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.


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