Potential Influence of Unconscious Assumptions & Biases on your Search

Women and minorities may be subject to unduly high expectations in areas such as number and quality of publications, name recognition, or personal acquaintance with a committee member.

Candidates from institutions other than the major research universities that have trained most of our faculty may be undervalued. Qualified candidates from institutions such as historically black universities, four-year colleges, government, or the private sector might offer innovative, diverse, and valuable perspectives on research and teaching.

The work, ideas, and findings of women or minorities may be undervalued or unfairly attributed to a research director or collaborators despite contrary evidence in publications or letters of reference.

The ability of women or minorities to run a research group, raise funds, and supervise students and staff may be underestimated.

Assumptions about possible family responsibilities and their effect on the candidate’s career path may negatively influence evaluation of merit, despite evidence of productivity.

Negative assumptions about whether female or minority candidates will “fit in” to existing environment can influence evaluation.

The professional experience candidates may have acquired through an alternative career path may be undervalued.

Other possible biases, assumptions, or unwritten criteria may influence your evaluation.

Consider getting tested (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/) to identify the types and strengths of your unconscious biases. This can enable you to avoid making unchallenged decisions about groups for whom you know you have negative associations.

To read more about this topic, check out The Invisible Gorilla by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, where they explore further the numerous ways that our intuitions can deceive us.

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What is Unconscious Bias?

Psychologists tell us that our unconscious biases are simply our natural people preferences. Biologically we are hard-wired to prefer people who look like us, sound like us, and share our interests. Social psychologists call this phenomenon “social categorization” whereby we routinely and rapidly sort people into groups. This preference bypasses our normal, rational, and logical thinking. We use these processes very effectively but the categories we use to sort people are not logical, modern, or perhaps even legal. Put simply, our neurology takes us to the very brink of bias and poor decision making.

Just How Hard-wired is Unconscious Bias?

Neuropsychologists tell us unconscious bias is built into the very structure of the brain’s neurons. Our unconscious brain processes and sifts vast amounts of information looking for patterns (200,000 times more than the conscious mind). When the unconscious brain sees two things occurring together it begins to expect them to be seen together and begins to wire them together neurally.

Brain imaging scans have demonstrated that when people are shown images of faces that differ from their own faces, the experience activates an irrational prejudgment in the brain’s alert system for danger; the amygdala. This happens in less than a tenth of a second. Our associations and biases are likely to be activated every time we encounter a member of a particular group, even if we consciously think that we reject a group stereotype.

The brain has a ‘safety gateway’ where these instincts can be shunted to the brain’s social processing areas. If this gating and shunting action does not take place our instincts become behavior.

When is Unconscious Bias Most Active?

We have very limited capacity in our brains to control bias. When we use up these resources, bias is more likely to break through into our behavior. When we are stressed, frustrated, angry, or threatened, these emotions overwhelm our resources, and bias is left unfettered.

Examples of assumptions that can influence the evaluation of candidates

When rating the quality of verbal skills as indicated by vocabulary definitions, evaluators rated the skills lower if they were told an African American provided the definitions than if they were told that a White person provided them (Biernat and Manis 1991).

When asked to assess the contribution of skill and luck to successful performance of a task, evaluators more frequently attributed success to skill for males and luck for females, even though males and females performed the task equally well (Deaux and Emmswiller 1974).

Evaluators who were busy, distracted by other tasks, and under time pressure, gave women lower ratings than men in written evaluation of equal job performance. Sex bias decreased when they gave ample time and attention to their judgments, which rarely occurs in actual work settings. This study indicates that evaluators are more likely to rely upon underlying assumptions and biases when they cannot/do not give sufficient time and attention to their evaluations (Martell 1991).

Evidence suggests that perceived incongruities between the female gender role and leadership roles create two types of disadvantages for women: (1) ideas about female gender roles cause women to be perceived as having less leadership ability than men and consequently impede women’s rise to leadership positions, and (2) women in leadership positions receive less favorable evaluations because they are perceived to be violating gender norms.

These perceived incongruities lead to attitudes that are less positive toward female leaders than male leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002; Ridgeway 2001).

Overcoming the Influence of Unconscious Biases and Assumptions

Remind yourself of the need to be fair and objective at key times, either in your head or with written reminders such as posters and cards.

Spend sufficient time (15-20 minutes) evaluating each applicant. Take breaks during extended or emotional discussions.

Know where you are in terms of your motivations to change or manage your biases. It can be unrealistic to expect to change deeply held beliefs. It may be all you can do is expect to manage them in key situations (e.g. appraisals, interviews, etc.).

Learn about research on biases and assumptions.

Discuss research on biases and assumptions and consciously strive to minimize their influence on your evaluation of candidates.

Develop criteria for evaluating candidates and apply them consistently to all applicants.

Evaluate each candidate’s entire application; don’t depend too heavily on only one element such as the letters of recommendation, or the prestige of the degree-granting institution or postdoctoral program.

Be able to defend every decision for rejecting or retaining a candidate.

Periodically evaluate your decisions and consider whether qualified women and underrepresented minorities are included. If not, consider whether evaluation biases and assumptions are influencing your decisions.