rapport with clients to optimize the outcome of the encounter.

Don't belabor the mistake. Acknowledge, apologize,
Move on, then do better.

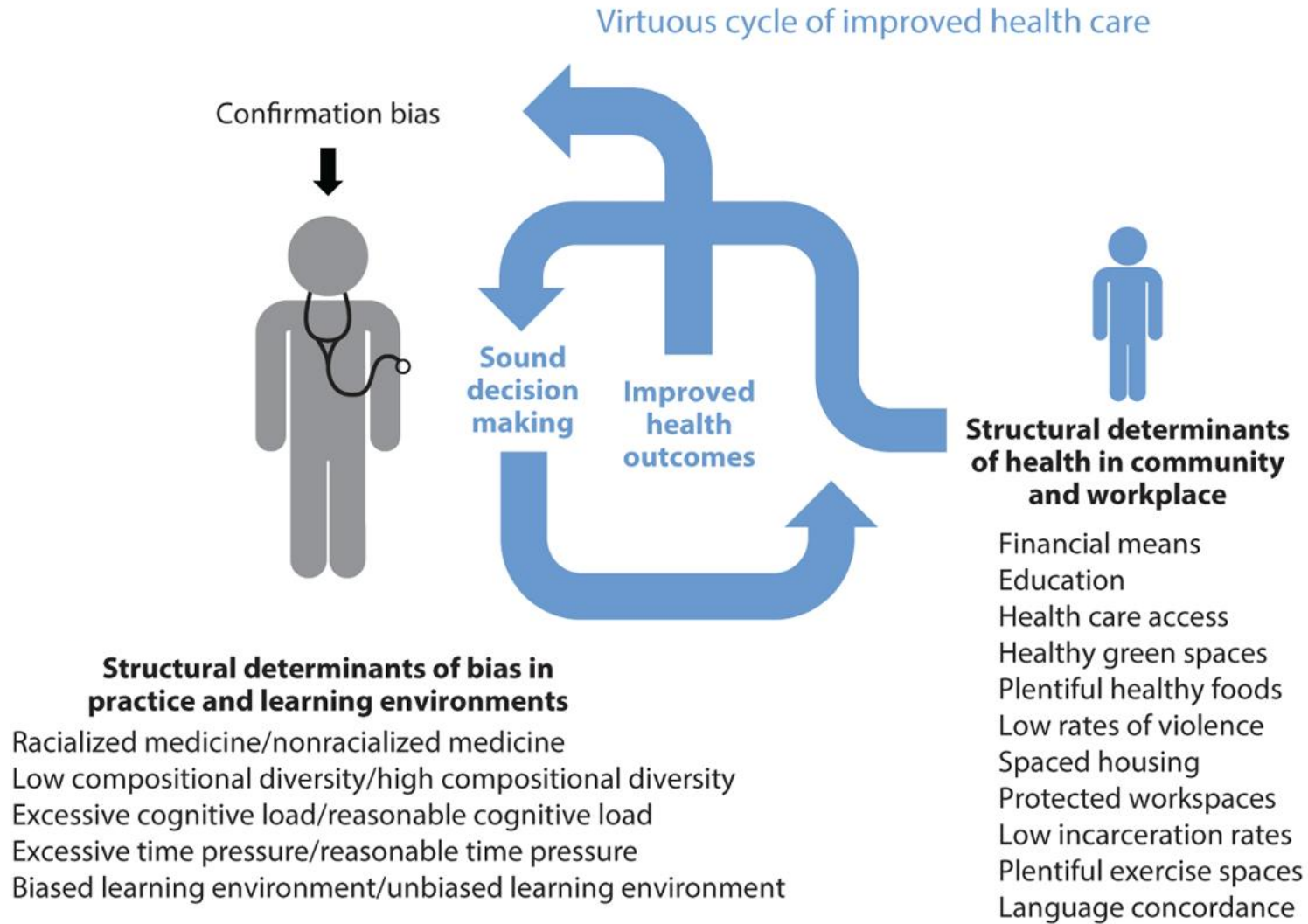


and...developing awareness and managing bias is not enough.

We must also work to address the racism and discrimination ingrained in societal structures and systems to disrupt the feedback loop.



