

BIAS CHECKLIST
CONDITIONS, BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES WHICH HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO PRODUCE AND
MASK BIAS IN CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Developed by Rita Cameron Wedding Ph.D.

California State University, Sacramento.

Email: drrcamwed@aol.com or cameronwedding@csus

Bias in child welfare practice occurs incrementally through “micro-actions” that are barely visible and are rarely challenged because they are practiced consistently within society and agencies. It is hard to detect bias in a single act but cumulatively, bias can contribute to patterns of disproportionality. Bias as it results in differences, however slight in the application of policies and procedures, can make the difference between in-home services, removal or reunification. This checklist identifies a few of the many potential sites of bias in Child Welfare Services. “Micro-Aggressions, e.g., everyday verbal, non-verbal and environmental slights, snubs, insults whether intentional or unintentional which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages,” (Derald Sue) are reflected throughout this checklist.

BIASES REFLECTED IN:	DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS
1. Language	Supreme Court Justice Roberts states that “language, like toxins can be deadly in small doses.” Buzzwords, are subjective language used in child welfare reports, and case notes that carry negative connotations. For example, statements like “the child was unkempt and filthy” and “the parents were hostile and uncooperative” can contribute to unintended biases”. (Alameda County DCFS Press. p.3)	Language informed by bias at one decision-point, e.g., investigation, referral or in other systems, e.g. juvenile justices or education will likely inform the language used at subsequent decision points.
2. Labeling Racially Coded Language	Using words like resistant, hostile, and aggressive can sometimes be shorthand or coded language with racial overtones. Reports and other forms of documentation that includes repetitive comments or language like “refuses” or “denies” services when referring to a particular category of people based on race or gender, with no explanation are left to interpretation. This makes it easy for stereotypes to fill in the blanks.	Ask clarifying questions, e.g., “what actions constitute aggressive or hostile behaviors? How do we differentiate between the use of the words angry vs. upset when applied consistently to one group? Can such simple words be signifiers for race?
3. Objectification of Clients and their Circumstances	Referring to clients as “placements”, “blowing out of foster care”, “damaged kids”, “illegitimate children”, “broken homes”; referring to mothers as “crackheads” and fathers as “deadbeat dads” or making disparaging remarks and generalizations about “single parents” can rationalize negative outcomes.	Discourage comments, jokes or insinuations of this nature. Discard written materials which might utilize similar forms of objectification and stereotyping.
4. Subjective and Vague Definitions of Neglect	Ambiguous charges of neglect are highly susceptible to biased evaluations of harm based on the parent’s race or class or on cultural differences in child rearing.	Ambiguous information is misinformation and should not be the basis for decision-making.

PERSONAL BIASES	DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS
5. Stereotypes	Stereotypes can act as powerful information systems. Implicit and unexamined assumptions that Black women are aggressive and difficult to work with, that Black men are violent, that Native Americans are “spiritual” or that Mexican men are macho are well-known and problematic when such ideas unconsciously inform decisions. Equally as problematic are assumptions of Asians as “model	Individuals should identify their unconscious biases and their potential to influence decision-making.

	minorities,” and the rarely acknowledged “pro-white” biases.	
6. Situations and Environments Which Produce Stress	Job tasks performed in certain situations such as the homes of clients, neighborhoods or among individuals that might produce anxiety for the decision-maker due to race, social class, religion might result in “distancing” and guardedness and may even slightly alter the assessment. When clients pick up on this it may well make them a little less friendly. “Such interactions can throw an interview hopelessly off course”. (“Blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking”)	Monitor how certain job tasks, e.g., interviewing and even home visits in certain instances might produce more stress than others. Consider how you might react differently when performing these tasks under stress. Consider how stereotypes influence your reactions to these environments.
7. “I’m not a racist”	Most people resist examining and critiquing personal biases. No one wants to acknowledge their culpability in modern racism. Modern racism is incremental, and it can mask bias in the interpretation and application of policies and procedures. These practices can persist undetected when individuals fail to acknowledge personal bias.	Help individuals to recognize the scope of modern racism which is not just reflected in the act of one individual but the collective acts of many, e.g., patterns of decision-making within the agency.
8. Inflexible Personal Values, Attitudes, Beliefs and Moral Convictions	Every individual is entitled to his or her personal belief system. The problem arises when decision-makers impose their personal beliefs and values on others. Strong personal convictions about child-rearing, discipline (spanking/ whipping) biases against family structure, e.g., “broken-homes” can influence assessments of child-wellbeing. According to Dorothy Roberts, in <i>Shattered Bonds</i> The attitude of the mother towards the social worker can be used as evidence of risk to the child.	Decision-makers should recognize that personal judgments that are values-driven can affect perceptions of safety and risk.

INSTITUTIONAL BIASES	DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS
9. Squelching Conversations About Race	Colorblindness allows everyday practices of discrimination to go undetected. Avoiding conversations about race won’t eliminate implicit bias. “Even in the non-mention of race, the radicalization process continues.”	Create formal and informal opportunities for public discussions and open dialogues about race. Don’t wait until there is a crisis.
10. Bias Against Circumstances	Practices which on the surface seem neutral to race can inadvertently disadvantage individuals. Bias against their “circumstance”, e.g., poverty, poor and dangerous neighborhoods, unemployment, single-parenting in effect become non-racial proxies which can result in decisions that inadvertently disadvantage people based on race and social class.	Address how the conflation of race and social class can influence perception of risk.
11. Lack of Collaborative Systems for Problem Solving	Programs which promote collaboration of family and community members strengthen problem-solving and solution-building which can provide a check and balance for bias. Such collaborations require more time and resources.	Encourage and promote family and team approaches and collaborative problem-solving; community based and cultural experts’ involvement in decision-making processes.
12. Structured Decision-Making Tools and Inflexible Computer “Drop-Down” Boxes	Structured Decision-Making Tools work in tandem with human decision making. Sometimes the items contained in the tools can promote bias, e.g., family structure. In some cases, SDM tools assess risk lower than human assessments which are informed by bias.	Conduct individual and agency audits to determine if overrides show disparities in decision-making. For example, in some juvenile justice agencies informal audits indicated that overrides resulted in more <i>big, Black boys</i> being detained despite the tool indicating a low need for detention.