

THE ROLE OF IMAGE NORMS IN PERSON-JOB FIT: THE APPLICANT'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

A theoretical model is introduced which examines the relationship between perceptions of person-job fit, image norms, and stigma. With a new vision of management being developed and/or emerging in today's world, does image still hold a place of honor in our hiring processes? Hiring managers, recruiters, and other responsible for hiring will have perceptions of person-job fit that will be influenced by 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 [7]. 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.

INTRODUCTION

Our organizations are very different now than in the past. Although physical attractiveness has been found to play a role in many hiring and promotion processes, many of the traditional hiring and promotion processes are no longer handled face to face. Resumes are submitted electronically, interviews are conducted over the internet, jobs are posted electronically, and the list goes on. This paper will explore how recruiters' perceptions of person-job fit will be influenced by image norms. This paper examines the operation of image norms and stigma in the selection interview and their role in perceptions of person-job fit. A better understanding of the cognitive processes of interviewers may be gained by exploring the relationship between stigma, image norms, and perceptions of person-job fit.

Image norm effects are hypothesized to manifest themselves in selection interviews. 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 [8]. An applicant, who does not meet the recruiter's image norms for a specific position or organization, will be stigmatized by the recruiter. 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.

A model is developed in which stigmas and image norms interact to affect person-job fit. Image norms may reflect both occupational and organizational stereotypes. Image norms may also reflect beliefs that recruiters hold about the role of physical attractiveness in achieving person-job fit. Stigmas that arise from violations of image norms will by definition be idiosyncratic to each recruiter [17]. They are expected to be both job and organization specific. Although stigmas may arise from several applicant

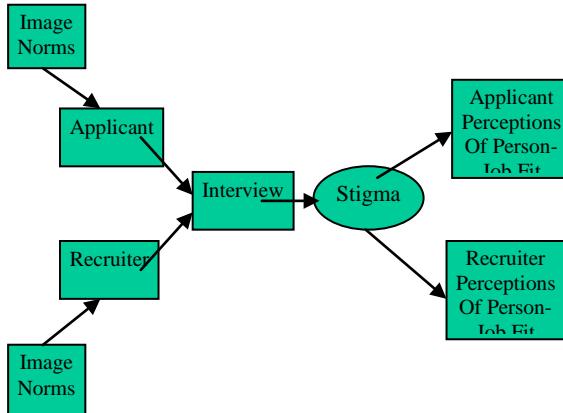
characteristics (e.g. race, gender, height, weight, and facial beauty) [23], this paper examines stigmas that arise from violations of image norms.

OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL

A generalized model of the relationship between image norms, stigma, and person-job fit is presented in Figure 1. Image norms may operate at both an individual and an organizational level. They may be held by both applicants and recruiters. 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.

FIGURE 1

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



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. Image norms may arise from organizational communications regarding the importance of physical attractiveness and image to a specific company. For example, companies may send direct messages to recruiters about the importance of physical attractiveness and image in hiring decisions by outlining appearance requirements in employee handbooks or policy manuals [2]. Recruiters' own experiences in the organization may shape 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 [8]. As a social exchange setting, the interview process is vulnerable to the effects of stigmatization [13]. While recruiters may assign stigmas to several characteristics of applicants, this model examines stigmas that arise from violations of image norms.

IMAGE NORM FORMATION: THE APPLICANT'S PERSPECTIVE

Occupational and organizational stereotypes about the importance of image for achieving person-job fit may become the basis for image norms. These image norms may influence individuals' decisions to pursue or reject jobs based on whether image and physical attractiveness is perceived as a requirement for entry into the occupation or advancement in that career field. While image norms may influence applicants at several points in the recruitment and selection process, such effects are expected to be especially strong during the selection interview. Applicants who do not believe they meet the image norm requirements for certain jobs are not expected to pursue those occupations.

IMAGE NORM FORMATION: THE RECRUITER'S PERSPECTIVE

A recruiter's beliefs about an applicant's overall image, as well as their own beliefs about the role of image in certain occupations, organizations, and industries may influence the decision to pursue or reject a candidate for employment. Expectancy theory [24] may explain the recruiter's evaluation process. Perceptions of an applicant's image are likely to influence recruiter's expectancies of the applicant's likelihood of success in different occupations. These perceptions, irrespective of accuracy, may influence the number and types of applicants that are considered for a position or that are allowed to remain in the hiring process.

STIGMA

Many researchers have relied on Goffman's definition of stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces the person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" [13, p. 3]. This explains why stigmatizing marks differ from culture to culture or organization to organization. This would operate in the selection interview if the recruiter noticed an applicant's stigma and utilized the stigma in their decision making process [3].

In our theory, image norms may lead to stigmatization in interview situations. Impression formation research has shown how observers make an initial categorization of a person when they first encounter them and base this categorization on the limited information available. 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 [10] [11]. Once the observer has categorized the person they will use information in their memory about other people they have encountered in that category to decide upon the appropriateness of this individual for their organization [23]. Social psychologists and the social cognitive approach can help us to understand how people place individuals into categories and then relate these categories to existing stereotypes [4] [5] [18].

