THE HUMAN BRAIN AND DECISION-MAKING

OVERVIEW

OBJECTIVES:

- To understand and explore the structure of our brains
- To learn about Implicit Bias and how to address its implications
- To discuss the importance of listening and explore different types
- To have a meaningful one-on-one discussion about listening to understand

SETTING:

- Large group interaction with participants seated in a circle
- Divide into pairs for a discussion activity

TIME:

- 60 minutes

PROCEDURE: [brief overview in bullets such as example below]

- Share the information related to brain structure, implicit bias, building trust, and listening to understand
- When finished with presenting this information, participants will break into pairs for a discussion on the importance of listening to understand
The concepts presented are drawn from the Boy Scouts of America Wood Badge Training and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Racial Healing Circles.

Sources of Work

- Dr. Desley Smith, Assistant Extension Professor
  - Mississippi State University

- Dr. Cade Smith, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Community Engagement
  - Division of Diversity and Community Engagement
  - University of Mississippi

TIME: 5 MINUTES
SUPPLIES: NONE
HANDBOUTS: NONE
LECTURETTE:

It might sound something like this...

The human brain developed in primitive societies, and this neurological operating system has not been updated for thousands of years.

In primitive societies, the greatest threat to survival was to be thrown out of one’s tribe. So, ensuring belonging and connection greatly increased security and survival.

Furthermore, decisions were focused on survival with an emphasis on immediate threat assessment and the four basic primal drives: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and reproduction.

In modern society, lots of decisions have to be made and we need to consider not only our immediate threats/wellbeing, but our long-term threats/wellbeing, as well.

Our brains are poorly adapted to operating in modern developed societies.

• There was no advantage to saving in the ancient brain
• Even two generation people didn’t have to worry about being taken care of in old age
The Amygdala and Hippocampus are part of the limbic system of our brain and involved in rapid and unconscious impacts on motivation, emotion, learning, and memory. This is a more primitive part of our brain than the forebrain, and it manages the fight or flight responses to threat.

- The Amygdala monitors stimuli (threats) and responds accordingly. It is also involved in rapid and unconscious evaluation of trustworthiness, facial evaluations, and other social processes.
- If the Amygdala stimulates a threat response, the function of the Hippocampus and Prefrontal Cortex is shutdown; the fight, flight, or freeze mode takes over. Memory storage and retrieval, emotional processing, and executive function is disrupted.
- The Hippocampus is involved in various cognition and memory processes, including memory storage and retrieval.
- The Prefrontal Cortex regulates executive function: the processing for emotions (e.g. empathy, shame, compassion, guilt), reason and objectivity, goal direction, prediction of future conditions and consequences, and social control (filters).
- In order to develop emotional processing skills and resiliency, the Amygdala, Hippocampus, and Prefrontal Cortex need to operate in coordination and avoid the flight, fight, or freeze response.
- If the Amygdala’s threat response highjacks higher brain function, memory and emotion processing, empathy, human connection goal achievement, and future orientation isn’t possible
• Threat and fear prevent understanding, emotional resiliency, connection, and trust fostering trust in process and between participants and creating appropriately “challenging and supportive” spaces and experiences reduces the Amygdala’s threat assessment.

• Participants can access and retrieve stored memories around a topic or experience. They can also create new memories and capture perspectives from others' lived experience and store them in their own memories.

• When presented with information and experiences that stimulate emotions, participants can process those emotions, evaluate the new information more objectively, consider the future implications for this newfound understanding, and plan and engage in goal-oriented behaviors.

• The rapid and unconscious threat assessment system of the Amygdala is also associated with Implicit or Unconscious Bias. These rapid and unconscious decision-making processes are a natural and unavoidable part of our human brain. They developed to keep us safe. However, they can also lead us to unknowingly make decisions and take actions that do not align with our conscious and sincere values.
People of Color — experience trauma from (or fear of):
- Denial of educational, social, employment, and economic opportunities and being ostracized
- Being falsely accused of malice and criminality because of race — Emmett Till Syndrome
- Being mistreated, physically assaulted, or killed by police or neighbors
- Explicit and implicit racist comments
- Being viewed as “less than”
- Being labelled an “Angry Person of Color”
- One’s children and grandchildren facing the same traumas and injustices
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INSTRUCTIONS

• Whites experience fear of (or trauma from):
  • Saying or doing the wrong thing
  • Being accused of being a racist; false binary (Racist=Bad / Not Racist=Good)
  • Talking openly about racism (social taboos; white solidarity)
  • Being held responsible for historical and contemporary existence of racist systems and structures
  • Losing present political, economic, education, legal, and social power
  • Prospect of becoming the minority and facing retribution from oppressed
  • Acknowledging internalized superiority and right to rule and deep cultural legacy of anti-black sentiment

TIME: 5 MINUTES
SUPPLIES: NONE
HANDOUTS: NONE
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INSTRUCTIONS

Dominate cultural and social norms communicate to us the things that are valuable and desirable.

