Attractiveness effect and the hidden discourse of discrimination in recruitment: The moderating role of job types and gender of applicants

L’effet de l’apparence physique et le discours caché de la discrimination en situation de recrutement : le rôle modérateur du type d’emploi à pourvoir et du sexe des candidats

Abstract

The goal of this research was twofold: 1) investigate whether the attractiveness bias is moderated by the type of jobs to be filled or by the gender of the applicants, and 2) examine the way this bias is implicitly echoed through the recruiters’ discourse in non-discriminatory settings. Using a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subject factorial design, 120 recruiters had to evaluate the hireability of an average or attractive candidate, being male or female, for either a frontline or a back-office position, and to justify their decision in writing. As predicted, the hireability ratings showed that being unattractive was a drawback, particularly for recruitment in frontline position. This was also expressed implicitly as recruiters used rhetorical and discursive markers to express their discriminatory thoughts. The social and empirical implications of the

Résumé

Cette recherche avait deux objectifs : 1) montrer que l’avantage induit par l’attrait physique des candidats pouvait être modéré par le type d’emploi à pourvoir ou par leur catégorie de genre, et 2) examiner la manière dont ce type de biais peut être implicitement transcrit dans le discours des recruteurs agissant dans un contexte non discriminatoire. Sur cette base, on a sollicité 120 recruteurs qui devaient décider de la recrutabilité de candidats plus ou moins attrayants, de sexe masculin ou féminin, et postulant à un emploi nécessitant ou non des contacts avec les usagers. Conformément aux prédictions, les mesures de recrutabilité ont montré que le fait d’être moins attrayant était pénalisant, particulièrement pour le recrutement sur un emploi qui nécessite des contacts avec les

Key-words

Attractiveness effect, discourse, discrimination, gender, job type, recruitment

Mots-clés

Attrait, discours, discrimination, genre, type de poste, recrutement

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The issue of attractiveness bias and its impact on recruitment is a matter of relevant concern for both policy makers and human resources managers. Prior studies have not paid enough attention on the moderating role of some factors, nor have they always considered the impact of existing anti-bias policies on how discriminations are produced. The present study is held within the framework of modern prejudices and discriminations theory. Its aim is twofold: 1) examine the way factors such as the gender of the applicants or the type of position to be filled moderate the relationship between the applicant’s level of attractiveness and job-related outcomes; 2) explore the way the attractiveness bias is explicitly or implicitly echoed in recruiters’ attitudes and discourse held in non-discriminatory settings (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, 1998). In both cases, the focus was to examine the way discourses can convey prejudices.

Attractiveness in the recruitment: impacts and moderators

Since the “what is beautiful is good” pioneering work of Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972), numerous studies have stressed the impact of attractiveness bias in everyday life (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Langlois et al., 2000), and particularly in the labor market (Desrumaux, de Bosscher, & Léoni, 2009; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003; Watkins & Johnston, 2000). These studies have systematically highlighted the positive regard received by attractive targets about their social (Eagly et
al., 1991) and intellectual competences (Jackson, Hunter, & Hodge, 1995), both being valued in the workplace. These consistent results illustrate a “heuristic of attraction” (Luxen & Van de Vijver, 2006, p. 241) and they show that this issue “has escaped regulation” (Watkins & Johnston, 2000, p. 76).

Other studies suggest that this attractiveness advantage can be moderated by factors such as the gender of the applicants or the type of job to be filled (Morrow, McElroy, Stamper, & Wilson, 1990). More precisely, studies within the framework of evolution theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) or feminist theory (Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007) suggest that being good-looking is mainly a female concern because of the biological adaptation for the former, and the cultural oppression of women for the latter. Other lines of research suggest that the attractiveness bias may be more pronounced for a frontline job, i.e., a job involving contacts with the public and conveying the image and values of the company (Drogosz & Levy, 1996; Marshall, Stamps, & Moore, 1998; Pansu & Dubois, 2002).

The expression of the attractiveness bias in recruitment also needs to be addressed in light of the growing concerns regarding social and legal protection against discrimination (Plant & Devine, 2001, 2003). When regulating policies are available, recruiters are likely to display their discriminative attitude implicitly rather than overtly. This has prompted researchers to design new or complementary tools that are consistent with the more modern expression of prejudice (McConahay, 1986), as they can document ingrained beliefs that reside outside of conscious awareness (Fazio & Olson, 2003; Ziegert & Hange, 2005).

