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The Positive Impact of Recruiter Interpersonal Sensitivity on Hiring Gender-Occupation
Incongruent Applicants

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Abstract

Gender-occupational stereotypes that recruiters harbor towards male and female applicants still exist. However, there might be individual differences in recruiters that account for more or less stereotyping when facing male and female applicants who do not correspond to the attributes of the job opening (e.g., male-typical vs. female typical job). In the present study we tested whether recruiters high on interpersonal sensitivity are more likely to hire gender-occupational incongruent applicants. Seventy-three participants in the role of a recruiter conducted a job interview with either a gender-occupational incongruent (woman applying for a male-typical job or man applying for a female-typical job) or a gender-occupational congruent applicant. Results showed that the likelihood of hiring a gender-occupation incongruent applicant increased the more the recruiter was interpersonally sensitive whereas interpersonal sensitivity did not affect hiring decision regarding gender-occupation congruent applicants.

Keywords: Interpersonal sensitivity, job interview, gender-occupational stereotypes, information processing

The Positive Impact of Recruiter Interpersonal Sensitivity on Hiring Gender-Occupation Incongruent Applicants

Recruiters are not immune to stereotypes and stereotypes can affect recruiters' hiring decisions (e.g., Anderson & Shackleton, 1990; Cohen & Bunker, 1975; Przygodzki-Lionet, Olivier, & Desrumaux, 2010). Especially, the effect of gender stereotypes on hiring decisions is well documented. Women are in most cases still less likely to be hired for male-typical jobs and men's chances to be considered for female-typical jobs are also still reduced (e.g., Cohen & Bunker, 1975; Przygodzki-Lionet et al., 2010). This can be explained by the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983) postulating that unfavorable hiring decisions are based on the incongruity between the attributes of the applicant and the "perceived nature of the job requirements" (Przygodzki-Lionet et al., 2010, p.53). When stereotypically expected characteristics of woman (e.g., caring, other-oriented) are not congruent with characteristics of a given job (e.g., dominant, competitive), the female applicant for that job will less likely be hired because the gender-occupation incongruity leads to a so-called backlash effect (reprisals for being perceived as counter-stereotypically) (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001).

Given how widespread gender-occupational stereotypes are, there is astonishingly little research addressing how they can be overcome on the part of the recruiter. Who are the recruiters whose hiring decisions are less influenced by commonly held gender stereotypes? The goal of the present study was to investigate whether the degree of recruiter interpersonal sensitivity – the skill to correctly infer others' traits and states (Hall & Bernieri, 2001) – affects the extent to which a recruiter hires women and men for gender-incongruent jobs.

Many jobs are associated with specific gender stereotypical expectations about the characteristics of the job holder. Typical *male* jobs are accountant, package material handler, or security guard. Typical *female* jobs are sales person, assembly worker, or receptionist (Athey & Hautaluoma, 1994; Buttner & McEnally, 1996). Gender-occupational stereotypes can result in women being less likely hired than men when applying for male-typical jobs and vice versa. Indeed, research shows that male applicants are less likely hired for female-typical jobs and female applicants are less favorably evaluated when applying for male-typical jobs (Cohen & Bunker, 1975; Przygodzki-Lionet et al., 2010; Reinhard, Schindler, Stahlberg, Messner, & Mucha, 2011). Although the majority of the research seems to point to such a backlash effect, the findings are not unequivocal. Sharp and Post (1980) showed that female and male applicants were not less likely hired for gender-incongruent jobs. Maybe the differences among the studies come from differences in the recruiters. Some recruiters might be more prone to stereotyping than others.

People who have a tendency to stereotype others tend to engage in quick evaluations of others (i.e., high need to evaluate) and do not put much effort in wanting to understand and reflect on the world around them including the social interaction partners (i.e., low need for cognition)(Carter, Hall, Carney, & Rosip, 2006). Interpersonally sensitive individuals, on the contrary, are people who endorse cognitive complexity (Davis & Kraus, 1997). Typically, stereotyping and interpersonal sensitivity are seen as opposing constructs. Accurate assessments of others necessitates a cognitive engagement and effort resulting in a more deliberate information processing which is opposite to the more automatic information processing common in stereotypical assessment of others (Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999).

