THE ROLE OF IMAGE NORMS IN EMPLOYMENT DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

Individuals' beliefs about their own level of physical attractiveness, as well as the perceived demands for physical attractiveness in certain occupations and organizations may influence the decision to pursue different career paths. These perceptions about the importance of physical attractiveness reflect both occupational and organizational stereotypes. We have termed such image stereotypes about the importance of physical attractiveness *image norms*. An image norm is the belief that people must possess a certain degree of physical attractiveness to work in certain occupations, industries, and/or companies. Image norms may be important influences on both individual and organizational behavior.

THE ROLE OF IMAGE NORMS

Physical attractiveness may play a role in the occupational and job choice decisions of individuals at several stages in their career. Greenhaus, Callanan, and Godshalk [6] suggest that effective career management include engaging in career exploration and gaining an awareness of the self and the environment. Individuals' beliefs about their own level of physical attractiveness, as well as the perceived demands for physical attractiveness in certain occupations, organizations, and industries may influence the decision to pursue or avoid different career paths.

This suggests that individuals may develop three separate (but not mutually exclusive) sets of physical attractiveness perceptions, each of which may influence career decisions. First, individuals form perceptions about their own level of physical attractiveness. The second set of perceptions involves occupational stereotypes. This is the belief that physical attractiveness is a requirement for entry into an occupation or advancement in one's career path. Finally, the third set of perceptions individuals may develop involves the relationship between physical attractiveness and organizational image. Given the uncertainly inherent in the job search and choice process, job applicants may be attracted to companies with favorable organizational images [2]. More importantly, job applicants may rely on such images to determine their potential fit with a particular company [6].

Several dimensions may comprise an individual's perception of an organization's image. Image may include industry reputation, perceptions of social responsibility, or perceptions about the types of people who work for a company [3]. These latter perceptions include individuals' beliefs about the physical attractiveness of the people who work for a company; the company's desire to hire an attractive workforce; and the role of physical attractiveness in advancing one's career in that organization. The belief that physical attractiveness is a hiring requirement in certain organizations or is necessary for advancement in those companies may result in applicant self-selection into or out of those companies.

From the organization's perspective, organizational image does not exist in a vacuum. Companies actively create and attempt to change their organizational image to affect a number of organizational

outcomes, including attracting qualified job applicants who fit with the organization [4]. Physical attractiveness may comprise one dimension of fit. Companies may use physical attractiveness as a hiring requirement or as the basis for advancement in their company. How directly or subtly this information is conveyed to applicants and organizational members may be difficult to measure. The importance of physical attractiveness to a company may be a commonly known practice, but an unwritten standard operating procedure. Moreover, different norms may exist within specific companies, industries, and occupations.

As has been discussed, individuals may develop three separate sets of physical attractiveness perceptions, each of which may influence career decisions. These perceptions about the importance of physical attractiveness in certain occupations and organizations reflect both occupational and organizational stereotypes. We have termed such image stereotypes about the importance of physical attractiveness *image norms*. An image norm is the belief that people must possess a certain degree of physical attractiveness to work in certain occupations, industries, and/or companies

Research suggests that children hold broad stereotypes about jobs that allow them to differentiate between occupations [10]. As adolescents learn more about the world of work, these stereotypes are refined as more accurate information is obtained about specific occupations. Occupational information may be obtained from one's family, peers, and social network. Job information may also be gleaned from images portrayed in the media, contact with individuals in specific jobs, and part time work experiences.

One dimension of occupational stereotypes may be beliefs about the importance of physical attractiveness in certain occupations. Such stereotypes may become the basis for image norms, whereby individuals believe that people must possess a certain degree of physical attractiveness to work in certain occupations, industries, and/or companies. Occupational image norms as may arise from one's own experiences; messages from family, friends, and one's social network; and messages from the media.

One source of image norms is one's own experiences in occupational exploration. A second source of image norms may arise from messages sent by family, friends, and one's social network. Image norms may also arise from messages sent by the media. Occupational images may be found in job advertisements, company brochures, newspapers, commercials, television shows, and the movies.