**Attractiveness bias and the discursive rhetoric of discrimination**

Discursive methods can reveal implicit bias attitudes. In our view, they are to be considered as a valuable supplement to the traditional self-reporting measures of prejudice and discrimination (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006; Schmader, Whitehead, & Wysocki, 2007). Discourse can be analyzed within the enunciation theory, which
is based on the assumption that the enunciation process is not neutral, since individuals can instrumentalize language in order to safely display their beliefs (Ducrot, 1998; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2009). Linguistic markers such as lexis, adjectives, modal adverbs and verbs (Ghiglione, 1991; Ghiglione, Landre, Bromberg, & Molette, 1998) enable the capture of the subtext and all the subjective beliefs that bypass the message of the enunciator. Discourse can also be analyzed within the discursive psychology theory, according to which discourse enables speakers to construct reality (share and create meaning), perform actions, and use various rhetorical strategies (indirect form, presupposition, insinuations, ambiguity) to circumvent the ongoing reality (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

What is common to both perspectives is the fact that discourse analysis seems to be the ideal tool to examine the role played by language in expressing, but also in maintaining bias (Ng, 1990; Weatherall, 1998), especially in non-discriminatory settings. Next, in both perspectives, the instrumentalization of language can be interpreted as the consequence of the impression-management process (Van Dijk, 1990, 1992; Verkuyten, de Jong, & Masson, 1994) according to which people would tactically provide conventional information that would not challenge their own positive image, but, at the same time, fill their discourse with rhetorical markers (e.g., utterance, denials) that help capturing the discriminatory subtext.

The objectives of the present study are in line with these perspectives. First, it aims at showing that, as in racist (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) or sexist (Stobbe, 2005; Weatherall, 1996, 1998) discourses, the contributions of discourse analysis in the field of the attractiveness bias can be effective. Second, it seeks to complement the ordinary self-reporting ratings with attitudes measured implicitly. Third, it aims at apprehending the rhetorical strategies that underline the impression management processes set up by individuals in non-discriminatory contexts.

These rhetorical strategies can be based on lexis (traits, adjectives) or syntax (hedges, modals, verbs). In recruitment settings,
the use of such markers can indicate the recruiter’s positive or negative attitude toward the applicants. Drawing from the implicit personality theory, Eagly and colleagues (1991) conceptualized the way attractiveness stereotypes operate. In their meta-analysis, they have shown that individuals spontaneously associate positive traits to an attractive person. They have also identified variables mediating the relationship between perceived physical attractiveness and performance. These include social competences (based on communication ability and likeability), professional competences (based on intellectual competence and expertise), and trustworthiness (based on integrity). Trustworthiness is utilized here, according to the seminal conceptualization of Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), as one of the factors underscoring the concept of source credibility. Therefore, being trustworthy means that one inspires confidence. Thus, such personality-like traits (Ahearne, Gruen, & Burke Jarvis, 1999) can be expected to fill the recruiters’ discourse and shed light on the recruiters’ ingrained beliefs about the candidates.

Overview and hypotheses

The present research extends the literature on bias based on attractiveness by examining the ways such bias is subtly and implicitly conveyed in the recruiters’ discourses, especially in non-discriminatory settings. We hypothesized that attractive applicants will receive higher evaluations than unattractive applicants in both hireability ratings and discourses (Hypothesis 1).

The research was also an investigation of the moderating role of the type of job to be filled on the effects of attractiveness in recruitment. Salespeople are required to possess and display additional interpersonal skills (communication ability, attractiveness, likeability), which are unnecessary for a laboratory position. We hypothesized an attractiveness x job type interaction such that the difference in evaluation between attractive and unattractive candidates would be more important when applying for frontline jobs than when applying for a back-office jobs (Hypothesis 2).
Because it appears that the so-called tyranny of appearance is more exerted on women than on men (Forbes et al., 2007; Judge & Cable, 2011), we hypothesized a gender x attractiveness interaction such that the evaluation of attractive men and women would not differ, while this evaluation would be more negative for unattractive women than for their unattractive counterparts (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

The sample included 120 participants \((M \text{ age} = 32.36, SD = 6.50)\) from Western France. There were 62 women \((M \text{ age} = 31.64, SD = 6.28)\) and 58 men \((M \text{ age} = 31.12, SD = 6.69)\). All were actively employed in the recruitment sector, and volunteered to participate to the study.

