

Unconscious Bias and its Influence on Decision Making

What is Unconscious Bias?

An enormous body of literature confirms that we all have biases—some explicit, many implicit. These biases have an effect on how we view others and how we make decisions, including decisions about faculty hiring. Perhaps most disturbing, implicit biases can be at odds with our own conceptions of ourselves and our conscious values and standards. You may believe yourself to be open-minded and you may be determined to select the most meritorious candidate before you. But a good deal of evidence from the behavioral sciences—some of it conducted on university professors themselves—demonstrates that actual achievements are often set aside in favor of those who fit some group stereotype of those likely to succeed.

Recognize Your Own Unconscious Biases

Acknowledging and understanding your biases and those of your colleagues can minimize the influence they have on the search. Spending sufficient time on evaluation can also reduce the influence of assumptions that may not be warranted.

Harvard Professor Mahzarin Banaji, Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, is a leading authority on unconscious bias and its effects on decision making. Search committee members are encouraged to read her book: Banaji, MR & Greenwald, AG (2013) *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Delacorte Press). It's a great read and will change your view of the world.

Take an Implicit Association Test (IAT)

Professor Banaji and colleagues have developed an online set of tasks designed to assess associations between personal attributes (e.g., gender, race, or sexual orientation) and your positive or negative views about them. Project Implicit, hosted at Harvard, includes dozens of IATs that allow you—in the privacy of your office or home—to explore your implicit biases.

We strongly encourage every search committee member to take at least one IAT. (Registration is free, and the first test takes no more than 15 minutes.) The tests are not meant to challenge your conscious attitudes, but to reveal the extent to which you may nevertheless associate groups like “female” with “family” and “male” with “career.” As members of this intellectual community, you will surely find it of some interest to discover that your mind contains associations of which you are unaware. You can find the IATs at <https://implicit.harvard.edu>.

Beware of How Unconscious Bias Can Affect Candidate Evaluations

Search committee members often give preference to applicants they know, whose advisors or mentors they know, or who hold a degree from their own alma mater or one of a small number of elite institutions.

- Women, minorities, and candidates from institutions other than traditional peers can be held to higher standards. Search committee members may scrutinize their records in an unconsciously dismissive way, evaluate the same achievements as others to be less important, and fail to notice unexpected achievements.
- Search committee members—and sometimes letter writers—can inadvertently, or even overtly, minimize the contributions by women and minorities, and may unfairly attribute success to mentors and collaborators. It can be helpful to explicitly ask and discuss—as a committee—if a letter writer is unduly shaping a view of a candidate in a positive or negative direction based on scant or unreliable evidence.
- Letters of recommendations often reflect stereotypic views of demographic groups. A man’s research will be described as seminal. A woman will be described as warm and collaborative. These implicit cues can influence decision-making.
- Be especially vigilant about statements concerning “fit.” This euphemism is often used to exclude individuals whose demographic characteristics don’t match the demographics of the department or field. If “fit” were the best driver of decision making, the Harvard of today would be identical to the Harvard of the past.
- Another concept to scrutinize is “potential.” Since decisions about early career stage scholars often depend upon predictions about potential, superficial qualities such as dress or style of speech should not color assessments of actual achievements.
- For women especially, it is important to not let the concept of family commitments enter the evaluation. Here are some excerpts from recent letters of recommendation: “She balances work and life in a way that detracts from her career.” “And what’s more remarkable is that she did all of this while having three children.” [NOTE: the same person who wrote this last sentence also wrote a letter for the candidate’s husband and did not mention the three children, although they were indeed his too.]
- Studies document that the achievements of women and minorities tend to be evaluated less positively than white men of equal accomplishment. Ask yourself whether you unconsciously read the dossiers of candidates differently? You will be impressed with your own ability to correct your assumptions once you become aware of their contaminating influence.