Donald Super [12] suggests that individuals attempt to implement their self concept through occupational choice. In other words, the choice of an occupation allows us to play a role that is consistent with our self concept. Super [12] defines the self concept as "the individual's picture of himself". Most people also hold perceptions about their own level of physical attractiveness. Irrespective of accuracy, these perceptions may influence (or constrain) the number of occupations that are considered as allowing for the implementation of the self concept.

Expectancy theory [13] may also explain how image norms influence occupational choice. Perceptions about one's own level of physical attractiveness may operate as expectancy beliefs in Vroom's model. If an individual does not believe that they are attractive enough to succeed in an occupation (and they believe that physical attractiveness is a necessary requirement for entry or advancement in an occupation), then the person is not likely to choose that occupation for their career.

Image norms exist at the organizational level, as well as at the individual level. Such norms would manifest themselves in the belief that individuals must possess a certain level of physical attractiveness

to work in or to advance in a specific organization. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that physical attractiveness [8] influences the selection, promotion, and reward decisions made by corporate decision-makers.

A similar phenomenon occurs with physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness is one component of the many physical cues others react to. Once a person is classified as attractive or unattractive, a variety of personality and psychological constructs are attributed to the individual. Implicit personality theory [1] offers one explanation for these effects. Once a person is classified into an attractive or an unattractive social category, the observer/evaluator links a variety of personality characteristics associated with being attractive or unattractive to that specific individual. Organizational decision makers may be particularly vulnerable to these effects since most evaluation/judgement tasks in organizations require the processing of a large amount of social information about a candidate or employee, usually under time pressures, with out complete information about each person being evaluated.

An examination of physical attractiveness research supports this statement. Physically attractive individuals have received more positive evaluations than unattractive individuals in the areas of hiring [9], promotion [11], and compensation [5]. Heilman [7] applies the lack of fit model to explain this attractiveness bias. She argues that an organizational decision maker/evaluator forms two sets of perceptions. First, they hold perceptions about the personality characteristics that are associated with different stereotypes (e.g. an attractive vs. an unattractive person). Second, they hold perceptions about the requirements for successfully performing a job. Then, as in any matching model, the evaluator compares their perception of the candidate/job incumbent to their perceptions of the characteristics needed to successfully perform the job. If there is a match, the person is evaluated favorably. If there is not a match, the person receives a negative evaluation.

Image norms may influence a decision-maker's perceptions about the requirements for successfully performing a job. If evaluators believe that it is necessary to possess a certain level of physical attractiveness to succeed in a job or a company, then, attractive individuals should receive more favorable evaluations than unattractive individuals on a variety of job outcomes.

Implications for Individuals and Organizations

Individuals need to consider the effects of image norms on their occupational and organizational choice decisions. Occupations and organizations may not be pursued if the individual believes internal and external messages about the importance of physical attractiveness for entry or advancement into certain jobs and companies. Applicants may engage in numerous impression management techniques to enhance the perception that they meet the image norms required to work in certain occupations, organizations, and industries. Job incumbents may also engage in impression management techniques to increase their chances of promotion and advancement if they believe career success is dependent on meeting attractiveness requirements.

Organizations need to consider the effect of image norms on their selection, promotion, and reward decisions. Companies also need to consider how image norms are directly and more subtly communicated to candidates. Organizations need to consider possible legal ramifications associated with image norms.

It is hoped that exploration of the questions posed in this paper will lead to new frontiers in physical attractiveness research. Image norms offer several exciting streams for future research activity. A delineation of image norms based on specific physical characteristics within specific jobs, industries,

and companies would be helpful to both individuals and organizations. Also, empirical investigations into how image norms affect specific organizational outcomes are needed. Image norms have a large effect on individuals and organizations. More research is needed on the process by which our perceptions lead to image norms and these image norms affect our lives.

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