

Selecting job applicants: Effects from gender, self-presentation, and decision type [☆]

Martha Foschi ^{*}, Jerilee Valenzuela

Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, 6303 N.W. Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T1Z1

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Abstract

We report on an experiment that utilizes an application-files design to recreate several features of a hiring decision for junior-engineer positions. The critical situation under study involved an assessor (either male or female) and a male and a female candidate with highly similar professional qualifications but different self-presentation styles. We investigate effects from sex category of assessor, sex category and self-presentation of pair of candidates, and type of assessment decision (namely, choice between the two applicants, and ratings of their competence and suitability). Our hypotheses consider both gender as status and as social identity, and predict different outcomes depending on assessment decision. We found no evidence of bias against the female applicant. The question about competence elicited effects from self-presentation only, from both men and women; the choice of applicant and suitability measures show no bias against the female candidate by men and a bias in her favor by women.

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1. Introduction

The formal assessment of job applicants and their qualifications is a ubiquitous feature of many contemporary societies. Although such contexts usually have explicit rules mandating the fair treatment of all applicants, it is often the case that biases (such as those based on gender and ethnicity) persist nonetheless. Under some circumstances, however, the effects from those biases can, in turn, be modified and sometimes even blocked by other factors, such as level of performance. Here we examine the relative roles of four variables in a hiring decision concerning a professional job: the sex category of the applicants and of their assessors,

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^{*} Corresponding author. Fax: +1 604 822 6161.

E-mail address: mfoschi@shaw.ca (M. Foschi).

the applicants' self-presentation style, and the type of assessment decision.¹ We also discuss the ability of our method to elicit the participants' gender beliefs (rather than, for example, socially desirable answers).

2. Theoretical and empirical background

The background for our work is expectation states theory, the comprehensive research program on assignment of competence in task settings (for recent reviews, see Berger and Webster, 2006; Ridgeway, 2003; Wagner and Berger, 2002). The core of the theory concerns groups in which members have no prior history of interaction with each other and yet are committed to doing well on a task that they must complete as a team. According to the theory, members of such groups assign competence to each other, and hold corresponding task-related expectations, on the basis of knowledge of either their status characteristics, or the quality of their prior task performance, or both. A "status characteristic" is any socially valued attribute believed by the interactants to carry information about task competence. These beliefs are not necessarily conscious nor do they have to have an objective validity. Such attributes consist of at least two levels, one viewed as carrying more worth than the other (e.g., high versus low mechanical ability). These attributes also vary in the range of their perceived relevance: specific characteristics provide information about task competence in a limited area (e.g., the ability to solve crossword puzzles); diffuse characteristics are seen as related to a wide, indeterminate set of tasks. In many societies, gender, ethnicity, nationality, formal education, and socioeconomic class, for instance, constitute diffuse status characteristics for large numbers of individuals.

It is useful to examine interaction in a task group from the point of view of any one member at a time. This person ("self") assesses his/her own ability relative to that of every other member of the group, in a series of pair-wise comparisons. The theory proposes that a person develops self-other performance expectations by combining all the available task-related information about the two actors. (No explicit calculations are assumed to be carried out.) Both the consistency of the items of information with each other, and their number and task relevance, are taken into account through a principle of "organized subsets" (Berger et al., 1977, pp. 122–129). Our general area of interest in this paper is on those situations in which actors differ on status but are either equal or highly similar on performance.

Of particular interest here is the manner in which the status information is *conveyed*. This topic has been investigated within expectation states theory under the heading of "status cues" (Berger et al., 1986; Fisek et al., 2005). Such cues are indicators of the socially valued attributes that a person possesses. The cues are classified as either "indicative" or "expressive," depending on whether they give direct or indirect identification of a person's status. Moreover, some cues provide specific information about an individual's performances, while others point more generally to his/her membership in a status category (and thus are either "task" or "categorical" cues). The cues a person presents may also be either consistent or inconsistent with his/her status. In this study we focus on men's and women's self-presentation style as an indirect cue to performance level. Thus, if gender is viewed as a status characteristic, a man who is self-promoting about his abilities and a woman who is modest about hers constitute a consistent situation, as their self-presentation styles reinforce the expected status-order based on gender. In turn, such consistency often carries implications of legitimacy (i.e., is seen as what *should* occur) (for a recent review of work on this topic, see Johnson et al., 2006). For a review of empirical research on status and self-presentation within the expectation states tradition, see Wagner and Berger (2002, pp. 56–59); related work also appears in Foschi et al. (2001), Rashotte and Smith-Lovin (1997), and Sev'er (1991).

There is also a vast literature on self-presentation style outside the expectation states approach. Of special relevance here are the studies involving gender. In most of them, findings indicate that self-promotion is instrumental in generating an impression of competence, but that men benefit more than women in the results that such a tactic yields. Other negative consequences for women often include a lower level of likeability. For examples of this work, see Daubman et al. (1992), Rudman (1998), and Wosinska et al. (1996). Although the

¹ We use "sex category" (or simply, "sex") when our objective is merely to refer to individuals as either men or women; we use "gender" when we wish to emphasize cultural aspects of this categorization. We treat "competence," "ability" and "skill" as synonyms. We use "gender bias" to indicate a preference for either the male or the female performer, and clarify the direction of the bias in the text as needed.

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