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UNCONSCIOUS ASSU

Commentary: Jumping to conclusions is human nature. So is implicit bias

MICHELLE VAN RYN, JOHN F. DOVIDIO, KATHRYN HAINES AND BETH O'CONNOR

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The latest Virginia Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) survey reported that 25% of women experienced discrimination or harassment as a result of their race, ethnicity or culture.

Dreamstime

MICHELLE VAN RYN, JOHN F. DOVIDIO, KATHRYN HAINES AND BETH O'CONNOR

Legislation that recently **passed both houses** of the Virginia General Assembly requiring medical professionals in the state to undergo training on unconscious bias and cultural competency seek to build a bridge, not divide.

Black women in Virginia continue to have two times higher rates of pregnancy-associated deaths compared with their white counterparts. In 2021, the rate was 113.8 for Black women and 54.8 for white women (per 100,000 live births). According to data from the Virginia Department of Health, Black infant mortality rate in the West Piedmont Health District in 2022 was 35.5 per 1,000, an alarmingly high rate.

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The legislation that recently passed would require unconscious bias training in order to reduce maternal health disparities.

It's understandable to feel skeptical about something as seemingly intangible as unconscious, or implicit bias. Because implicit processes often operate automatically and without our awareness, we tend not to notice them or get a full sense of how much it affects what we do.

Feeling skeptical of the concept of implicit bias, in particular, is also understandable because the behavior it influences is at odds with our deep commitment to being fair, and it seems like blame is being placed on a single group. It's only natural to feel your integrity is being called into question and to wonder whether there is solid proof.

Yet over a quarter-century of **research** — using a variety of methods including fMRI and other brain-imaging studies — across psychology, neuroscience and other mind sciences —



Kathryn Haines



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has shown that unconscious preferences, assumptions and expectations of others (implicit biases) are real and influence our judgments and behaviors in ways we typically don't consciously notice.

If you're unsure whether to trust the thousands of peer-reviewed scientific studies, consider your own experiences: Have you ever noticed that while driving you automatically stop at a red light and go at a green light — often when you are actively thinking about something else? We engage in implicit behaviors regularly throughout the day.

But what about implicit bias? Has anyone ever assumed something about you or someone you know that turned out to be untrue? Have you been caught off guard because you expected a person to think or act one way, and they did something completely different? Think about the phrase “jump to conclusions” — we've all done it. These everyday moments show our unconscious, or implicit, thinking at work.

Implicit thinking, like our conscious intentions, can sometimes have good outcomes and sometimes bad outcomes. Being knowledgeable and aware of unrecognized influences on our behavior allow us to act in ways more aligned with our intentions and values.

It's also important to recognize that implicit bias is a human challenge that we all share, not solely a “white person” challenge.

Studies indicate that anyone — no matter their background — can hold unconscious assumptions about others. When tackling implicit bias, the goal isn't to shame anyone. Rather, by acknowledging it — a step that can feel uncomfortable — we can begin to address it. Doing so helps us make more fair, thoughtful decisions in our personal relationships and across systems like schools, workplaces and health care.

Being aware of the potential impact of implicit bias makes us better able to behave in ways consistent with our values. This is why over 90% of health care providers, including a majority of those who identify as conservative, reported that completing

the “Dignity in Pregnancy & Childbirth” course improved their patient encounters and clinical care.

Accepting the science of implicit bias isn’t about placing blame; it’s about understanding a universal human tendency so we can move toward living our values, achieving our goals, and thriving in this diverse and complex world.

Richmond speaks up: Letters to the editor for the week of Feb. 28, 2025

Our weekly round-up of letters published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

Letter: Defunding USAID a direct assault on Va.'s economy



The recent decision to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is not just a blow to international aid — it is a direct assault on Virginia’s economy.

Agriculture stands as Virginia’s largest private industry, contributing an impressive \$82.3 billion annually and providing over 381,800 jobs across the commonwealth. Our farmers, producing commodities like poultry, corn, wheat and soybeans, have long benefited from USAID’s initiatives that open and sustain international markets. By fostering global trade relationships, USAID ensures that Virginia’s agricultural products reach consumers worldwide, bolstering farm incomes and supporting rural communities.

The abrupt cessation of USAID’s programs threatens to sever these vital trade links. Without the agency’s efforts in maintaining and developing overseas markets, Virginia’s farmers face the grim prospect of surplus yields and diminished demand, leading to plummeting prices and potential financial ruin. This is not mere speculation; it is a reality that could devastate the backbone of our state’s economy.

Moreover, Northern Virginia is home to a significant portion of the federal workforce, with more than 50,000 employees in Fairfax County alone. The dismantling of USAID has already resulted in mass layoffs and the loss of contracts with organizations that play a crucial role in implementing aid programs. These actions not only jeopardize the livelihoods of thousands but also destabilize the local economies that depend on their specialized expertise.

This issue transcends partisan politics. For over six decades, USAID has enjoyed bipartisan support, reflecting America’s commitment to humanitarian aid and global leadership. The agency’s dissolution undermines this longstanding ground to global competitors and eroding the United States’ moral and economic standing.

The stakes are too high to remain silent. The dismantling of USAID is not just a policy shift; it is a direct threat to Virginia’s economic vitality and our nation’s global leadership.

Christopher Melton.

Richmond.

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