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Unconscious Bias and Assumptions



in ■ Hiring ■ Promotion ■ Tenure

Research and Tips for More Equitable
and Effective Hiring Practices



Potential Sources of Bias

Even when we are committed to promoting diversity in the workplace, research indicates that we bring our personal experiences and cultural histories into the hiring and employment process.

How is it that women are now nearly half of all doctoral recipients, but only 37% of the faculty at research intensive institutions in 2011, and 29% of tenured and tenure-track faculty at Virginia Tech in 2014? How is it that the progress in hiring ethnic minority faculty has been so slow and difficult, and gains are so quickly eroded when retention fails? The reasons are subtle and often not visible to those in the majority culture. Unrecognized biases and assumptions play a powerful role in maintaining the status quo.

“As we become aware of our hypotheses, we replace our belief in a just world with a view of the world in which bias plays a role. Since this is a state of affairs we wish were otherwise, we prefer not to acknowledge it. But we can learn.” (Valian, 1999)



Schemas that allow us to make short-hand assumptions about someone based on the person's or group's main characteristics unknowingly shape our expectations and judgments. Advantages accumulated by some (such as attending the best graduate schools or working with influential mentors) are often viewed as signs of individual merit. Cumulative disadvantages (such as attending less prestigious institutions or taking time out for a baby) more often characterize the experiences of women and people of color and are assumed to reflect less talent or commitment. Over the course of a career, small differences can add up to large differences in salary, promotion, and prestige. (Valian, 1999)

Tips for Reviewing Dossiers

Self-Growth and Education

- Recognize personal biases and prejudices that might influence hiring and promotion decisions.
- Be familiar with research on biases and assumptions.
- Acknowledge the impact of cumulative disadvantage.

Create Consistent Hiring Practices

- Use clear job descriptions.
- Create transparent policies and procedures.
- Develop criteria for evaluating candidates and apply them consistently.
- Include individuals with different perspectives on hiring and personnel committees.
- Educate committees on bias and assumptions.
- Make sure policies are modeled and reinforced by leadership.

Studies Show Bias in Academic Job Contexts

In a study of over 6000 faculty members at top U.S. universities, both male and female professors were more likely to respond to requests for information about graduate programs from students with white, male sounding names. (Milkman et al., 2014)

Search committees tend to weigh recommendation letters higher if the evaluators know the writers. This can be a disadvantage for black men and women who may develop different network systems. (Sagaria, 2003)

Science professors at research intensive universities rated applicants for a laboratory manager position more highly and offered them a higher starting salary if the name on the application was male. (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012)

When a scholarly journal introduced double-blind peer review, there was a significant increase in the number of papers published with female first-authors. A similar journal in the same field did not experience the same pattern. (Budden et al., 2008)

In a study of 300 letters of recommendation for medical school faculty positions, letters written for female applicants were shorter and tended to display more “doubt raisers” than for male counterparts. Adjectives such as “superb” and “exceptional” were more frequent in recommendations for male applicants. (Trix and Psenka, 2003)

A study of R01 grants awarded by the National Institutes of Health found that despite controlling for educational background, publication record, and other factors, African Americans were 10 percentage points less likely than whites to receive funding. (Ginther et al., 2011)



Put Education and Policies into Action

- Review dossiers carefully: Consider the entire package; do not weigh one element too heavily.
- Be aware of how the style or origin of a reference might bias against females or ethnic minorities.
- When hiring, review the final pool of applicants for diversity.
- Do not use informal methods of hiring or promotion exclusively.

Evaluate

- Consistently assess hiring and promotion practices.
- Be able to defend every decision to reject or retain a candidate.
- Periodically evaluate your decisions and consider whether qualified women and underrepresented minorities are included.

“Having a diverse search committee makes it less likely that the committee will overlook talented individuals with non-traditional kinds of experience.” (Smith, 2000)