

The Impact of Implicit Bias Podcast
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Kelly Meehleib: Welcome to the Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts podcast series on juvenile law. We are fortunate to have Dr. Cameron Wedding, Professor of Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies at Sacramento State University. Welcome, Dr. Cameron Wedding.

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Thank you.

Kelly Meehleib: I first wanted to start with, what is implicit bias?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Implicit bias is often referred to as unconscious bias. These are thoughts that we all have in our heads that describe who people are and, in particular, who's good, who's bad, who's right, who's wrong. Years ago, when I first started doing this work, it was very difficult to go into child welfare organizations, or even juvenile justice settings, and talk about implicit bias because we didn't have all the data and we didn't have the research that we have now. But now, there's been over 20 years of solid research that says that when we experience things that we are uncomfortable with, our brain has a reaction. So, it's not just, you know, people being bad people or acting out, it's really a reaction that occurs in our brain. But that doesn't mean that we can't control it. And it doesn't mean that we can't improve on the decisions that we make as a result of implicit biases.

Kelly Meehleib: And how and when did you become interested in studying implicit bias in child welfare?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: That's a great question. So, years ago, probably almost 20 years ago, I was approached by people in child welfare and they knew that I was interested in looking at disparities in youth serving systems, like education and juvenile justice, and they asked me if I would look at their data. And, I was really shocked to see the degree of disproportionality and disparities. But, one of the things that was clear to me is that there has to be some explanation for it. And so, I started looking for an explanation because I believe that child welfare professionals go to work every day with the intention of doing their best for their clients. And so, I started looking for an explanation for what's causing this. And I believed that it had to be something as natural as the air we breathe.

And so, I was right. I mean, I ran across the research on implicit bias and that told the story for me. And I also believe that it's one of the best ways to deliver the conversation, because it means that we're all starting at the same place. Some of us have thought about it, perhaps, longer and in a much more concise way, but it means that all of us have a responsibility to recognize our implicit biases so that we can improve outcomes.

Kelly Meehleib: And in your work, you reference micro-actions in child welfare practice. Please explain what micro-action means and are micro actions the same as microaggressions?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, insults. And whether they're intentional or not, it doesn't matter. The thing about micro aggressions, is that they look like everyday business as usual behaviors. And in the past, when we can think back, whether it's from our own experiences or whether we're thinking about what was in the history books or what our Uncle Jim taught us. When we think about racism and discrimination in the past it was more so considered blatant and incontrovertible forms of discrimination. So, therefore, everybody knew it, it's just the way we did business in the United States.

But, since the civil rights movement, when we moved into the so-called colorblind era, we were encouraged not to think about race, don't talk about race, because race doesn't matter. But what I want everyone to know is even in the non-mention of race, the racialization practices still persist, but they look different. They look like microaggressions. They might look like snubs, or slights, or, you know, the way people look at you, or this feeling that you might have. And because they can be subtle, and because everybody doesn't experience it, they're easily overlooked.

And a lot of people will say "oh I think you're taking that too seriously," that just because they looked at you that way, or just because they frowned at you when you walked in the room, or did something that you felt made you uncomfortable, it doesn't mean that it was discrimination. And so, it's really hard to prove, it's hard to measure, it's hard to quantify, however, that doesn't mean that microaggressions don't exist and don't persist, because they do.

Kelly Meehleib: How do micro-actions and microaggressions show up in child welfare?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Well, I have a great example. If you are interviewing someone, or if you're doing some sort of intake, and you don't like the way a person is dressed, you don't like the way they talk, you don't like their demeanor, you don't like the way they engage with their children. But, your judgement about these things have been informed by biases and you don't even know it. So, what can happen in that face-to-face interaction, and this is according to Malcolm Gladwell, he was the author of *Blink*. He talks about the fact that people have a tendency to sit farther away from people that they're uncomfortable with or to not give them eye contact, not give them attention, not to engage them into feeling comfortable. So, whenever we do that, whenever I walk in with a preconceived idea about who someone is, they're going to feel that. And so, I, as a result of my behavior, as a social worker for example, I can derail the whole conversation. And then, it's easy for me to look at the person, at the client, and say, "they were so rude," or "they were so uncooperative," or "they were so resistant to change." When, I also have to look at my behavior and think about what might I be doing that might be contributing to that.

Kelly Meehleib: And considering the history of implicit bias in child welfare, can it ever be completely eliminated?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Well, this is what I think. I think we learned how to be biased, so I think we can learn how not to be biased, if there were an incentive for us to do so.

Kelly Meehleib: And what outcomes do you hope will come with better understanding awareness of implicit bias?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Well, obviously, our assessment of people would look different. I strongly believe if we were aware of our unconscious biases at every decision point in the continuum within child welfare, as well as across systems, the disparities would disappear. That's what I think, they would just, go away.

Kelly Meehleib: So, what about in the educational system? How do micro-actions and microaggressions show up there?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: So, they're the same. I often talk about the collaboration of major social institutions. So, we have child welfare, juvenile justice, education, mental health, health care, all of those systems are working with similar populations. And so, if I go into a medical office for services – for example, we took our child, when he was five, to a well-baby checkup. This was one of the youngest in my family. And he is, I must say, as cute as he can be. [Laughter] But the intake person, the intake nurse, when she looked at his picture profile – and this is a little black baby boy, brown skin baby boy – she looked at his picture and she said, out loud in front of the child, the mother, and anyone in hearing distance, "oh my, he looks just like a little inmate."

Yes. So, those are messages that even though, if you were to ask that person, "did you mean anything by it?" I'm sure she'd say no and I'm sure she would assert that she has no biases and that she treats everyone the same. But, if she can perceive him as a little inmate, as someone who looks like a little inmate, she is already describing his potential in a very detrimental way. So, whatever else happens in that interaction, let's say if she and the mother have a conversation that the intake nurse is not comfortable with, that would probably also fall into the category of seeing this mother as maybe an unfit or as a mother who's not as, you know, dedicated to her child, because that's how biases work.

Now, that goes on a piece of paper, and although we know that people can't access health records just, you know, randomly like that. But when you have every system, child welfare, juvenile justice, education, reinscribing the same ideas about a family, it has a major impact on them. And, in particular, with child welfare, it will prevent parents or mothers, or fathers for that matter, from wanting to engage with the social workers. It may not even be something they say out loud or make explicit, but they will find ways to avoid those interactions when those microaggressions occur and when those implicit biases exist. So, all of the systems are working together reproducing the same ideas. Highly problematic for families.

Kelly Meehleib: What are some of the ways that we can work to eliminate or reduce the impact of implicit bias in child welfare and in the educational system?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: We hedge a lot in our society around implicit bias. I was working with one group and they were looking at their data and it still showed some very significant disparities for African American kids. And when we look at the data, we're always

so careful to say, oh my we can explain why even though black families and white families, black mothers and white mothers, have very similar outcomes with regard to child welfare, similar outcomes similar rates of neglect and abuse identification – But we won't explain why we have more black families in the system. If everything else is the same, why are there still more black families in the system? And I think it's still very hard for us to say there is implicit bias at every single decision point. And the implicit bias that starts at the front end of the decision-making process is going to perpetuate itself at every subsequent decision point.

Kelly Meehleib: And what do you see as the courts' role in minimizing implicit bias?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Well, I think the court plays a very important role. I've worked with a lot of judges and a lot of the things that I know, and a lot of the things that I teach about implicit bias, comes directly from judges.

I'm a faculty for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and have been for, maybe, 15 years. And I've trained judges all over the country. And, one of the things that I've learned is that judges are our guides. And so, if they don't notice bias, it makes it easier for biases to fly under the radar. So, it's really important that judges do pay attention, they do recognize that. And judges have said to me that once they became aware of implicit bias, that's when they were able to see that the language that we use in the court is really different, depending on who is involved.

So, language that shows up in court reports, like, for an example, when they're talking about mothers who've lost their kids to child welfare, the court reports will often refer to the white mother as having been upset as a result of losing her child, but will refer to the black mother as angry as a result of losing her child. So, if the judge can tune in to and become cognizant and aware of how this language plays out differently, because that is a very – that's a catalyst for moving those families deeper and deeper into the system. Just by paying attention to language.

And, one example, this is a juvenile case and the two kids, they were co-defendants and involved in the same situation, their family statuses were almost identical, according to the judge but one was released to his parents and one was detained, was placed in detention. And so, this judge, because of all the work he had done on implicit bias, he asked the question, why was this person released? Why was this person detained? And that then sets a momentum for all of the court staff, including the social workers, to ask questions. So, why are we doing things differently? What – is this implicit bias? What's happening here?

