Cognitive Errors and Shortcuts that Contaminate Academic Evaluation

From: JoAnn Moody, Faculty Diversity: Removing the Barriers, Routledge, New York, 2012)

1. **First Impressions:** We validate our observations and impressions that are made in a matter of seconds or minutes and based on something that pleases or displeases us.

    Example: That ponytail and those blue jeans showed that the applicant is disrespecting us!

2. **Elitism:** We want to feel superior by downgrading others based on their campus, accent, social class, ethnic background and more.

    Example: Shouldn't we ask if a hire like Dewayne is likely to bolster our place in the national rankings? His scholarship is a bit out of the mainstream and could weaken us.

3. **Raising the Bar:** When the candidate is from an underrepresented group, we justify additional requirements to verify only this candidate's ability.

    Example: Don't we need more writing samples from Latoya? Even though we asked for three samples, and hers are solid, I'd feel better if we had more in this particular case and that she is really qualified.

4. **Premature Ranking/Digging In:** In rushing to support the selection criteria, we can bypass meaningful discussion and interpretation of evidence with colleagues by implementing a rush to a numerical evaluation or ranking process.

    Example: I've got enough evidence to make-up my mind now, so let's assign points and come up with our number one, number two and number three choices.

5. **The Longing to Clone:** We devalue the candidates with educational credentials that are not the same level as one's own.

    Example: We don't know anything about the program at University of Southwestern Nevada, do we? Or: I wonder about her seriousness as a researcher, since she dropped out for several years to raise little kids. I mean, none of us did this.

6. **Good Fit/Bad Fit:** We desire to feel comfortable and culturally at ease with the candidate, or we wonder how much guidance will be needed once hired.

    Example: I thought Mercedes was a bit awkward last night at dinner. Is she ever going to be comfortable with us?

7. **Provincialism:** We undervalue something outside our province, circle or clan; for instance, valuing only recommendation letters written by people one knows.

    Example: I'm uneasy because I've never met this referee. My gut tells me to not give his letter much credence.

8. **Extraneous Myths and Assumptions (Including "Psychoanalyzing" the Candidate):** We espouse our personal opinions and provide misinformation, second-guessing and mind-reading as solid evidence for or against a candidate.

    Example: No one from Georgia Tech would want to come here. I know some of those folks. I'm positive about that. Or: Her husband has a great job in New Jersey. So put two and two together. This candidate won't accept an offer from us. We're too far away.

9. **Wishful Thinking: Rhetoric not Evidence:** We hold to a notion in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary and let the notion cloud our cognitive processes.

   Example: I don't really see gender or race in people, or if a job candidate is black, white, green or polka dot. I don't see why you're asking me, of all people, to bend over backwards to recruit more and more minority candidates. Give me a break.

10. **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy:** We want to structure our interactions so that we can receive information congruent with our assumptions; those for whom one has high expectations can earn extra points, while those with low expectations are confirmed in one's mind.

    Example: You think that the next candidate to visit is the strongest of the group. You ask your most senior colleague to meet the candidate at the airport. Primed by this colleague, the candidate will be better prepared than other candidates for issues faced in the upcoming interviews and evaluation process.

11. **Seizing a Pretext:** We contrive false and obscure the real reason for our decision with over-emphasis of side issues.

    Example: Raquel seemed so nervous during the first five minutes of her job talk. Why keep her in the running? We don't need a timid mouse to work with.

12. **Assuming Character over Context:** We attribute an individual's behavior to her or his personal characteristics while excluding any particular context and extenuating circumstances.

    Example: Even though well-formulated research studies have shown that women and non-immigrant instructors usually earn lower teaching evaluation ratings from students than do male majority instructors who are viewed as the "norm," committees blithely assume (without consulting the research findings) that women and minorities are totally responsible for their lower ranking and should pay the consequences.

13. **Momentum of the Group:** It can be difficult for one or two people to continue an evaluation discussion when the rest of the group seemingly has made a decision.

    Example: I know we're all exhausted and have spent more time on this part of the search process than we intended. Nevertheless, I want to make sure we give a full hearing to the only African American in our pool of finalists, especially since we devoted plenty of thought and care in the others. Please hear me out.