Source:
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9172268/>

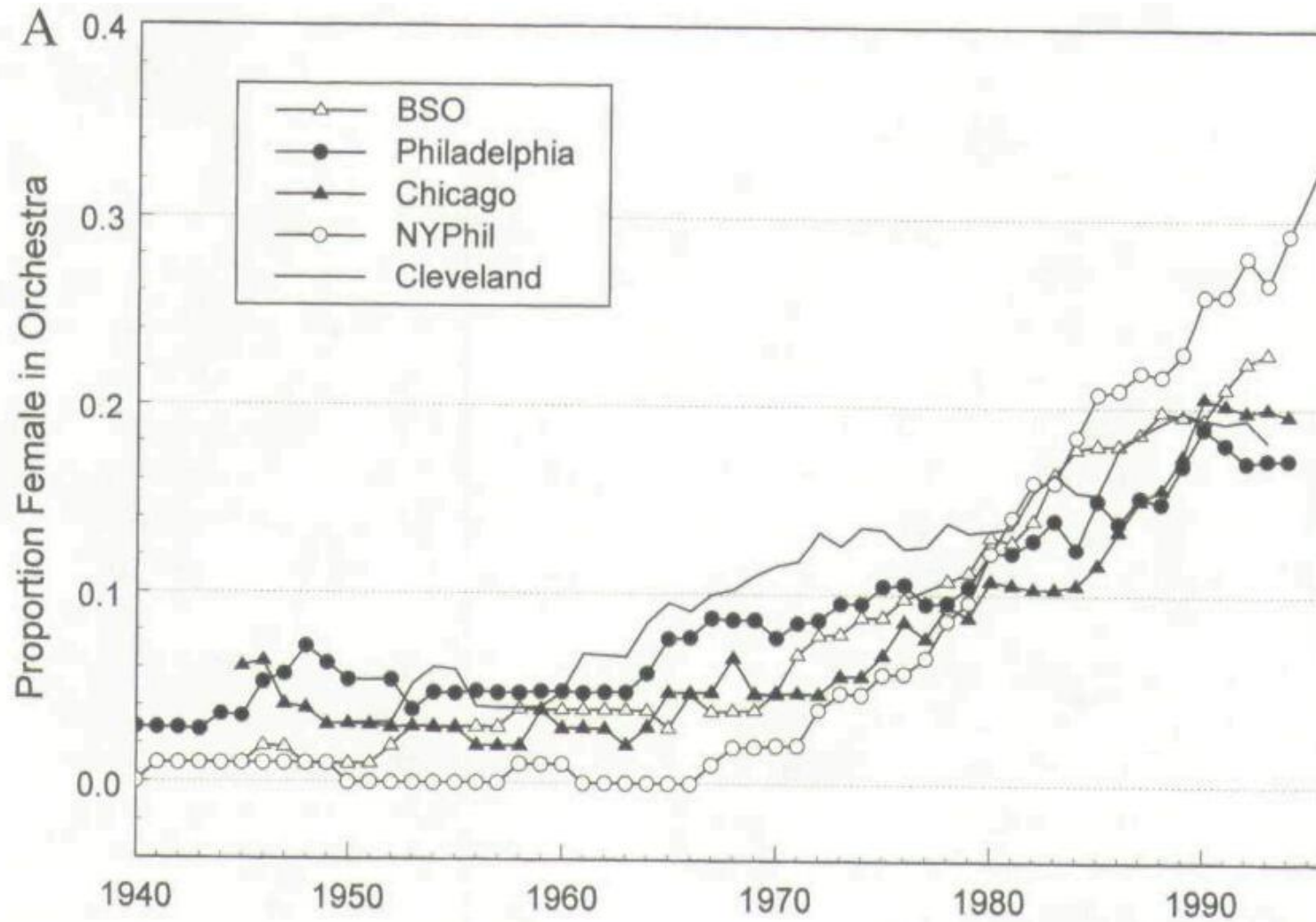


Source:
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9172268/>

High Heels, Violins, and a Warning



- What happened? (Goldin & Rouse, 2000)



Slide courtesy of Felice Klein, BSU Assistant Professor, COBE, Management

Advocate for and Implement Organizational and Systemic Strategies

Reduced cognitive load:

- Studies have consistently shown that decision makers burdened with higher cognitive load are more likely to make biased decisions

De-Identification (names and/or other identifying information redacted from files, etc.)

What are other strategies you might implement in your work to help reduce potential negative impact of bias?

Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9172268/>

ONE-MINUTE REFLECTION



- What is one concrete action **you** want to take to further explore these issues and/or to examine your own potential unconscious biases?
- What next step(s) can you take within your team or agency to continue to learn about and manage bias, and strive to decrease the negative impacts of bias and stigma on those you serve?





THANK YOU