

The Potential Influence of Unconscious Bias on the Evaluation of Candidates

Although we may believe that we are objective scholars and professionals who are able to evaluate candidates based entirely on merit, the quality of their work and the nature of their achievements, an enormous body of research has shown that each of us brings with us a lifetime of experience and cultural context that shapes the way in which we evaluate other individuals.

Studies show that people who have strong egalitarian values and believe they are not biased may, in fact, implicitly or inadvertently behave in discriminatory ways. A first step toward ensuring fairness in the evaluation process is to recognize that implicit biases, attitudes, and other influences not related to the qualifications, contributions, behaviors, and personalities of candidates can influence our evaluations of them, even if we are committed to egalitarian principles.

The results from several controlled research studies in which individuals are asked to make judgments about human subjects demonstrate the potentially prejudicial nature of our many implicit assumptions. These implicit biases show up in a range of situations from our everyday social interactions to those that have a clear connection to hiring for faculty and staff positions or evaluating individuals for promotion and tenure.

It is important to note that in most of these studies, the gender and sometimes the race or ethnicity of the evaluator was not significant, indicating that people in general share and apply some of the same assumptions.

Recognizing biases and other influences not related to the quality of candidates can help reduce their impact on a search or review of faculty candidates. Constructing clear guidelines and spending sufficient time on evaluation can reduce the influence of implicit bias.

The Power of Implicit Biases

- Such biases are pervasive
- Biases can occur even when there is no intent or motivation to be biased (and in fact the perceiver might be horrified to realize the bias)
- Biases are a product of what are otherwise very normal cognitive processes essential for navigating a complex environment
- Biases derive from expectations or learned associations based on our “models” of the world
- Simply talking about bias is often insufficient for eliminating its influence

See the Reducing Bias section in the next guidebook for a list of unconscious biases.

Examples of Possible Implicit Biases

Decades of research demonstrates that biases show up repeatedly at every level of organizations including recruitment, screening, hiring, evaluating for tenure and promotion, and determining salary and raises. For example:

1. Faculty from historically underrepresented groups may be subject to higher expectations in evaluation areas such as the number and quality of publications, name recognition, or personal acquaintance with a committee member.
2. The ideas and research findings of individuals from historically underrepresented groups may be undervalued or unfairly attributed to a mentor or other collaborators despite contrary evidence in publications or letters of recommendations.
3. The ability of underrepresented people to run a research group, obtain funding, navigate a complex system, and supervise students and staff may be underestimated.
4. Assumptions about possible family responsibilities and their effect on a person's career path may negatively influence evaluation of merit, despite evidence of productivity.
5. Negative assumptions about whether underrepresented people will "fit in" to the existing academic environment can influence evaluation.
6. The professional experience a person may have acquired through an alternative career path may be undervalued.
7. Biases or assumptions may exist such as over valuing someone who holds a degree from a peer institution or knowing the references for a candidate. These things on their own do not necessarily mean the person is the most qualified.

Practices That Can Minimize the Impact of Implicit Bias

1. Reflect on your impressions
 - The greatest amount of bias happens in the early stages of the "acquaintance process"
 - Run "mental simulations" evaluating a candidate by substituting a different gender or ethnicity into the materials and considering whether this changes the narrative you construct about the scholar, credit for their work, probability of future success, etc.
 - Talk through your decision with someone with whom you generally disagree or don't know well
 - Make a plan in your mind for how you will handle situations when you recognize that bias is at work
2. Minimize or eliminate cues that trigger implicit bias
 - Identify one thing that you may have in common with a candidate when reviewing their background and then re-review their materials
 - Focus solely on relevant or diagnostic cues – have agreed upon specific concrete procedures for reviewing candidates before reviewing them
 - Explain the thinking behind decisions (and ask for clarification if the reasoning is unclear)
3. Create a culture of pointing out bias or the potential for bias
 - Elicit feedback and be open to receiving it through a range of formats

- Encourage everyone to take part in recognizing and pointing out potential bias and value them for doing so
4. Create a culture of explaining and describing processes (transparency & self-awareness)
 - Slow down decision-making to create more opportunity for identifying and interrupting bias
 - Make decisions collectively (when appropriate and possible)
 5. Continue exploring implicit bias and selection and evaluation processes that enhance inclusive excellence, such as asking all candidates the same set of job-related questions and rating their responses.

Source:

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