



The origin and consequences of unconscious bias

"In fact, automatic, stereotyped behavior is prevalent in much of human action, because in many cases it is the most efficient form of behaving and in other cases it is simply necessary. You and I exist in an extraordinarily complicated stimulus environment, easily the most rapidly moving and complex that has ever existed on this planet. To deal with it we need shortcuts. We can't be expected to recognize and analyze all the aspects in each person, event, and situation we encounter in even one day. We haven't the time, energy, or capacity for it. Instead, we must very often use our stereotypes, our rules of thumb to classify things according to a few key features and then to respond mindlessly when one or another of these trigger features is present.

Sometimes the behavior that unrolls will not be appropriate for the situation, because not even the best stereotypes and trigger features work every time. But we accept their imperfection, since there is really no other choice. Without them we would stand frozen - cataloging, appraising, and calibrating - as the time for action sped by and away. And from all indications, we will be relying on them to an even greater extent in the future. As the stimuli saturating our lives continue to grow more intricate and variable, we will have to depend increasingly on our shortcuts to handle them all."

-Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*

"You cannot help dealing with the limited information you have as if it were all there is to know. You build the best possible story from the information available to you, and if it is a good story, you believe it. Paradoxically, it is easier to construct a coherent story when you know little, when there are fewer pieces to fit into the puzzle. Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: our almost unlimited ability to [unconsciously] ignore our ignorance.

The workings of the mind [can be described] as an uneasy interaction between two fictitious characters: the automatic System 1 and the effortful System 2....System 1 is designed to jump to conclusions from little evidence – and it is not designed to know the size of its jumps... The way to block errors that originate in System 1 is simple in principle: recognize the signs that you are in a cognitive minefield, slow down, and ask for reinforcement from System 2... Unfortunately, this sensible procedure is least likely to be applied when it is needed most. We would all like to have a warning bell that rings loudly whenever we are about to make a serious error, but no such bell is available, and cognitive illusions are...difficult to recognize... The voice of reason may be much fainter than the loud and clear voice of an erroneous intuition, and questioning your intuitions is unpleasant when you face the stress of a big decision. More doubt is the last thing you want when you are in trouble. The upshot is that it is much easier to identify a minefield when you observe others wandering into it than when you are about to do so."

-Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, *Thinking Fast and Slow*

Best practices for faculty searches maximize the engagement of "System 2" and minimize both the unconscious influence of "System 1" and common cognitive errors that unintentionally, and often unknowingly, influence decisions.

Best Practices for Faculty Searches
Updated Fall 2014

1. Plan and run smart meetings
 - a. “The standard practice of open discussion gives too much weight to the opinions of those who speak early and assertively, causing others to line up behind them.”¹
 - b. Write and distribute in advance an agenda with time allotted to each topic of discussion
 - c. Note body language or speech habits that indicate someone is trying unsuccessfully to speak and then give them an opening
 - d. Assign specific tasks to specific people. Review the assignments at the conclusion of every meeting

2. The first committee meeting – before the search is launched
 - a. Set a schedule for all future meetings whenever possible
 - b. Agree that attendance of all members for the planned duration of each meeting is expected
 - c. Discuss target areas and priorities. Agreement on priorities will substantially enhance capacity to evaluate individual candidates against a common baseline
 - d. Plan informal distribution of the job posting through networks of colleagues
 - e. Distribute specific proactive recruitment tasks to all committee members

3. Proactively recruit applications from candidates who are members of underrepresented groups
 - a. Studies show that “minority” candidates opt-out of applications more frequently than “majority” applicants.²
 - b. The future faculty database provides one mechanism for search committees to use in identifying potential candidates:
<http://www.futurefacultydb.org/>
 - c. Specifically request recommendations of underrepresented candidates when distributing job ads to colleagues. Follow up with the potential applicant and encourage them to apply.

4. Use numerical evaluations of candidates in various categories
 - a. Use of numerical scores minimizes intuitive and substitutional answers known to be prone to unconscious bias.¹
 - b. Before screening any candidate applications, search committee should:
 - i. Identify no more than 6 categories for numerical evaluation (e.g. research productivity, probability for collaboration with UD faculty, teaching experience, clarity of presentation)
 - ii. Establish formula with relative weights for each category
 - iii. Agree on normalizing criteria (e.g. 1-10 scale, 5 refereed journal articles = 5 for research productivity)

- iv. “Insist that raters commit to the value of specific credentials before seeing actual applicants.”³
 - c. Search committee members should NOT have access to other’s scores until they have completed their own evaluation
 - i. Avoids “anchoring effects.”¹
 - ii. Maximizes the independence of each evaluation
- 5. Force yourself to establish “optimal” conditions for evaluation
 - a. Distractions, including exhaustion, hunger and time pressure, maximize the probability that you will unconsciously default to intuitive, and often unjustified, conclusions.¹
 - b. Randomize the order of candidate applications for each reviewer
 - c. Structure your internal evaluation to maximize comparisons
 - i. Do I think candidate X is likely to be a better hire than candidate Y? Do my scores reflect this?
 - ii. Joint comparisons minimize probability of error relative to isolated single evaluations
- 6. Structure candidate evaluation meetings
 - a. Specific strategies are known to minimize confirmation bias and maximize independent evaluation.
 - b. Before any meeting at which you discuss and compare candidates, every evaluator should:
 - i. Review their rankings and evaluations to identify their top candidates
 - ii. Write and submit in advance a very brief summary of their position and rationale for prioritizing their top choices
 - c. Try to have more than one member of underrepresented groups on the short list. This strategy minimizes the chance that a single candidate will be viewed as the “token” minority and enhances objective comparisons of candidates without defaulting to stereotypes.
- 7. Interviews
 - a. Develop, in advance, a list of desired attributes for which you will provide numerical scores.⁴ Follow guidance in 4b above
 - b. Schedule interviews as close together as possible
 - i. Large schedule differences (e.g. before/after winter break) can significantly alter evaluator’s distractions and mood
 - ii. Isolated evaluations are prone to error.
 - c. The search committee chair or an assigned committee member should “own” each interview and construct the schedule so that every candidate leaves UD wanting this job. This will build the reputation of our programs.
 - d. Structure all group meetings (e.g. search committee, research round tables) with time allocated for each subject you wish to discuss. Stick to the schedule to be sure you are giving each candidate the same opportunity to present information.
 - e. Distribute information on family friendly policies to every candidate.

- i. For example, include these policies in a packet containing other information about employment at UD. Provide this packet to all candidates when they check in to the hotel.
 - ii. Put a neutral third party (e.g. Associate Dean Cook) on the candidate's schedule to present and discuss these policies without implication that it could impact hiring decisions. If neutral third party cannot be included on the schedule, department chair or other assigned person should follow up when meeting with the candidate to be sure the candidate knows that these policies are described in their packet of information and that they would be happy to answer questions in the future. Choose words that do not pressure the candidate into asking questions or revealing family status information during the interview.
 - f. Fill out your numerical evaluation and notes immediately after each interview
 - g. Distribute numerical evaluation forms to everyone that met with the candidate. Collect and collate to inform committee discussion.
- 8. Making the final decision
 - a. Before the meeting, every evaluator should:
 - i. Review their scores and evaluations to identify their top candidate
 - ii. Write and submit in advance a very brief summary of their position and rationale for prioritizing their top choice
 - b. Discussion should intentionally be structured to consider:
 - i. "Regression to the mean," which advantages candidates who were lucky enough to have a good day when they interviewed
 - ii. Bias toward confident candidates
 - iii. Framing effects: Are evaluative questions framed as positives or negatives? Are you using the same frame for every candidate?
 - iv. Availability bias: Are you asking for the same number of positive and negative examples for each candidate?
 - c. Verify that you are evaluating candidates against the criteria you set in advance. Be sure that you are not redefining criteria to justify hiring the candidate you like for reasons that *might* be influenced by unconscious bias.⁴
- 9. Recruiting the top candidate
 - a. Make offers and counter-offers promptly. Delays will force competitive candidates to take other offers or undermine their confidence in UD.
 - b. Before making the offer, identify the faculty member who will serve as a mentor for the new hire. Identify the mentor when the initial offer is made. The mentor should immediately contact the candidate to find out what the candidate needs and wants and provide advice about what is available at UD. Mentor should aggressively advocate for meeting reasonable wants and needs of the candidate.

- c. Expect every hire to have a two-body problem. Do not be surprised or express discouragement if and when the issue arises. Immediately investigate and communicate opportunities for the candidate's partner.

More detailed information on best practices for faculty recruiting, interviewing and mentoring can be found at <http://sites.udel.edu/advance/> under "ADVANCE PAID Resources."

- [1] Kahneman. *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York (2011)
- [2] Hopkins. *Diversification of a University Faculty: Observations on Hiring Women Faculty in the Schools of Science and Engineering at MIT*. (2006)
<http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/184/hopkins.html>
- [3] Isaac, Lee and Carnes. *Interventions That Affect Gender Bias in Hiring: A Systematic Review*. *Academic Medicine* **84** 1440 (2009) <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19881440>
- [4] Uhlman and Cohen. *Constructed Criteria: Redefining Merit to Justify Discrimination*. *Psychological Science* **16** 474 (2005) <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/16/6/474>