- The human brain is wired to prefer who and what dominate cultural norms value.
- Non-Target Groups by default define the dominate cultural and social norms.
- People and experiences from Target Groups are less valued, because they are seen as “less than” in relationship to the dominate cultural and social norms.
- As humans, our brains rapidly and unconsciously trust culturally normative people and things more than culturally “different” (based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other differences) people and things.
  - These associations are made and fractions of seconds without our awareness.
  - This is part of our brain structure and us being a social species.
  - This unconscious negative association for people who are different from the dominant cultural norm may have served to protect humans in a more threatening time, and it is part of us being a social species.
- This video illustrates evidence of internalized racism from implicit biases
- These associations result in resumes with African-American sounding names being consciously or subconsciously devalued compared to white-sounding names on the exact same resume
As humans we all hold biases. We are also all subject to implicit bias because of our brain function and the influence of our cultural and social environments. Holding implicit biases doesn’t make us bad, it means we are human.

- Because we know that prejudice against others - based on race, religion, age, sex, body composition, etc., is dehumanizing, it is hard to allow ourselves to “see” our implicit biases.
- Understanding implicit bias helps us slow down our decision-making by moving beyond the rapid and unconscious processes of the Amygdala and move our decision-making to our Prefrontal Cortex where our executive functioning and more objective evaluations can take place.
- Slower, more thoughtful decisions allow us to align our action with our true values.
How do we take this corrupted software and use it so we do okay and thrive in today’s world?

We will always remain biased if we ignore the fact that we hold biases.

The more time we can spend owning and not denying, the more we can actually make progress.

The more time we spend with others who are different from us, dealing with our fears, the more we have opportunities to support equity and inclusion.

But this is hard—how do we do it?
What do you think about this statement, “Feeling I can trust you is more important than thinking I can trust you.”

When considering trusting someone, how accurate is this statement for you?

Allow time for discussion.
Discuss Each Question

- How important is listening in building trust?

- What is happening when you are listening well?

- What is happening when you are NOT listening well?
The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply.

We can use simple steps to practice and build the skill of “Listening to Learn and Understand”. This is very important when preparing for dialogue around sensitive, polarizing, and emotionally impactful topics like racism.

**Note to facilitator:**

*This may be an ideal time to make connections back to the piece on Moving from Debate to Dialogue.*

Dialogue is supported when:

- You practice listening to other people's stories about their realities and lived experiences.
- You believe people about their realities and experiences—rather than becoming defensive and stuck in denial.
- The question in your mind is “What can I learn about myself and others?”
- You listen more than you talk.
- You practice reflecting on what you're feeling and respond in intentional ways rather than reacting in ways that lack self-awareness.
Solutions appear through listening. “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Stephen Covey

How do you respond when you hear something you don’t want to hear?

Many of us...

- Have blank looks, interrupt, and are distracted
- Are simply waiting to be able to say something rather than listening to learn and understand
- Are uncomfortable with silence, which may allow individuals to gather their thoughts before sharing their ideas, etc.

Especially when we feel tired, hungry, angry, or threatened

Tip: take a break and take care of yourself so you can be in a better place to listen
Discuss the two types of listening noted on the slide.

1. **Active Listening**
   - Reflect back, “What I understand you to say is…”
   - No moral judgments, just restate

2. **Empathetic Listening**
   - Understand the depth of what is said
   - More than just listening to the words, what is the message?
   - Put self in place of the speaker
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INSTRUCTIONS

Watch Video.

How did you feel while watching the ‘Story of Ben’?

Empathy Arises from “Emotionally Sharing” a Humanizing Experience

We All Relate to

• The joy from the birth of a loved one
• The love for a loved one
• The dream of a prosperous future
• The grief of losing a loved one

We Can Use Life-Stories to Step Into Someone Else’s Experience through Empathy

This Allows us to then Critique Ourselves, our Social Groups, Institutions, and Society and Engage in Antiracism Work
Power of Being Heard:

“People start to heal the moment they feel heard” – Cheryl Richardson

Power of Hearing
People are more likely to act after they’ve emotionally connected with someone else’s story
Much research exists on **Perspective Taking**

- Making an effort to understand another person's perspective and point of view

Emile Bruneau’s at MIT has done recent research on **Perspective Giving**

- Embracing the opportunity to share one's own story with someone else
Emile Bruneau at MIT – recent research:
http://news.mit.edu/2012/conflict-resolution-0315

Emile Bruneau: Lessons Learned

- It is important for both groups to give perspectives.
- Attitudes toward the other group improved the most when disempowered shared their stories and the empowered group listened.
- The less empowered group benefits more from perspective giving.
- The dominant group benefits more from perspective taking.

For the dominant group, the researchers believe that hearing the opposing group’s stories is beneficial because members of the group in power often feel being blamed for the conflict. Therefore, listening gives an opportunity for them to act virtuously and morally and to show that they’re actually good people,” said Bruneau.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d052ShE2eM
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzBIJt6oNfA

TIME: 5 MINUTES
SUPPLIES: NONE
HANDOUTS: NONE
Take away messages from this section.

- **Our Brains are Wired for Prejudice, Bias, and Polarization**
  - These Fast Brain Decisions are Super Fast, Automatic, and Unconscious

- **Our Brains are also Wired for Partnership, Empathy & Connection, Critical Thought, and Prosocial Action**

- **We Must:**
  - Partner across differences
  - Create opportunities for building empathy and emotional resilience
  - Critically analyze ourselves, institutions, community, and culture
  - Commit to antiracism action