15 Common Cognitive Errors

Cognitive scientists are proving definitively that many of the selection and evaluation tasks we undertake on a daily basis are alarmingly ‘contaminated.’ The contaminants—what can be generically termed cognitive shortcuts and errors—are present in academia as we gather and sort through information, interpret it, and then come to decisions about, for instance, job candidates, tenure and promotion cases, grant and fellowship applicants.

JoAnn Moody. 2007. Rising Above Cognitive Errors. P.1

1. **Negative Stereotypes.** Negative stereotypes are negative presumptions such as presumptions of incompetence in an area, or presumptions of lack of character or trustworthiness.

2. **Positive Stereotypes.** A halo effect where members of a group are presumed to be competent or bona fide. Such a member receives the benefit of the doubt. Positive achievements are noted more than negative performance, and success is assumed.

3. **Raising the Bar.** Related to negative stereotypes, when we require members of certain groups to prove that they are not incompetent by using more filters or higher ones for them.

4. **Elitism.** Wanting to feel superior through certain attributes or selectivity that highlights how we characterize more positive stereotypes (accents, schools, dress, and ratings).

5. **First Impressions.** Drawing conclusions in a matter of seconds based on our personal likes/dislikes.

6. **The Longing to Clone.** Devaluing someone who is not like most of ‘us’ on the committee, or wanting someone to resemble, in attributes, someone we admire and are replacing.

7. **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 we will feel.

8. **Provincialism.** Similar to cloning, this is undervaluing something outside your own province, circle, or group. For example, trusting only reference letters from people you know.

9. **Extraneous Myths and Assumptions.** Undermining the careful collection and analysis of information, such as we can’t get a person like that to come here, or we have all of them we need.

10. **Wishful Thinking.** Opinions rather than facts and evidence. Examples are assumptions that we, and certain other institutions, run on objective meritocracy, or we are colorblind.
11. **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.** Some call it ‘channeling,’ where we structure our interaction with someone so we can receive information congruent with our assumptions, or avoid information incongruent with our assumptions.

12. **Seizing a Pretext.** Hiding one's real concern or agenda (e.g., excessive weight) behind something trivial, or focusing on a few negatives rather than the overall performance.

13. **Character over Context, or Attribution errors.** For example, failing to recognize the context of a situation—was it social, late in the day, outside of the professional arena, or an attribution of responsibility for a situation that is misplaced on one person rather than others.

14. **Premature Ranking/Digging In.** Rush to use numbers, as if they are objective, to drive a decision.

15. **Momentum of the Group.** It is difficult to resist consensus when the majority seems to be heading one way without a full hearing on other considerations.

Throughout the evaluation process, search committee members and chairs can avoid or minimize the severity of cognitive error if they learn to recognize and steer clear of them and agree on the ground rules for candidate discussion, including an evaluation matrix. Moody (2007) identifies fifteen common cognitive errors that can occur during searches, promotion and tenure, and other evaluative situations.

**Recommendations to Mitigate Cognitive Errors (Moody, 2004, 2007):**

1. **Build individual capacity to recognize unconscious biases and cognitive errors and develop intentional strategies to mitigate biases and errors through workshops and discussions;**
2. **Keep reminders of common cognitive errors on index cards visible during search committee meetings;**
3. **Establish ground rules for search committee processes prior to the first meeting;**
4. **Set evaluation criteria prior to receiving candidate applications;**
5. **Use a matrix to keep track of how well candidates meet those criteria; and**
6. **Have a copy of the matrix visible and available during the search committee discussions.**

**Sources:**

Adapted from the University of Virginia’s Provost’s Search Committee Tutorial. Cognitive Errors.

Adapted from Bates College’s Active and Inclusive Search Toolkit.

**References**

Reducing Stereotypic Biases in Hiring

A. Findings from research in social psychology on stereotypic biases

1. Stereotypes function as cognitive shortcuts.
2. Stereotyping often occurs out of awareness.
3. We are all prone to biases.
4. Both men and women, non-sexist, non-racist, even well-intentioned people are capable of bias.
5. Biasing processes are more extreme when …
   a. individuals are tired, rushed or otherwise cognitively burdened.
   b. Underrepresented identities are rare in a unit (“tokens”).
   c. jobs are “typed” (associated with a particular gender or race).
   d. valid performance information is lacking.
   e. criteria are vague or ambiguous.
6. The good news is that biases can be reduced.

B. What can be done?

1. Underlying principle — disrupt the tendency to use stereotypes as cognitive shortcuts.
2. Strategies/solutions
   a. Devote adequate time.
   b. Avoid premature ranking of the applicants.
   c. Read or review applicants work rather than relying solely on support materials
   d. Critically analyze supporting materials (recommendation letters, cover letters, performance evaluations etc.).
   e. Be accountable — be prepared to explain your decisions and rankings
   f. Be transparent — What are the criteria? Is it the same for all applicants? Is it the right criteria?
   g. Structure diverse groups and allow for maximum participation.
   h. Think about how the job ad and descriptions might impact the applicant pool and perceived fit of the candidates.
   i. Consider using a candidate evaluation form (see attached for example).

Know your biases: www.implicit.harvard.edu (Social Attitudes)
References


Recruitment Resources and Posting Venues

National and Regional Websites

- AcademicKeys
- AcademicJobsOnline.org
- ArtJobsInHigherEd.com
- ARTSEARCH
- ArtsJournal
- Deaf Education
- EconJobMarket
- Environmental Jobs and Careers
- Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC)
- Hire Culture
- Job Openings for Economists (JOE) Network
- Marketing PhD Jobs
- MathJobs.org
- PhilJobs

National and Regional Publications

- Annals of Biomedical Engineering
- Asian Studies Newsletter
- Boston Business Weekly
- Boston Globe
- Boston University Human Resources
- Chemical & Engineering (C&E) News
- Chronicle of Higher Education
- Diverse: Issues in Higher Education
- Economist
- Editor & Publisher
- Food, Culture & Society
- Gastronomica
- Graduate Journal of Food Studies
- Inside Higher Ed
- INSIGHT into Diversity
- Journal of Broadcasting
- Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education
- Marketing News
- Nature
- New York Times
- Physics Today
- Science
- The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education
- University of Florida website
- Wall Street Journal
### Professional Publications and Organizations

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Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)
Decision Sciences Institute (DSI)
European network on cultural management and policy (encatc)
Financial Economics Network (FEN)
Global Hospitality Educators
INFORMS
Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought
Institute for Mathematical Statistics
Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)
Integrated Student Information Systems (ISIS)
International Academy of Practical Theology
International Community Association (ICA)
International Society for Bayesian Analysis
International Studies Association
Linguist List
Linguistic Society of America (LSA)
Literacy Research Association
Manufacturing and Service Operations Management (MSOM)
Massachusetts Association for Bilingual Education (MABE)
Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages (MATSOL)
Materials Research Society (MRS)
Mathematical Association of America
Modern Language Association (MLA)
National Art Education Association
National Association of Broadcast Journalists
National Association of Schools of Art and Design
National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
National Association of the Deaf
National Communication Association (NCA)
National Council of Arts Administrators
National Council of Teachers of English
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics
New England and National Associations of Elementary and Secondary School Principals
New England and National Associations of School Administrators
New England and National Associations of School Committees
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education
Online News Association (ONA)
Production Managers Forum
Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA)
Religious Research Association
Sign Language Linguistics
Social Science Research Network (SSRN)
Society for Classical Studies
Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics (SIAM)
Society for Judgement and Decision Making
Society for Neuroscience
Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)
StageSource
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Theatre Communications Group
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