

Cross-Cultural Implications of Physical Attractiveness Stereotypes in Personnel Selection

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Draft copy of paper presented at 27th Annual Conference on Personnel Assessment

Abstract

This study examined the influence of physical attractiveness on selection in two cultures, India and the US. A 2 X 2 (applicant attractiveness and gender) between-subjects design was used. For the Indian sample, physical attractiveness did not affect ratings of qualifications or likelihood of hiring, however there was an effect on the salary offered. There were no significant effects of attractiveness and gender for the American sample.

Many studies have supported the idea that physical attractiveness of an individual influences the inferences that others make about them. This physical attractiveness stereotype, which is also known as the “what is beautiful is good” (Dion et al., 1972) suggests that those who are physically attractive are associated with more desirable personality traits, future life outcomes, and social skills than those who are less attractive.

Within the context of the world of work, physical attractiveness has been shown to have an influence over who gets hired, performance appraisals, salary determinations, and promotions. However, most of this research has been conducted in Western societies, predominantly, the US and Canada. In these times of increased globalization of business, it is important to consider the generality of this research to people of different cultures. This study examined the influence of physical attractiveness on selection in two very different cultures, namely the US and India.

Method

Participants

Data was collected from 216 Indian students (124 females and 92 males) and 121 American students (86 females and 35 males).

Design

Applicant gender and attractiveness were manipulated via photographs (Between-subjects design). Participants were asked to review applicant resumes and a job description for a department head of children's toys and then to evaluate the applicants' qualifications, likelihood of being hired, and the salary they would be awarded. Equivalent pictures and resumes were used for the Indian and American samples.

Independent Variables

Applicant gender and attractiveness (facial) was manipulated through the use of photographs. There were four photographs for each of the two samples (Attractive male and female and unattractive male and female).

Dependent Variables

Participants rated the applicants on their qualifications and the likelihood of their being hired on a 10 point rating scale. Finally they indicated the salary that they would offer the applicant. The salary question was open-ended with averages provided (\$ 50,000 or Rs. 500,000)

Manipulation Check

Participants rated the attractiveness of the applicant on a 10 point scale.

Results

In analyzing the data for the Indian students, there were no significant interaction or main effects for applicant attractiveness or gender on the ratings of qualifications or likelihood of hiring. There was a, however there was a significant main effect of attractiveness ($F(1,216) = 4.1, p < .05$) on the salary rating. As shown on Table 1, on average, higher salaries were offered to attractive applicants (Rs 411,000 for males and Rs 439,479 for females) than for unattractive applicants (Rs 368,883 for males and Rs 381,818 for females). There were no significant main effects or interactions for applicant attractiveness or gender on the ratings of qualifications, likelihood of being hired, and salary made by American students (See Table 2).

Discussion

The results of the data showed that Indian students were likely to have physical attractiveness stereotypes when making a decision on what salary to offer the applicant. Although this was the only variable affected by the applicant's attractiveness, it suggests that physical attractiveness stereotypes does have some impact on personnel decisions made by Indians. Surprisingly, the American sample showed no significant indication of these stereotypes. One reason for the relatively weak effects for attractiveness in this study could be that each participant reviewed only one applicant and made only one hiring decision. In the real world, interviewers review many resumes and interview many applicants before making a hiring decision. We are currently analyzing data, where each participant is being asked to review several candidates and make hiring decisions for each. It is heartening to note however, that in this study, participants did not show strong evidence of the physical attractiveness "What is beautiful is good" stereotype.

Table 1.
Means and Standard Deviations of Qualification, Hire, Salary, and Attractiveness for an Indian Sample

Applicant Characteristics	n	Qualification		Hire		Salary	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Male Applicant	107						
Attractive	52	7.3	1.9	7.1	2.0	411,000	149,490
Unattractive	55	6.7	2.1	6.7	2.4	368,883	164,055
Female Applicant	109						
Attractive	54	7.2	1.7	7.2	2.0	439,479	144,683
Unattractive	55	6.9	1.9	6.7	2.0	381,818	148,517

Note: Ratings are from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) for Qualification, Hire, and Attractiveness.

The higher the mean the more favorable the evaluation. Salary is an open range with Rs. 5000,000 described as the average.

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviations of Qualification, Hire, Salary, and Attractiveness for an American Sample

Applicant Characteristics	n	Qualification		Hire		Salary	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Male Applicant	60						
Attractive	30	8.4	1.2	8.5	1.4	52,150	6,905
Unattractive	30	7.7	1.3	7.8	1.4	49,517	6,706
Female Applicant	61						
Attractive	30	8.3	1.0	8.3	1.1	51,516	5,650
Unattractive	31	8.4	1.4	8.2	1.5	51,333	9,141

Note: Ratings are from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) for Qualification, Hire, and Attractiveness.

The higher the mean the more favorable the evaluation. Salary is an open range with \$50,000 described as the average.