

# ORGANIZATIONAL RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTION DECISIONS: THE ROLE OF STIGMA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of stigma in organizational recruitment and promotion decision making. It is hypothesized that recruiters' perceptions of person-job fit will be influenced by stigma and image norms. An *image norm* is the belief that applicants must present a certain image, consistent with occupational, organizational, or industry standards, in order to achieve career success. Applicants who violate image norms will be stigmatized. Stigmas are expected to affect recruiters' perceptions of person-job fit, which in turn affects whether the applicant continues in the selection process [2]. It is hypothesized that stigmatized applicants are likely to be dismissed by recruiters early in the selection process, since recruiters will not view them as appropriate candidates for positions in their organization. This paper examines the operation of image norms in the selection interview and their role in perceptions of person-job fit.

## THE ROLE OF STIGMA

While researchers have explored the effects of physical attractiveness on careers [8], the role image plays in career success has received limited academic attention. *Image* is defined as the totality of an individual's personal appearance. It is a broader construct than physical attractiveness, encompassing several dimensions of attractiveness. Historically, much of the physical attractiveness research has focused on specific physical characteristics such as height [7], weight [6], clothing [9], facial beauty [10], and handicapped status [1]. Image effects may operate in selection decisions because recruiters' hold image norms.

Recruiters are hypothesized to hold image norms and to rely on these image norms when assessing the applicant's degree of person-job or person-organization fit [3]. An applicant who does not meet the recruiter's image norms for a specific position or organization, will be stigmatized by the recruiter. As face-to-face interactions, selection interviews may be viewed as distinct social settings in which the stigmatization process may operate [5]. Recruiters may stigmatize applicants who in their judgment violate the image norms of the job applied for; are perceived as not fitting with the company's corporate image; or do not match the company's product brand image. Once the applicant has been stigmatized, the interviewer is less likely to perceive a person-job fit and are more likely to dismiss the applicant from the selection process.

At the individual level, job applicants are hypothesized to hold image norms regarding the type of image necessary to work in certain occupations, organizations, and industries. Applicants' image norms may arise from several perceptions, including the individual's perception of their own image and level of physical attractiveness; the perception that possessing a certain image is a requirement for entry into an occupation; and the perception that possessing a certain image is an organizational requirement for employment. At the organizational level, recruiters also hold image norms. Recruiters' beliefs that

applicants should possess a certain image to work in specific occupations, organizations, and industries form the basis for their image norms.

For many organizations, the first direct contact between the applicant and the recruiter occurs when they meet in the selection interview. While recruiters possess information about the applicant's qualifications pre-interview, information about the applicant's physical attractiveness and overall image does not become apparent until the two meet face-to-face in the interview [3]. As a social exchange setting, the interview process is vulnerable to the effects of stigmatization [5]. While recruiters may assign stigmas to several characteristics of applicants, this model examines stigmas that arise from violations of image norms.

Stigmas may influence recruiters' perceptions of person-job fit. Applicants who have been stigmatized for violating image norms will be judged poor fits for the job and/or the company. Stigmatized applicants will be removed from further consideration in the selection process. (Of course, applicants who believe that they do not fit job or company image norms may self-select out of employment opportunities where they perceive a misfit.)

Image norms may lead to stigmatization in hiring and promotion decisions. According to research in the area of impression formation, when people encounter a target person, they make an initial categorization of that target on the basis of information available at that moment[4]. Applicant pools and labor market participation rates may be unnecessarily restricted if candidates self select out of jobs and companies based on inaccurate image norms or inaccurate perceptions about their own level of physical attractiveness.

Research into the process whereby stigmas of image norms affect hiring and promotion decisions will greatly facilitate organizations in achieving the person-job fit they are looking for. True person-job fit means that the applicant is perceived as they truly are instead of for what they appear to be. It is more important for applicants to be rather than to seem or in other words "Esse quam videre".

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FIGURE 1

Relationship Between Image Norms, Stigma, and Person-Job Fit

