



**FIFTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON FAIRNESS & EQUITY
ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

Opening Exercise

**This is Your Brain on Bias—Perception, Memory,
and Unintended Discrimination**

Dr. Jack Glaser

Summary of Presentation

April 12, 2007

From a cognitive science perspective, Dr. Glaser discussed how implicit bias influences the manner in which human beings process information about one another. He explained that the phenomenon of bias developed as a natural function of the brain over the course of human evolution. He referenced experiments that have been conducted which demonstrate how biases manifest in personal judgments and everyday decision making. The dire consequences of these implicit associations and bias were outlined, and ideas for mitigating the effects of stereotypes and prejudices were presented.

Dr. Glaser began with a small experiment to demonstrate how memory is primarily reconstructive, based on a general sense of familiarity and association, rather than a perfect recording by the brain of past events. He explained that people both perceive and remember things schematically and associatively, and that we process information based on the biases formed from our perceptions and schemas, including how we process information about one another.

He reported that bias, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination are not pathological, as many might assume. They are actually very normal human thought processes and behaviors. Dr. Glaser explained that they arise from three fundamental human mental processes:

- Categorization
 - The human brain automatically categorizes information (objects, concepts, people, etc.) into groups to help simplify and understand a complex world.
- Correlation
 - Humans naturally look for and perceive correlations or similarities among things. This tendency is the reason why people create stereotypes from their perceptions of traits, characteristics and behaviors.
- Favoritism
 - Humans tend to favor those who are similar to them or who belong to their own group.

These three fundamental human processes work in concert to create a powerful tendency for humans to discriminate. Though bias may be a normal human function, Dr. Glaser clarified that it is not a desirable one, especially in current times.

Dr. Glaser then discussed unintended or implicit bias, and whether there is a way to discover one's personal unintended or unconscious biases. Becoming aware of one's own unintended biases can increase the likelihood of making decisions that are more objective or non-discriminatory. He discussed several scientific tests that allow people to identify biases that had previously eluded their awareness. These tests include the Implicit Association Test (IAT), the Modern Racism Scale, the Shooter Task Measure, and the Eye Blink/Startle Potentiation Measure. Information, including a self-test, about The Implicit Association Test can be found on the following website:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit>

In conclusion, Dr. Glaser offered some solutions for mitigating the effects of stereotypes and biases on personal judgments and behaviors that can be applied to child welfare practice:

- *Accountability*. It has been shown that when people expect to be evaluated or held accountable in some way, they are less likely to be influenced by stereotypes and more likely to make objective judgments.
- *Allowing ample time for decision making* may also lessen the effects of bias. Decision making processes that are thoughtful and deliberate may result in less bias than automatic or reactive responses.
- *Make possible biases explicit* through open discussion or conscious thought. Then they will be less likely to influence decisions and behaviors.
- Finally, it is important to *be constantly vigilant* throughout decision or evaluation processes to encourage more conscious behavior without bias or discrimination.