Evaluating Job Candidates: Understanding and minimizing the influence of unconscious bias

Jennifer Sheridan, Ph.D.
Introduction: Commitment vs. Results

- Despite broad commitment to the goal of diversity, why are results less than satisfactory?
  - Lack of training/education on the hiring process
  - Influence of unconscious bias and assumptions
Introduction

Searching for Excellence & Diversity®:
Workshops for Faculty Search Committee Members

Guiding Principles

- Research Based
- Peer Training
- Active Learning
- Practical Information
- Accountability

Content

1. Run an effective and efficient search committee
2. Actively recruit an excellent and diverse applicant pool
3. Raise awareness of unconscious bias and assumptions and their influence on evaluation of candidates
4. Ensure a fair and thorough review of candidates
5. Develop and implement an effective interview process
6. Close the deal – successfully hire selected candidate
Group Discussion

Why do you think it is important to develop a diverse faculty, or a diverse workforce?
Introduction: Benefits of Diversity

Diverse working groups are more productive, creative, and innovative than homogeneous groups

Introduction: Benefits of Diversity

- Diverse groups engage in a higher level of critical analysis than do homogenous groups

Introduction: Benefits of Diversity

- Diverse scholars and professionals can invigorate and expand disciplines and fields
  - New approaches to teaching
  - New research questions
  - New perspectives and interpretations
  - New concerns
Overview: Unconscious bias in the search process

1. What is “unconscious bias”?  
2. How might unconscious biases influence evaluation of faculty candidates?  
3. How can a search committee minimize the influence of bias?
What is unconscious bias?

- A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that most people hold unconscious biases about groups of people.
- Depending on the discipline, unconscious biases can also be referred to as:
  - Schemas
  - Stereotypes
  - Mental models
  - Cognitive shortcuts
  - Statistical discrimination
  - Implicit associations
  - Spontaneous trait inference

The tendency of our minds to judge *individuals* by the characteristics (real or imagined) of the *groups* to which they belong.
What is unconscious bias?

- Most of us routinely rely on unconscious assumptions even though we intend to be fair and believe that we are fair.

- Human brain works by categorizing people, objects and events around us -- this allows us to quickly and efficiently organize and retrieve information.

- But – when evaluating people we can be led astray by our tendency to categorize people – and we tend to do so on the following dimensions:
  - Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Age
How is the research on bias conducted?

- **Blind, randomized trials**
  - Give each group of evaluators pictures, words, or applications with a racial or gender indicator
  - Compare evaluations

- **Real life studies**
  - Evaluate actual résumés/curriculum vitae, job performance, letters of recommendations, call backs for interviews, etc.
Examples of Research on Unconscious Bias

- **Estimating height**

- **Judging athleticism**

- **Evaluating verbal skills**
  When asked to rate the quality of verbal skills indicated by a short text, evaluators rated the skills lower if they were told an African American wrote the text than if a they were told a white person wrote it, and rated verbal skills higher when told that a woman wrote it than when told a man wrote it. Biernat and Manis (1994).
Unconscious bias in the search process

- Applications/CVs/Résumés
- Reference Letters
- Interviews/Evaluation of Leadership
Evaluation of Curriculum Vitae and Résumés

Curriculum vitae for positions in academic psychology


- 238 academic psychologists (118 male, 120 female) evaluated an actual cv randomly assigned a male or female name (Karen or Brian Miller)
  - One cv – at time of job application (jr-level)
  - One cv – at time of early tenure (sr-level)

- Entry level – academic psychologists move likely to hire male applicants and gave men higher ratings for research, teaching, and service

- Senior-level - Academic psychologists were equally likely to tenure men and women candidates, **but** were four-times more likely to include cautionary comments on cv’s with a female name
Evaluation of Curriculum Vitae and Résumés

Evaluating résumés with African American- or white-sounding names


- Resumes sent to a variety of employers advertising openings in local newspapers in Chicago and Boston
- Randomly assigned “white-sounding” or “African American-sounding” names to resumes
- Applicants with “white-sounding” names were 50% more likely to be called back to interview for positions
- For “white-sounding” names, applicants with better qualifications were 27% more likely to be called back; for “African American-sounding” names, applicants with better qualifications were only 8% more likely to be called back
Evaluation of Curriculum Vitae and Résumés

Additional examples

- **Motherhood Bias**

- **Sexual Orientation**

- **Arabic sounding-names**
  Compared call back for job interviews for applicants with Arabic- or Dutch-sounding names

