Unconscious Bias in the Hiring Process

This paper addresses the issue of unconscious bias in the hiring process through an intersectional analytic (gender, race, age, ability, etc.) and outlines strategies for conducting fair and effective external recruitment processes to ensure equity and diversity across university faculty. Social science scholarship has identified several different kinds of biases that can influence the evaluation of applications for academic positions and research grants, including assumptions about applicants' qualifications based on ethnic nomenclature (Biernat and Manis; Bertrand and Mullainathan) and gender roles (Phelan et al.; Eagly and Karau; Heilman et al.). Such biases have been shown to be built into every stage of the academic hiring process, from the systematic difference in the length of reference letters written for male and female applicants (Trix and Psenka) to the preferential hiring of male over female job applicants (Steinpreis et al.) and the systematic privileging of white over black or ethnic grant applicants (Ginther et al.).

After reviewing the literature on unconscious bias in hiring, this paper offers an overview of best practices collected by the Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and intended to challenge assumptions and provide faculty members and external assessors with concrete strategies for running efficient and effective searches, recruiting excellent and diverse applicants, and conducting fair and thorough reviews of applicants. Increasing the representation of women and minorities in the applicant pool is a particularly effective strategy, because research has shown that gender and racial bias are more likely to influence evaluation of women and minority candidates when they represent only a small proportion of the applicant pool (Heilman; van Ommeren et al.), as is often the case in the discipline of Classics. Explicit discussion of scholarship on unconscious bias has been shown to intensify hiring committee members' commitment to the ideal of impartiality and to

reduce bias effectively (Devine et al.). Developing clearly articulated evaluation criteria before reviewing applications and applying the evaluation criteria consistently to all applicants helps to protect against shifts in discussion emphasis that may favour candidates from majority demographic groups (Biernat and Fuegen; Uhlmann and Cohen). Devoting the same amount of time to the evaluation of each job applicant helps busy faculty members allocate time and attention fairly across the pool of candidates (Martell). Discussing the entire application, rather than depending heavily on only one element (e.g., reference letters), allows a hiring committee to make a fuller assessment of each applicant's strengths and weaknesses. Being able to explain every decision for going forward with, or terminating, an applicant's candidacy holds hiring committee members to a very high standard of accountability for the fairness of their judgments and reduces the influence of unconscious bias. Periodic reviews of the numbers of qualified women and minority members in the applicant pool can also help to keep committee members focussed on recruiting diversely.

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