Design

A 2 (applicants' level of attractiveness: attractive vs. unattractive) \(\times\) 2 (applicants' gender: male vs. female) \(\times\) 2 (type of job to be filled: salesperson vs. laboratory assistant) between-subject factorial design was used. After randomly assigning participants to conditions, the cell size was \(N = 15\) recruiters.

Procedure

The applicants' attractiveness was one of the main factors considered in this research. A pilot study was conducted with 40 female \((M = 20.8; SD = 2.63)\) and 30 male \((M = 19.78; SD = 2.63)\) students from a large French state university. Each participant had to rate the attractiveness of females and males photographs. Two original headshots, one male and one female, were selected as the standard portrait of the applicants. These initial photographs were then slightly touched up using the Photoshop Liquify Filter in order to get six additional photographs, varying according to their level of unattractiveness. All the participants were presented with 7 male and 7 female photographs in random order. A 7-point scale (1 = “very attractive”; 7 = “not attractive at all”) was used to this end. Based on mean ratings (see Table 1),
two female and two male photographs (one average, one attractive) were selected for the study. It is worth to note that the average photograph was only a variation of the original female or male one.

**Table 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographs</th>
<th>Attractive</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.16 (1.78)</td>
<td>4.28 (2.11)</td>
<td>5.74*</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.12 (0.56)</td>
<td>4.15 (1.20)</td>
<td>18.75*</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001

Note. df = 69. The lower the mean score is, the higher the attractiveness of the photograph is. In order to avoid a caricatural comparison, we chose not to oppose the most attractive photograph to the least attractive one. Thus, the choice of average photograph was made according to the median value of the average score obtained by the 7 male photographs (Median: 4.16) and female photographs (Median: 4.14). In each case, the average photograph is the one that obtained the closest average score to the median value.

Participants were recruited under the pretext of lending their expertise to an advanced seminar for students in human resources management. They were invited to serve as expert role models in the way a recruitment process is handled. Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of the 8 experimental conditions. Participant were handed out a booklet including a) a description detailing the tasks and responsibilities of the job to be filled, b) the skills required for the job, c) the résumé, which included a black-and-white laser copy of a photograph attached to its top right-hand corner, information about the candidate’s biographical information (i.e., age, education achievements, work experience and training). The contents of the booklet were essentially the same for all the fictitious applicants. All had the required skills for the prospective job.

**Dependent variables**

Each booklet included a questionnaire enabling the assessment of applicants on several dimensions.

**Applicants’ hireability**

Participants rated the applicants’ hireability on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all recommended) to 5 (highly recommended). Next, participants were asked to justify in writing their decision.
Discursive measures

The linguistic material gathered was analyzed through three markers, which were selected because they were assumed to help reaching the recruiters' implicit beliefs, and because they referred to the criteria that saturate the most widespread professional evaluation tools. An interpersonal skill marker was constructed by reporting the ratio of the difference between the number of positive adjectives (e.g., “altruistic,” “assertive”) and negative adjectives (e.g., “individualistic,” “hostile”) by the total number of adjectives in the corpus. A professional competence marker was constructed by reporting the ratio of the difference between the number of active tone verbs suggesting that the applicants may be dynamic (will “take the initiative,” “perform”) and stative tone verbs suggesting that they may be passive (“will wait and see”) by the total number of active and stative tone verbs in the corpus. A trustworthiness marker was constructed by reporting the ratio of the number of hedges, disclaimers, and uncertainty words (e.g., “but,” “however”), by the total number of clauses in the corpus. The more these markers are used in recruiters’ discourse, the lower their level of trustworthiness towards the applicants.

Coding the recruiters’ reports

First, the corpus obtained (for examples of written justifications about applicants, see Appendix 1) was analyzed using Tropes 7 software. Tropes has been widely used and extensively validated as a semantic analysis program (Marchand, 1998; for more details see also the Tropes website). Then, two independent coders recoded all the reports. They were trained in the coding scheme and aware of the principles of discursive analysis. They were blind to the study hypotheses. Inter-raters reliability was adequate for all discursive measures (Kappa above .70).

