

# Being aware of our own cognitive biases

In the previous section, you explored general strategies that promote objectivity. Following are definitions of several biases, as well as specific strategies that will help you mitigate your cognitive biases.

## The halo effect (or generalization)

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Tendency to make an overall judgement on performance, based on one or two aspects, either because you find them more significant, or because they are more noticeable. (Drolet, 2016; Johnson, 2019; Kakia, 2019; Ménard & Gosselin, as quoted by Blanchette, 2017). As a result, the trainee is underestimated or overestimated on the basis of a small number of aspects that do not represent his true performance.

**For example:**

Your trainee's overall performance is satisfactory, but he does not master one of the interventions. You give him a C.

**To counter this bias:**

Consult all of your sources to fully review the observed facts.

## The hawk-dove effect

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Tendency to show too much severity or leniency. Unlike other cognitive biases, the hawk-dove effect often occurs consciously (Daly *et al.*, 2017; Drolet, 2016).

The "hawkish" supervisor pays much more attention to the trainee's mistakes than to his successes and has higher standards than average (Drolet, 2016; Faherty *et al.*, 2020; Hunt, 2019; Vagner & Walter, 2019). As a result, the trainee is underestimated (Kakia, 2019; Ménard & Gosselin, as quoted by Blanchette, 2017).

Conversely, the supervisor said to be a "dove" is too lenient toward the trainee, because he is reluctant to give a negative assessment (Drolet, 2016; Faherty *et al.*, 2020; Hunt, 2019; Johnson, 2019). As a result, the trainee is overestimated (Kakia, 2019; Ménard & Gosselin, as quoted by Blanchette, 2017).

**For example:**

- You rate your trainee's performance as "adequate", since he made a few mistakes, even though he is generally very good.
- Your trainee made several mistakes, but he is only completing his second placement, so you let it go and do not mention it in his assessment.

**To counter this bias:**

Pay special attention to the trainee's strengths as well as his challenges before taking a stand.

## The central tendency error

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Tendency to keep the trainee's assessment at an average level even when the performance level varies, either to satisfy everyone or because you lack experience in assessment (Daly *et al.*, 2017; Drolet, 2017; Kakia, 2019; Ménard & Gosselin, as quoted by Blanchette, 2017).

### For example:

You give a 7.5 on 10 for various criteria assessed. As a result, your trainee will not ask too many questions.

### To counter this bias:

- Use multiple choice nominal scales, without specific grades (e.g. very satisfactory, satisfactory, unsatisfactory, very unsatisfactory) (Drolet, 2016).
- Use descriptive scales listing expected behaviours.

## The anchoring effect

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Tendency to assess the trainee on the basis of the initial information (first impression) available to you (Goldszlagier, 2015; Grünbeck, 2020; Vagner & Walter, 2019). You then focus on the information that is likely to confirm your initial judgement and ignore information that contradicts this initial judgement (Faherty *et al.*, 2020; Vagner et Walter, 2019).

### For example:

On his first day, your trainee did not conform to the dress code. You gave him a poor grade regarding respect for the institution's labour standards.

### To counter this bias:

Introduce other assessment sources, such as self-assessment or 360° assessment.

## The recency effect

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Tendency to assess the trainee according to the most recent information you have (Grünbeck, 2020). As a result, a recent event, whether positive or negative, takes disproportionate importance in your mind, thus concealing facts that occurred prior to this event (Drolet, 2016; Grünbeck, 2020).

### For example:

Your trainee is usually able to complete files. However, the file he submitted this week was not really thorough. You give him a C for clinical documentation.

### To counter this bias:

Review your notes to read and remember all of the facts.

## The contrast effect

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Tendency to assess the trainee against a standard model (another trainee seen previously or yourself) rather than against predetermined criteria (Chong *et al.*, 2017; Yeates *et al.*, 2015).

As a result, you assess performance based on the gap between what the trainee accomplished and what the standard model would have done (Durand & Chouinard, 2012; Fontaine *et al.*, 2020).

### For example:

- You rate the trainee's performance as adequate, because he does possess the competencies that you had when you were a trainee.
- When a strong trainee follows a weaker trainee, the strong trainee may be perceived as even stronger than he really is. The reverse is also true.

