

## Minimising the impact of unconscious bias during promotions

### What is unconscious bias?

*Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. (ECU: 2013 Unconscious bias in higher education)*

Although we all like to think we are open-minded and objective, research shows consistently across all social groups that this is not the case. We are heavily influenced in ways that are completely hidden from our conscious mind in how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves. Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, then we can take time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making.

### Research on Bias

Research shows that a great majority of people have implicit/unconscious associations that can influence their responses to situations and their decisions. The following list highlights evidence of bias in professional, evaluative settings which negatively impacts underrepresented groups.

**Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004):** applicants with African American- sounding names had to send 15 resumes to get a callback, compared to 10 needed by applicants with white-sounding names. White names yielded as many callbacks as an additional eight years of experience.

**Wenneras & Wold (1997):** female postdoctoral applicants had to be significantly more productive than male applicants to receive the same peer review score. This meant that she either had to publish at least three more papers in a prestigious science journal or an additional 20 papers in lesser-known specialty journals to be judged as equivalent. The authors concluded that the systematic underrating of female applicants could help explain the lower success rates of female scientists in achieving high academic rank.

**Steinpreis et al. (1999):** a national study in which male and female faculty evaluated a curriculum vitae randomly assigned a male or a female name. Both male and female evaluators rated the male applicant higher in research, teaching and service experience and were more likely to hire the male rather than the female applicant.

**Adam (1981):** this study involved nearly identical resumes of law students applying to internships in Canadian law firms. Gay-labeled male applicants received 38% fewer offers as other male applicants. Gay-labeled female applicants received half as many offers as other female applicants.

**Trix and Psenka (2003):** this study found systematic differences in letters of recommendation for females and males hired into academic medical faculty positions. Letters written for women were more likely to refer to their compassion, teaching, and effort as opposed to their achievements, research, and ability, the characteristics significantly stressed for male applicants. The traits stressed for the women are based on cultural stereotypes of women and are less valued for success in academic medicine

**Moss-Racusin et al. (2012):** a recent national study found that both female and male science faculty members harbour bias against female students. The faculty participants were given application materials from an undergraduate student applying for a lab manager position. All

received the same exact materials, except half the participants received a male applicant's materials and the other half a female applicant's materials. Faculty participants rated the female applicant significantly lower than the male applicant in terms of competence, hireability, salary offers and willingness to mentor.

### **Common Shortcuts<sup>1</sup>**

Shortcuts can lead to biased assessments in evaluation if we are not motivated to avoid them and skilled in doing so. These shortcuts can lead to erroneous conclusions that underrepresented candidates are unqualified or a bad fit.

**Cloning** –Replicating oneself by hiring someone with similar attributes or background. Also refers to undervaluing a candidate's research because it is not familiar, as well as expecting candidates to resemble someone whom a search committee might be replacing. Cloning limits the scope and breadth of approaches and perspectives in research, teaching and service.

**Snap Judgments** – Making judgments about the candidate with insufficient evidence. Dismissing a candidate for minor reasons or labeling a candidate "the best" and ignoring positive attributes of the other candidates. Having a covert agenda furthered by stressing something trivial or focusing on a few negatives rather than the overall qualifications. Often occurs when the hiring process feels rushed.

**Good Fit/Bad Fit** – While it may be about whether the person can meet the programmatic needs for the position, it often is about how comfortable and culturally at ease one feels.

**Negative Stereotypes** –Characterized by presumptions of incompetence. The work of women and underrepresented minorities is scrutinized much more than majority faculty, at all stages of academic career.

**Positive Stereotypes** – Dominant group members are automatically presumed to be competent. Such a member receives the benefit of the doubt, negative attributes are glossed over and success is assumed. Also called the "original affirmative action" because dominant group members are automatically presumed qualified and thereby given an unearned advantage.

**Elitist Behavior** (also called "Raising-the-Bar") – Increasing qualifications for women and minority candidates because their competency doesn't strike committee members as trustworthy. Downgrading the qualifications of women and minorities, based on accent, dress, and demeanor. In short, uneven expectations based on a candidate's social identity.

### **Euphemized Bias:**

**Visionary:** Members of dominant groups are evaluated based on their potential whereas underrepresented groups are judged on their accomplishments and their track record only. For example: "He has vision" or "She lacks vision."

**Star:** Used when the speaker is an infatuated fan of the candidate under consideration. When you hear it, ask the speaker to explain their use of the term and support it with evidence. For example: "She's not a star" or "It's clear he's a star."

**Committed, single-minded focus or hard-worker:** These terms could be cloaking a bias against care-givers, those faculty members who cannot depend on what Williams (2000) calls

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Joann Moody, [Rising Above Cognitive Errors: Guidelines to Improve Faculty Searches, Evaluations and Decision-Making 2010.](#)

a “flow of family work” which allows ideal workers to log long hours in the office while still having their material needs met.

**What can we do?**

Be able to defend every decision for eliminating or advancing a candidate. Requiring a clear and reasoned rationale for every decision made mitigates against bias or instinct taking over.

Ensure that all decisions are evidence-based – stating that a candidate is ‘not ready’ is not a sufficient. Focus on reasons why you believe they are not ready and where these reasons originate.

Where individual circumstances have been submitted consider them carefully and evidence how they have been taken into account against the criteria.

Focus on quality rather than quantity, and ensure that all aspects of the criteria are applied and considered – for example, good citizenship.

Provide clear and detailed feedback to the applicant on the outcome of their application, particularly if they were unsuccessful. Identify action that you will take to support them in reaching the required standard to strengthen future applications. If shortcomings or concerns were identified at FPC or UPC these should be fed back to the applicant.