Results

Intercorrelations among all the dependent measures are shown in Table 2. In a test of the overall predicted pattern, controlling for Type 1 error, a MANOVA was performed across the four dependent variables. The primary analysis was a 2 (applicants’
level of attractiveness: attractive vs. unattractive) x 2 (applicants’
gender: male vs. female) x 2 (type of job to be filled: salesperson
vs. laboratory assistant) between-subject multivariate analysis.
This MANOVA, based on Wilks’ criterion, revealed the predicted
attractiveness effect (Hypothesis 1), $F(4, 109) = 18.04, p < .001,$
and the interaction between applicants’ level of attractiveness
and type of job to be filled (Hypothesis 2), $F(4, 109) = 3.32, p <
.02.$ We also found a main effect for applicant’s gender, $F(4, 109)$
= 6.45, $p < .001,$ and the three-way interaction, $F(4, 109) = 9.99,$
$p < .001.$ Contrary to the prediction, the level of attractiveness x
applicant’s gender interaction (Hypothesis 3) failed to approach
significance, $F(4, 109) = 1.66, p = .16.$ Besides, we found no
main effect for the type of job, $F(4, 109) = 0.48, p = .75.$

Follow-up univariate analyses showed a consistent effect of level
of attractiveness (Hypothesis 1) across the four dependent
measures, with ratings of attractive applicants systematically over-
taking those of unattractive ones ($p < .02,$ at least), and
illustrating the benevolence of recruiters toward the former
rather than toward the latter (see Table 3).

Contrary to expectations, the attractiveness x type of job interac-
tion (Hypothesis 2) was only supported for the interpersonal
marker dependent variable, $F(1, 112) = 12.15, p < .001.$
Nevertheless, planned comparisons in each of the four measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Attractive Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Unattractive Mean (SD)</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hireability</td>
<td>4.36 (0.45)</td>
<td>3.70 (0.57)</td>
<td>48.58**</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>4.30 (1.06)</td>
<td>3.32 (1.47)</td>
<td>17.48**</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional skills</td>
<td>3.29 (0.81)</td>
<td>2.96 (0.81)</td>
<td>5.21*</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>3.56 (0.44)</td>
<td>3.80 (0.67)</td>
<td>5.39*</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05; ** p < .001$
Note: df = 1 and df error = 118
revealed a coherent pattern of results, confirming the moder-
ating role of the type of job to be filled (see Table 4). For each
measure, differences between attractive and unattractive appli-
cants were more significant in the frontline job condition than in
the back-office job condition. While the magnitude of these
effects varied, they were generally strong.

| Dependent variable | Frontline Job | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---|---|---|
|                    | Attractive | Unattractive | F   | η² |
| Hireability        | 4.45 (0.47) | 3.78 (0.41) | 32.75*** | .22 |
| Interpersonal skills | 4.70 (0.74) | 2.96 (1.67) | 29.69*** | .20 |
| Professional skills | 3.41 (0.98) | 2.91 (0.69) | 5.60** | .04 |
| Trustworthiness    | 3.57 (0.41) | 3.89 (0.79) | 4.83* | .04 |

| Dependent variable | Back-office Job | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|---|---|---|
|                    | Attractive | Unattractive | F   | η² |
| Hireability        | 4.43 (0.43) | 3.88 (0.70) | 16.86*** | .13 |
| Interpersonal skills | 3.90 (1.19) | 3.67 (1.17) | 0.48 | .000 |
| Professional skills | 3.18 (0.58) | 2.99 (0.92) | 0.72 | .000 |
| Trustworthiness    | (0.47) | (0.55) | 1.17 | .000 |

* p < .05. ** p < .02. *** p < .001
Note: df = 1 and df error = 116. For each dependent variable, planned contrasts comparing
the attractive and unattractive targets within each type of job condition were conducted.