### To counter this bias:

Avoid comparing trainees' performance to one another or comparing their performance to your own.

## The contamination effect

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Tendency to be influenced by the trainee's past assessments (good or bad) during the current assessment (Durand & Chouinard, 2012; Faherty *et al.*, 2020; Fontaine *et al.*, 2020). For example, you may have heard about this trainee from a colleague who supervised him previously.

### For example:

Eric, your trainee, was under the supervision of your colleague Antoine in his previous placement. Antoine mentioned that Eric had trouble taking blood samples. When assessing the trainee, you note that this intervention "needs improvement".

### To counter this bias:

Put on "blinders" when you hear about your trainee's past performance in previous placements.

## The mirror-imaging effect (or similarity to the assessor error)

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Tendency to overestimate the performance of a trainee with whom you have affinities (shares your values or personality traits) (Benson, 2019; Détail Formation, 2018; Drolet, 2016; Grünbeck, 2020).

### For example:

Your trainee is shy with patients and it hinders his way of communicating. Being shy yourself, you understand he is doing his best and you give him a good grade for communication.

### To counter this bias:

Introduce other assessment sources, such as self-assessment and 360° assessment (Drolet, 2016).

## The intercultural bias

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Tendency to apply your cultural expectations when assessing someone whose beliefs and expectations are fundamentally different (Fontaine *et al.*, 2020; Kim & Zabelina, 2015).

Intercultural biases can be reflected in how words are interpreted (when French is not the trainee's first language), in the importance attached to success and how feedback is provided to the trainee (some cultural groups will expect the supervisor to start with strengths, while others emphasize challenges) (Kim & Zabelina, 2015).

### For example:

Your trainee is of Asian origin and French is his third language. When you assessed his clinical reasoning, his answers were incomplete. You gave him an “unsatisfactory” rating for this aspect, without knowing whether he simply had not understood the questions you asked him.

### To counter this bias:

- Enroll in training on cultural diversity (Register for our online workshop (in French only): [Les compétences culturelles : un incontournable pour assurer des soins de qualité](#) for more information).
- Develop cultural sensitivity.

## The attribution effect

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Tendency to state that a trainee shows poor performance, while it actually results from the context (using obsolete equipment, lack of resources, etc.) (Guidere, 2020).

### For example:

Most of the equipment in your clinic is obsolete. Your trainee does not master its use since he has never seen it in his courses. As a result, he makes several mistakes during his interventions. You note that he does not have the required competencies for his level.

### To counter this bias:

- When assessing performance, take into account the context of the situation.
- Put yourself in your trainee's shoes.

## The social desirability bias

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Tendency to overestimate the trainee in order to portray yourself positively (Dubois *et al.*, 2018). You want to be well recognized and repress negative comments, keeping only those that will please your trainee (Vagner & Walter, 2019; Wanat *et al.*, 2020).

Unlike other cognitive biases, the social desirability bias often occurs consciously (Vagner & Walter, 2019; Wanat *et al.*, 2020).

### For example:

You feel that your trainee is distant, that he does not appreciate you very much. You do not want him to despise you, thus you avoid giving him feedback or poor grades.

### To counter this bias:

- Determine your level of social desirability by using a scale, such as the abridged version of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding.
- Take time to reflect on the impact of your level of social desirability on your interpretation.

## The “order” effect

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Tendency to overestimate or underestimate your trainee’s assignments according to their position in the stack of copies (Fontaine *et al.*, 2020; Université Laval, 2015).

This effect is only present in some professions, when a professional supervises a group of trainees and corrects their written assignments.

### For example:

- First, you correct Stephane’s work and it is of very high quality. Then you correct Emilie’s work, which is clearly inferior to Stephane’s paper. Thus, you are more critical in your rating.
- You first correct Marc’s paper, which does not meet expectations at all. You then review Elise’s work, which is of higher quality and seems exceptional against Marc’s assignment. Thus, you are more indulgent in your rating.

### To counter this bias:

Avoid comparing trainees’ paper to one another.