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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

Moody, J. 2004. Faculty diversity: problems and solutions. Pp. 89-92, 104-111. New York: Routledge.

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

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Bertrand, Marianne and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2004. "Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination." *The American Economic Review* 94(4):991-1013

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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

Academy of Management

Actors' Equity Association

AERA Special Interest Group on Bilingual Education

AERA Special Interest Group on Deaf Education

AERA Special Interest Group on Second Language Research (SLR)

Allied Social Sciences Association (ASSA)

American Academy of Religion (AAR)

American Accounting Association

American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL)

American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

American Association of Advertising

American College Educators of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

American Counseling Association

American Economics Association

American Educational Research Association (AERA)

American Finance Association (AFA)

American Philosophical Association

American Physical Society (APS)

American Political Science Association (APSA)

American Psychological Association

American School Counselor Association

American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE)

American Society of Health Economists (ASHEcon)

American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME)

American Sociological Association

American Statistical Association

American Studies Association

American Vacuum Society (AVS)

Association for Computing Machinery (ACM)

Association for Consumer Research

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)

Association for Psychological Science Employment Network

Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS)

Association of American Law Schools (AALS)

Association of Arts Administration Educators (AAAE)

Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators

Association of Practical Theology

Association of Theatre in Higher Education

Bachelier Society

Behavioral Science and Policy Association

College Art Association

College Music Society (CMS)

Communication, Research, and Theory Network (CRTNET)

Computing Research Association (CRA)

Council on Academic Programs in Communication Sciences and Disorders (CAPCSD)

Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education

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 Principles

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

The Optical Society (OSA)

Theatre Communications Group

Minority and Women's Caucuses

Anita Borg Institute

Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM)

Association of Black Sociologists

Association of Departments of Computer and Information Sciences in Minority Institutions

CRA Committee on the Status of Women

EJMC Committee on the Status of Women

Faculty for the Future

listservs in American Sociological Association

LSA Committee on Ethnic Diversity in Linguistics

LSA Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics

Minority caucuses of the APSA

Minority groups within NASW & CSWE

National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ)

National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ)

National Conference of Black Political Scientists

National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists

National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE)

National Society of Black Physicists

National Technical Association

Nemnet Minority Recruiting

Neuroscience Scholars Program

Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM)

PhD Project

Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS)

Society for the Study of Black Religion

Society for Women in Philosophy

Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers

Society of Women Engineers (SWE)

Women in Communication

Women in Physics (American Physical Society)

Women in Science and Engineering (WISE)

Women's Caucus for Art

Women's Caucus of the AAR

Women's Classical Caucus