Discussion

We designed this research to address the role that attractiveness
plays in selection decisions as a function of the type of jobs to be
filled and the gender of applicants, as well as the way attrac-
tiveness bias is implicitly echoed through the recruiters’ discourse.
Overall, the results on the MANOVA supported the two main
hypotheses. As outlined in Hypothesis 1, both recommendation
and discursive ratings confirmed that being attractive is a
consistent advantage in the recruitment process. The focus on
the discourse content corroborated the effectiveness of the
“what is beautiful is good” stereotype. Besides, discursive analysis
tended to provide support to the folk belief that attractiveness
and personality-like traits, previously noticed, go hand in hand.

Results also indicated that the effect of attractiveness in recruit-
ment varied according to the type of job to be filled (Hypothesis
2). As predicted, attractiveness is a more determining factor in
frontline jobs. In such jobs, employees convey the images and values of their company. Thus, the recruiters’ preference would go to those whose level of attractiveness and whose pleasant and reassuring abilities can foster sales and encourage the customers to adhere. By contrast, it appears that being good-looking is a marginal criterion for back-office positions. Therefore, attractiveness discrimination is less likely to occur during the selection process for this type of occupation.

It is worth to note that the testing of Hypothesis 3 was disputable. Indeed, the pilot study clearly showed that the material utilized was not adapted to conduct a fair test of this hypothesis, as the difference of attractiveness was more pronounced for female than for male targets (see Table 1). Besides, although not predicted, the three-way interaction effect opens the door to future investigations and might nuance the presumed interplay between the attractiveness and the gender of the applicants.

As a whole, this research highlights the mechanism of discrimination attached to the attractiveness criteria, its pernicious effects, and the necessity to address them (Dipboye, 1985; Watkins & Johnston, 2000) through legal, educational, and pragmatic means (e.g., supplying recruiters with clear guidelines for recruitment). Next, it shows that the attractiveness bias can be moderated. Last, it sheds light on the role played by language to convey and maintain prejudices. Concretely, the discourse analysis seems to be a valuable complement to recommendations ratings as it can help capturing the ingrained beliefs of individuals in settings endowed with non-discrimination policies. Having access to both explicit and implicit attitudes enables a more synoptic view of individual attitudes and helps identifying the nature and extent of the rhetorical strategies that are used to accommodate non-standardized attitudes with existing legal constraints.

Our study has limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, the recruitment process was fictitious and artificial. Therefore, participants may have found it difficult to engage fully in the selection process. Second, the gender of the recruiters was not considered as an independent variable, despite the suggestion that the concern of attractiveness varies according to the gender of individuals. A third limitation is about the selection
process itself. Previous studies have demonstrated that depending on the nature of the selection process (telephone interview, face-to-face, assessment of applications files, assessment centers), recruiters may behave differently (Raza & Carpenter, 1987; Silvester, Anderson, Haddleton, Cunningham-Snell, & Gibb, 2000). A final question concerns the fact that the level of expertise of the recruiters has not been taken into account. As it has been showed in previous works, attractiveness has more influence on the judgment of less experienced recruiters than on more experienced recruiters (Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996; Raza & Carpenter, 1987). It would be useful to examine the workings of the attractiveness effect with respect to these limiting factors.

References


Appendix 1

*Excerpts of written justifications about applicants*

**Attractive female applicant (N° 42) applying for a job requiring contact with public:**

“According to the résumé submitted, I think that this applicant fits best the requirements for the job of salesperson in the mobile phone sector. Considering the content of the résumé, I notice that this applicant is well experienced in the sales field. She has already performed this type of job elsewhere. The applicant has skills to be a good salesperson: she is welcoming, supportive with the customers and she masters stock control and computing. After spending a year in England, she is fluent in English. At last, I think that she is dynamic, sporty and has a team spirit. I think that this applicant must be recommended for a last stage interview to better evaluate her motivation for the job to be filled. After the interview, I think that a fixed-term contract must be proposed in order to assess her abilities in this field. Then, if the trial period is conclusive, she will be offered a permanent employment contract”.

**Unattractive male applicant (N° 45) applying for a job requiring contact with public:**

“This applicant has an advanced technician certificate in the sales field. He is experienced in the mobile phone sector, so he is well qualified. Moreover, his youthfulness can be an asset in order to boost the team. Besides, his fluency in English is an advantage. However we cannot rely on his résumé, that is why a face to face interview is required in order to assess his competences, his motivation, his dynamism and his physical appearance. It is only at the end of this process that we will know if he looks the part or not”.