  Compared call backs for job interviews for applicants with Arabic- or Swedish-sounding names
Analysis of Letters of Recommendation


- 312 letters of recommendation for medical faculty **successfully hired** at large U.S. medical school
- Letters for women vs men:
  - Shorter
  - More letters for women with "minimal assurance"
  - More gendered terms in letters for women
  - More letters for women included "doubt raisers"
  - Women - Fewer *standout adjectives* ("outstanding" "excellent") and more *grindstone adjectives*
  - Women – 4X more references to personal lives
Top 3 semantic realms following the possessive for men and for women

Trix & Psenka 2003
Top 3 semantic realms following the possessive for men and for women

Trix & Psenka 2003

Found fewer differences between letters for men and women in comparison to the Trix and Psenka study, but reaffirmed the comparative absence of outstanding adjectives in letters for women.
Evaluation of Job Interviews

Interviews for a leadership position


- Taped male and female candidates interviewing for a leadership position in a male dominated field
- Candidates were actors trained to perform an agentic or communal script
- 428 evaluators (approx. 50% women) viewed the taped interviewers and rated the “candidates” on competence, likeability, and hireability.
Assumptions about Gender and Behavior

Multiple authors over 30 years: e.g., Bem, Broverman, Eagly, Heilman, Rudman

Men
- Strong
- Decisive
- Assertive
- Tough
- Authoritative
- Independent

Women
- Nurturing
- Nice
- Supportive
- Communal
- Helpful
- Sympathetic

“Leader”

Agentic  Communal

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Social Penalties

Agentic

Communal
Job Interviews

Phelan, Moss-Racusin, and Rudman (Continued)

- Competence: Agentic interviewees rated as more competent than communal interviewees.

- Likeability: Agentic men rated more likeable than women; Communal men rated less likeable than women.

- Hireability
  - Agentic interviewees more hireable than communal;
  - No difference in hireability of communal men and women;
  - **Agentic men more hireable than agentic women**

WHY? – SHIFTING CRITERIA

- For agentic men, communal men, communal women – competence weighted most heavily in hiring decisions.
- Agentic women likeability/social skills – a perceived weakness – weighted most heavily in hiring decisions.
Job Interviews - Other Examples

- **Sexual Orientation**

- **Accented English**

- **Weight**

- **Pregnancy**

- **Disability?**
Unconscious Bias in the Search Process

Case Study Discussion
Minimizing Bias and Assumptions

What Not to Do:

- Suppress bias and assumptions from one’s mind (or try to)
  - Studies demonstrating Stereotype Rebound effect

- Relying solely on a presumably “objective” ranking or rating system to reduce bias
Minimizing Bias and Assumptions

What to do before conducting evaluations:

- Replace your self-image as an objective person with recognition and acceptance that you are subject to the influence of bias and assumptions

- Diversify your search committee
  - Social tuning/increased motivation to respond w/o bias
  - Counterstereotype imaging

- Hold each member of the search committee responsible for recruiting and equitably evaluating an excellent and diverse applicant pool.
What to do before conducting evaluations (cont.):

- Critical Mass – increase proportion of women and minorities in the applicant pool
  Heilman, *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 1980; van Ommeren et al., *Psychological Reports*, 2005

- Develop and prioritize criteria prior to evaluating applicants.
Minimizing Bias and Assumptions

What to do while conducting evaluations:

- Spend sufficient time and attention on evaluating each application

- Focus on each applicant as an individual and evaluate their entire
  application package – information minimizes bias
  Heilman, *Organizational Behavior & Human Performance*, 1984; Tosi and
  Einbender, *Academy of Management Journal*, 1985; Brauer and Er-rafiy,
  *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2013

- Use inclusion rather than exclusion decision-making processes
  Hugenberg et al., *J. Personality and Social Psychology*, 2006

- Stop periodically to evaluate your criteria and their application

- Accountability - Be able to defend every decision
References cited in this presentation AND MORE are found at:

https://www.zotero.org/groups/wiseli_library/items/collectionKey/9WUA782Q
Relevant Publications

- Sheridan, Jennifer; Eve Fine; Christine Maidl Pribbenow; Jo Handelsman; Molly Carnes. 2010. “Searching for Excellence & Diversity: Increasing the Hiring of Women Faculty at One Academic Medical Center.” Academic Medicine. 85(6):999-1007.


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