A recruiter would develop image norms of the organization they work for and bring this into the interview. If an applicant does not fit the image norm the recruiter perceives their company to need, this lack of fit with the image norm may become a stigma. The stigma of not fitting an image norm may become one of many factors a recruiter bases their hiring decision on.

Our model explores the interaction between the stigmatizer (the interviewer) and the stigmatized (the applicant). There is a paucity of research on the actual interactions of the two groups [9]. Goffman (1959) would see the interaction taking place in an interview as a play (based on reality) where the two parties are trying to manage impressions and project the image they perceive is needed in the situation

[6]. With performers “acting” in interactions it can become very difficult to differentiate between facts and appearances [6] or as Schechner wrote in 1998, “Appearances are actualities” (p. 362).

PERCEPTIONS OF PERSON-JOB FIT

Physical attractiveness and image effects in organizations are well documented [16]. The importance of physical attractiveness in person perception is not surprising, as physical cues are one of the first things noticed about a person. Moreover, physical cues are used to differentiate people into meaningful categories. Once categorized, a variety of personality and psychological constructs are attributed to individuals falling within the referent category. In both work and non-work settings, image norms serve as the basis for social evaluations.

Two theoretical explanations from the research on physical attractiveness, implicit personality theory [1] and lack of fit model [14], may explain how image norms operate to influence the hiring and promotion decisions made by recruiters. Implicit personality theory [1] offers one explanation for these effects. Once a person is classified as attractive or unattractive, the observer (recruiter) links several personality characteristics associated with that social category to the individual [22]. Organizational decision makers may be particularly vulnerable to these effects as they process large amounts of social information, usually under time pressures, without 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 [19], promotion [21], and compensation [12].

Heilman and Stopeck (1985) apply a lack of fit model to explain attractiveness bias findings. They argue that recruiters form 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 with any matching model, the recruiter compares their perception of the candidate 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 are compatible with both implicit personality theory and the lack of fit model in explaining physical attractiveness and image norm effects on perceptions of person-job fit. Image norms may influence a recruiter’s perceptions about the requirements for successfully performing a job. If recruiters believe that it is necessary to possess a certain image to succeed in a job or progress in a company, then, individuals matching that image will receive more favorable evaluations on a variety of job outcomes, than individuals who violate image norms. Moreover, recruiters may rely on image norms to determine an applicant’s potential fit with their company.

DISCUSSION

Organizations and individuals striving to achieve person-job fit need to explore the role of stigma and image norms and their effects on fit within their organizations. 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. The stigmatization of applicants according to their image norm may occur at a conscious or unconscious level [18].

Past research has shown that applicants are often stigmatized because of their group membership. This would include their gender, race, age, sexual preferences, and even some aspects of physical attractiveness such as obesity [15]. Organizations and researchers have searched for way to eliminate or lessen stigmatization due to group membership. For example, many firms have developed interventions such as diversity training in an attempt to improve their employees' treatment of non-whites and change their attitudes towards non-whites. This type of intervention may be successful for one specific behavior in one specific context. However, this does not challenge the stigmas created by the employees. It appears that image and the stigmas formed from image are still raising their head in our new era of technology and with our new vision of management.

Stigma will also affect the reputation of organizations and executives. An executive at a firm which suffers a negative event such as bankruptcy or a lawsuit, often cannot recover their careers from this image (Sutton & Callahan, 1987). Organizations may have their corporate reputation permanently tarnished by a stigmatized activity [13]. While some of these stigmatizing events may occur without warning such as secret tampering of their product, organizational members may be able to predict some events such as bankruptcies [3]. Goffman describes how organizations can use impression management to define their corporate reputation. Impression management techniques described by Goffman include defining the situation, discrediting many of the sources reporting the stigmatizing event, show non-responsibility for the event among other methods.

Organizations need to stay continually tuned to the image norms created by them. Organizations must examine all of their communication materials for potential sources of image norms. Companies need to consider how image norms are directly and more subtly communicated to candidates. Messages about the importance of image may reside in seemingly neutral recruiting materials

Hiring and promotion decisions should be examined for signals about the perceived importance of image norms for entry and advancement in the organization. Image norms may explicitly operate within organizations if physical attractiveness standards are applied to hiring and promotion decisions. Image norms may also operate in a more subtle fashion. In times of labor shortages, it would be unfortunate to lose qualified candidates and valued employees because of misperceptions about hiring and promotion standards.

It is hoped that exploration of the theory and model presented in this paper will lead to new avenues for research in stigma, image norms, and person job-fit. Research on stigma has recently delved into the point of view of the stigmatized instead of the stigmatizer [20]. Most of this research has focused on membership in groups such as gender and race as the stigma. Our theory introduces the concept of image norms as one source of stigma.

Research into the process whereby stigmas of image norms affect the person-job fit 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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