Unconscious Biases

What Is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias, also known as implicit bias, refers to the subconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions without our conscious awareness. These biases are often rooted in our personal experiences, societal stereotypes, and cultural influences.

An enormous body of literature confirms that we all have biases – most are implicit, some are explicit. Unlike explicit biases, which are conscious and deliberate prejudices, implicit biases operate outside our conscious awareness. They are deeply ingrained mental shortcuts that our brains use to make quick judgments and assessments. While these shortcuts can be helpful in certain situations, they can also lead to unfair and inaccurate assessments of individuals or groups. These biases have an effect on how we view others and how we make decisions, including decisions about faculty hiring

Recognizing Your Biases

To minimize the influence of unconscious biases on the search process, it is crucial to acknowledge and address both personal biases and those of colleagues. Engaging in open discussions about potential biases and their impact can foster a more objective and inclusive approach. Additionally, dedicating ample time to evaluation allows for a thorough assessment of candidates, reducing the influence of unfounded assumptions. By actively confronting biases and prioritizing a comprehensive evaluation process, we can ensure a fair and equitable search.

Recognizing that we have biases and trying to understand the types of biases we have can help in reducing them. Below you can find several types of unconscious biases, as well as definitions and examples.

Unconscious Bias	Definition	Example
Affiliation Bonus	Overvaluing candidates who are part of one's professional or personal networks.	A reviewer who notices that a candidate belongs to the same professional organization and rates that candidate more favorably as a result.
Anchoring bias	Making a judgement based on a reference point.	When reviewing potential candidates, the first resume a reviewer sees might show that the candidate has a degree from a 'prestigious' institution. The reviewer then uses that candidate's resume as a reference point.
Bias blind spot	Failing to recognize one's own biases.	A manager hiring a candidate who has a similar socioeconomic background to them without recognizing that those qualities are influencing their decision.
Confirmation bias	Looking for information that supports one's existing theories.	A manager who believes women are more passive than men asking female candidates questions about their assertiveness that they do not ask men.
First impression bias	Drawing conclusions based on initial meeting.	Making a decision about a candidate (either positive or negative) within the first few minutes of meeting them.
Fundamental attribution error	Placing blame on contextual factors for personal mistakes, but attributing others' failures to their individual shortcomings.	When reviewing potential candidates, a reviewer assumes that the lack of publications in someone's resume is due to their inability to produce scholarly work.
Good vs Bad fit bias	Evaluate people that share similar traits, backgrounds, or life experiences in a positive manner	Overvaluing candidates who have cultural or experiential similarities to the existing department members.

	vs evaluating those who do not share the similar traits, backgrounds, or life experiences in a negative manner.	
Hierarchical bias	The tendency to have an inflated perception of what is important or relevant information.	Evaluating a candidate more favorably than others because of a belief that the lineage/prestige of an institution matters more when picking out candidates to interview.

Also beware of the following scenarios:

- Individuals from underrepresented groups, including women, minorities, and those from non-traditional academic backgrounds, may face heightened scrutiny and unconsciously biased evaluations during the search process. Search committee members may inadvertently apply stricter standards, undervalue their accomplishments compared to others, and overlook unique achievements.
- Unconscious biases can lead search committee members and even letter writers to unintentionally diminish the contributions of women and minorities, often attributing their successes to mentors or collaborators rather than recognizing their individual merit. To counteract this, committees should engage in open discussions to assess whether letter writers' assessments are unduly influencing their perception of candidates, especially when based on limited or questionable evidence.
- Letters of recommendation frequently perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of demographic groups. While a man's research might be lauded as groundbreaking, a woman's contributions might be characterized as supportive and cooperative. These subtle yet influential cues can sway decision-making processes.
- Exercise caution when evaluating "fit" as a criterion for selection. This ambiguous term often serves as a guise to exclude individuals whose demographic characteristics deviate from the prevailing norms of the department or field. If "fit" were the sole determinant of decision-making, WPI would remain stagnant, forever mirroring its past.
- When evaluating early-career scholars, exercise caution in assessing "potential." While predictions about future accomplishments often play a significant role in these decisions, superficial factors such as attire or communication style should not overshadow the assessment of concrete achievements.

Take an Implicit Association Test (IAT) from Project Implicit

Harvard's Project Implicit is a non-profit organization and international collaboration of researchers investigating implicit social cognition, or thoughts and feelings that are largely outside of conscious awareness and control. Project Implicit was founded in 1998 by three scientists: Tony Greenwald of the University of Washington, Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard University, and Brian Nosek of the University of Virginia. The project's main goal is to educate the public about hidden biases and provide a "virtual laboratory" for collecting data on the Internet.

One of Project Implicit's most well-known tools is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html), which measures the strength of associations between concepts and evaluations or stereotypes to reveal an individual's hidden or subconscious biases. The IAT has been used to study a wide range of biases, including those related to race, gender, age, and sexual orientation.

We strongly encourage every search committee member to take at least one IAT. Registration is **free** and most tests take no more than 15 minutes. These tests are not designed to question your conscious beliefs but to uncover the extent to which you may subconsciously link concepts like 'female' with 'family' and 'male' with 'career.' As inquisitive individuals, you may find it intriguing to unveil unconscious associations that reside within your mind.

Beware of Psychological Barriers that Prevent Us From Interrupting Discriminatory Behaviors

These barriers can include fear of confrontation, bystander apathy, and diffusion of responsibility; they can lead to inaction and perpetuate injustice. It is crucial to recognize and overcome these barriers to foster a more inclusive and equitable search process. By understanding and addressing these psychological barriers, we can empower ourselves and others to take action against discrimination.

Psychological Barrier	Definition
Evaluation Apprehension	There is a risk of embarrassment if the situation turns out not to call for immediate action or response.
Bystander Effect	People are less likely to step up if there are more people around than if they're alone as everyone assumes someone else will act.
Situational Ambiguity	People are much less likely to offer help in situations where it is unclear if disrespect is going on than in situations involving a clear emergency.
Normative Influence	People conform to the group's rules in order to be accepted.
Cause of Misfortune	People are less likely to step up if they perceive the person to be responsible for their own misfortune.
Pluralistic Ignorance	When others are present, the bystander looks for any reactions from those people. If there are no reactions to the situation that give rise to concern, then the bystander may decide that there is no reason for them to intervene.
Dissimilarity	People are more willing to help others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (people who share a common background, physical characteristics, or beliefs).
Personality Traits	One's patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that could prevent the bystander from intervening. Examples: "I don't like conflict." "I don't like to call attention to things."