The Potential Influence of Cognitive Bias

Cognitive bias refers to a range of systemic errors in human decision-making stemming from our tendency to use mental shortcuts. It has been important to our survival as a species, and there are downsides when it comes to quickly sizing up other people.

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

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

The results from many controlled research studies in which individuals are asked to make judgments about human subjects demonstrate the potentially prejudicial nature of our many automatic assumptions. These thinking errors or cognitive 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.

The Power of Cognitive 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

Examples of Possible Biases

Decades of research demonstrate that biases show up repeatedly at every level of personal interaction and are pervasive in organizations.

1. Having higher or lower expectations of other people based on little information
2. Overvaluing people who share a similar background to our own
3. Avoiding people who are different from us
4. Feeling distant or disconnected from people who are different from us
5. Having negative assumptions about how interaction will go

Practices That Can Minimize the Impact of Cognitive Bias[i]

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1. Reflect on your impressions

   - The greatest amount of bias happens in the early stages of the "acquaintance process".

   - Run "mental simulations" of the situation or your response to someone by substituting a person with a different gender, ethnicity, background, etc. and considering whether this changes the narrative you construct about the person or nature of an interaction.

   - Talk through your thinking with someone who doesn't always agree with you.

   - Use strategies to slow down like taking more time to respond or react, delaying decisions, gathering more data, or seeking additional feedback.

2. Learn to recognize and interrupt cues that trigger bias

   - Focus on personal characteristics of the individual and not the broader social group you associate with the person.

   - Identify one thing that you may have in common with a person different from you.

   - Develop criteria and follow a structured process or rubric that helps you focus specifically on relevant facts and information.

3. Create a culture of pointing out 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 assumptions, inconsistencies, or short cuts in decision making and value them for doing so.

4. Take care to get in touch with your own emotional state before interacting with someone unfamiliar, different from you, or whom you've formulated strong opinions about.

   - Focus on coming across as open and friendly rather than trying to suppress any preconceived ideas. This mindset has been shown to be more effective for mitigating bias.

5. Practice curiosity and perspective taking to build empathy for people with a different background, world view, or social identity from your own.

6. Use the right criteria for evaluating a person's work or conduct and think through whether that criteria would make sense if you were dealing with someone of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.

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