



Maine
Philanthropy
Center

2017 Funders Forum

Maine Mechanics' Hall (Portland, Maine)

Tuesday, November 7, 2017

8:30 am – 3:30 pm

Brain Science, Implicit Bias, and Philanthropy

The November 2017 Funders Forum featured neuroscientist **Laura Ligouri**, executive director and founder of [Mindbridge](#), an organization that "seeks to connect psychological and neurobiological insight to nonprofit and government-sponsored humanitarian efforts." During her presentation, Laura – together with her colleague **Kate Evans** – introduced Forum participants to what cognitive scientists know about implicit bias. They then offered insight into how such bias may shape and affect philanthropy and grantmaking. (You may access Laura and Kate's PowerPoint deck [HERE](#).)

Laura began the day by explaining that humans have multiple diverse dimensions to their identities. *Primary dimensions* consist of traits or attributes that people are born into or have no control over, such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Comparatively speaking, individuals possess more control over the *secondary dimensions* of their identities – the traits or attributes that reflect their group identities. For example, people (at least in the United States) usually can choose political party affiliation, the types of organizations they work for, etc.

The circumstances and situations that people experience over the course of their lifetimes (and perhaps especially while growing up) have the power to affect the neurology of their brains. In short, experiences that people have – or, alternatively, *don't* have – can shape how they unconsciously react to people who do not share their own dimensions of identity. Over time, our brains may develop biases that we are not even aware of.

Laura and Kate demonstrated this fact by having Forum participants take a version of the [Implicit Bias Test](#). The results showed that people tend to subconsciously associate members of certain social or ethnic groups with “positive” attributes and members of other groups with “negative” attributes. In many cases, such automatic associations occurred even in individuals who consider themselves relatively open-minded and self-aware.

And that's precisely the point. Throughout their presentation, Laura and Kate repeatedly emphasized the *unconscious* nature of implicit bias, which they formally defined as “the automatic or neurobiological processes underlying unconscious stereotyping and prejudice guiding the perception and attitude towards social groups.”

Arising out of the biological processes that cause our brains to *unconsciously* and automatically put people into categories or groups, implicit bias may end up affecting how our *conscious* minds make decisions. But because implicit bias lives below the level of consciousness, we don't always recognize that our decisions have been shaped by it.

In short, we sometimes are blind to the non-rational biases that undergird seemingly “rational” choices – including decisions about hiring staff and selecting grant recipients. This lack of self-awareness may help explain why only 14% of foundation CEOs, and less than 20% of nonprofit executives, identify as people of color – even though nonprofit and foundation leaders and boards consciously support the idea of increased diversity. And it may help explain why, historically, many grantmaking processes have unconsciously privileged applicants who share identity characteristics with grant decision-makers (e.g., a grant written by a college-educated individual who writes in Standard American English might have a better chance of being funded).

Fortunately, as Kate and Laura emphasized, tools exist that can help us recognize and counteract our own implicit biases. These include:

- **Perspective taking.** When interacting with others, we can listen to people as they share their stories, thoughts, and ideas – and then, in our own minds, actively imagine and contemplate their feelings and experiences.
- **Expanding our circles.** We can work to get to know people who differ from us. It behooves all of us to expand our networks of friends and associates, so that we are no longer located in “echo chambers” that reinforce our own biases.
- **Education.** We can engage in the long-term work of educating ourselves and becoming increasingly aware of our own biases, so we – and our decisions – are less affected by them.
- **Sector-level work in the areas of policy and structural change.** Working together, nonprofits – which often possess special insight into the topic of bias, because many serve diverse populations – and funders can work to create justice-related policy changes within individual organizations and the larger philanthropic and nonprofit sectors.

As is evident, there is much work to be done when it comes to implicit bias. If there is sufficient interest in pursuing this important work at the network level, the Maine Philanthropy Center can help arrange further opportunities for learning and engagement.