The Potential Influence of Implicit Bias on Evaluation of Candidates

Although we may believe that we are objective scholars who are able to evaluate individuals based entirely on merit and on the quality of their work and the 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 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 many 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 positions or evaluating faculty for 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

Examples of Possible Implicit Biases

1. Faculty from underrepresented groups may be subject to higher expectations in evaluation areas such as number and quality of publications, name recognition, or personal acquaintance with a committee member.
2. The ideas and research findings of individuals from 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, 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.\textsuperscript{i}

**Practices That Can Minimize the Impact of Implicit Bias\textsuperscript{ii}**

1. Reflect on your impressions
   - 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 his/her work, probability of future success, etc.

2. Minimize or eliminate cues that trigger implicit bias
   - Use “blind auditions” whenever possible in reviewing candidates
     - De-identified materials as an initial review can reduce bias in the “acquaintance process”
   - Focus solely on relevant or diagnostic cues – have agreed upon specific concrete procedures for reviewing candidates
   - Explain the thinking behind all 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)
   - Value skills or achievements that may not fit the typical candidate
   - Make decisions collectively (whenever possible)

5. Continue exploring implicit bias and selection process practices that enhance inclusive excellence

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\textsuperscript{i} Adapted from *Building and Sustaining Inclusive Excellence: A Guide for Faculty Search Committees*, Brown University.

\textsuperscript{ii} Adapted from *Implicit Gender Bias in the Academy*, 2015 Diversity Summit, Bernadette Park, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder.