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RESEARCH

Overview of Research on Unconscious Bias

related to Performance Evaluation

We all intend to be objective scholars who evaluate others based entirely on individual merit. But research shows that everyone brings social stereotypes and a lifetime of cultural experience to the evaluation process.

- Controlled studies on performance evaluation have shown that implicit or unconscious hypotheses about members of various social groups may influence evaluation of individuals, despite evaluators' best intentions to be fair and accurate.
- In most studies that have found unconscious gender bias in evaluations, the gender of the evaluator was not significant, indicating that both men and women share and apply the same assumptions about gender (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Steinpreis et al., 1999).
- Studies have also shown that recognizing biases and other influences not related to actual performance can help reduce their impact on evaluations (Bauer & Baltes, 2002).

Research shows that both positive and negative assumptions based on racial and gender stereotypes may influence evaluations.

- When shown photographs of men with similar build and physical qualities, evaluators rated the athletic ability of African American men higher than that of White men (Biernat & Manis, 1994).
- When rating the quality of verbal skills as indicated by vocabulary definitions, evaluators rated the skills lower if they were told an African American provided the definitions than if they were told that a White person provided them (Biernat & Manis, 1994).
- Evaluators more frequently credited successful task performance to skill for males and Whites, and to effort, luck, or help from others for females and African-Americans. (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993).
- Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders proposes that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of unconscious bias: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential leaders and (b) evaluating behaviors associated with a leader role less favorably when they are done by a woman (Eagly & Karau, 2002).



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Research on Unconscious Bias in Evaluation

In Academic Job-related Contexts

- A study of over 300 recommendation letters for medical faculty who were hired by a large American medical school in the 1990s found that letters for female and male applicants differed systematically. Letters written for women were shorter, raised more doubts, and portrayed women more as students and teachers while portraying men more as researchers and professionals (Trix & Psenka, 2003).
- In a national study, 238 academic psychologists (118 male, 120 female) evaluated an early-career resume randomly assigned a male or a female name. Both male and female raters gave the male applicant better evaluations for teaching, research, and service and were more likely to hire the male than the female applicant. (Steinpreis et al., 1999).
- A study of evaluators' rating sheets for postdoctoral fellowships awarded by the Medical Research Council in Sweden found that women candidates needed substantially more publications (the equivalent of 3 more papers in *Nature* or *Science*, or 20 more papers in specialty journals such as *Neuroscience*) to achieve the same rating as men, unless they personally knew someone on the panel of evaluators (Wenneras & Wold, 1997).
- Two studies at universities in Italy and the Netherlands found no gender differences in the self-reported work commitment or work satisfaction of male and female doctoral students, while faculty in the same universities perceived female students to be less committed to their work. Female faculty endorsed these gender-stereotypical perceptions most strongly. Additional measures suggested that female faculty perceived themselves as non-typical females, allowing stereotypical views of other women to continue unchecked. (Ellemers et al., 2004).