Kelly Meehleib: So, speaking of social services, what is social services role in this regard?

RCW: It's the same. To look at language. To look at language, to look at behavior. I think most particularly, social services and child welfare agencies have to pay attention to their shared beliefs. Because, what happens is that, when we work together as a group of people we start to take on the same belief systems, the same value systems, and we think families who look a certain particular way or who have a certain family structure – like single female heads of households, particularly black women, we refer to those families as broken homes. It's like, is

that family really broken? Or are we adding another layer of a negative connotation to that family?

So, with one agency we worked with, we gave them a survey and we asked them to help us understand why it was that there were so many African American kids in their child welfare system. And their response to the survey was, we have more African American kids in the system even though they are not there in numbers that are parallel to their presence in the general population –so there was an over-representation – but we have an over-representation of African American mothers because, and I quote, "black mothers have poor parenting skills" unquote. So, if that is, like, a shared belief in that organization or agency and somebody – it's somebody's responsibility to monitor for that and to listen to those stereotypes and to intervene against those stereotypes so people can hold themselves accountable.

Kelly Meehleib: And can you give some examples from your research on how race and social class influence the perception of risk of harm?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Oh yes, absolutely. So, poverty often mimics neglect. I watch this all the time when I'm in airports or in the stores and, you know, I see children who happen to be Caucasian children climbing on things and hanging off things and yelling and carrying on. And these are things that many black parents would consciously say, "I would never let my child do that in public," because we know the judgment is harsher. So, poor women, poor women of color, poor women of color who are involved in the system, are held, in some ways, to a higher standard in terms of their responsibility. You know, what it looks like to be a good parent.

I like, sometimes, to talk about my neighborhood. I live in a neighborhood that is a very professional neighborhood and it's a neighborhood that my mother could not have raised me in, because they wouldn't allow black people or people of color in there. And so, here I am in this neighborhood and – I often say, I have seen some things in my neighborhood. I mean, it's a great neighborhood. But, I mean, I see things that people who work in child welfare would definitely consider risk factors for children. Like, you know, children being unattended in hot tubs – these are upper-class dilemmas and issues.

And I'm not saying that these parents aren't great parents, they're great parents, and they do things that were those behaviors being carried out by poor women, it would look really different. I mean, you can't leave – I don't think anybody should leave a kid in a hot tub unattended, a five-year-old. You know, treehouses and hot tubs and leaving them in cars because they can watch SpongeBob, because they just want to. I mean, these are things that most people our child welfare would definitely frown upon. But these are things that I've seen carried out by wealthy parents frequently, and by poor parents it could be grounds for an investigation.

Kelly Meehleib: We are becoming more aware as a society as to how bias impacts the rates of criminalization of youth of color. What are some of the interventions we can use to begin changing this culture of bias in the criminal justice system?

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Well, once again, it's so important that everybody is aware of their biases. I worked with one agency and they talked about the fact that even with a structured decision-making tool, when they went back and did an audit of their overrides it was mostly big, black boys were the ones that they did the overrides on to keep in juvenile hall. And so, again, every decision point, everyone needs to be held accountable. And I don't mean accountable like a big stick kind of accountability. I mean, just from an educational perspective.

In fact, the way that I teach implicit bias, I try to teach it from the perspective of we're all in this together. We're all sitting at the table, what if we can just get a, just a, little bit tighter, a little bit better? What if we can make even the most minute improvements? What if that could save one family's life? You know, in terms of them not getting so entrenched in a public system like that. Because we know, you know, this is a school example, we know we don't suspend every five-year-old kid who has a tantrum, but disproportionately the ones who do get suspended are kids of color. So, again, juvenile justice is the same, we need to be held accountable.

That's a tough one because people are resistant to having this conversation. But it doesn't mean that we're bad people when we have biases. It just means that we are human. And it's like, if I really am coming to work every day saying, "I'm going to do the very best I can to provide the very best services for the children and families I work for," then it is my responsibility to really be willing to examine and be introspective about my own unconscious biases.

Kelly Meehleib: Dr. Cameron Wedding, thank you so much for joining us today to talk about implicit bias.

Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding: Thank you so much.

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