Recruiter interpersonal sensitivity, we assume, works to protect against the commonly observed backlash effect when confronted with gender-occupation incongruent applicants. We hypothesize that when gender-occupational stereotypes are violated by women applying for male-typical jobs or by men applying for female-typical jobs, the hiring decision becomes more favorable, the more interpersonally sensitive the recruiter is. In a situation of gender-occupation incongruity, interpersonal sensitivity makes the recruiters less prone to stereotyping, which is what we call the buffer effect of interpersonal sensitivity. Interpersonal sensitivity can prevent stereotyping because it might result in more deliberate cognitive processing and/or increased motivation or effort in processing cues from others. Conversely, in a situation of gender-occupation congruent applicants, we predict interpersonal sensitivity not to affect hiring. When no stereotypes are violated, interpersonal sensitivity has nothing to “act upon” and does therefore not affect recruiter decision making.

Recruiter interpersonal sensitivity has gained limited research attention. Recruiters are accurate at assessing applicants’ personality traits based on the applicants’ CVs (Cole, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 2009; Cole, Feild, & Stafford, 2005; Schmid Mast, Frauendorfer, & Sutter, 2013) or on excerpts of applicants’ job interviews (Schmid Mast, Bangerter, Bulliard, & Aerni, 2011). Hilliard and colleagues (2009) found that participants who scored high on social skills evaluated applicants more correctly with respect to the applicants’ personality than did raters with low social skill scores. In the present study, we are interested in *individual differences* among recruiters with respect to interpersonal sensitivity and how these differences influence stereotyping toward gender-occupational incongruent applicants.

Focusing on recruiter interpersonal sensitivity is a promising avenue because there is pronounced variability among individuals in their levels of interpersonal sensitivity (Bernieri, 2001) and because interpersonal sensitivity is a skill that can be learned (for a review see Hartigan, 2012). This means that if our prediction is verified, recruiters low in interpersonal sensitivity can be trained in this particular skill to reduce the influence of gender-occupational stereotypes in their hiring decisions.

The present study

We investigated whether increased interpersonal sensitivity relates to greater likelihood of hiring members of stereotype-incongruent groups. In the current study, we use a sales and an accountant job. Salespeople are seen as being more socially competent and extraverted and accountants are rated as being less sociable and more persistent (Brown & Campion, 1994; Jackson, Peacock, & Holden, 1982). Sales therefore corresponds rather to female stereotypes (e.g., interpersonal skills and extraversion), whereas accounting is rather related to male stereotypes (e.g., math ability and less sociability). Indeed, male applicants were more likely to be hired for a job in accounting than were female applicants and female applicants were more likely to be hired for a job in sales than were male applicants (Buttner & McEnally, 1996).

To ensure that our participants perceived the jobs in the intended way, we pretested whether sales and accounting are indeed seen as a more female or male typical job, respectively. Twelve participants (6 male, 6 female) were asked to rate different jobs such as sales, accounting, custodial worker, and production scheduler (the last two jobs served as fillers; the literature reports them as gender neutral) (Athey & Hautaluoma, 1994) on masculinity/femininity on a scale ranging from 1 (*male*) to 5 (*female*) with 3 indicating

neither male nor female. Sales was perceived as being significantly more feminine ($M = 3.85$, $t(11) = 3.98$, $p = .002$, statistical comparison with the gender-neutral midpoint of the scale, 3) and accounting as being significantly more masculine ($M = 2.45$, $t(11) = 3.25$, $p = .008$).

We used immersive virtual environment, a highly standardized method enabling us to keep the applicant behavior constant across all conditions so that the variance in the dependent variable can solely be explained by the differences in the participants' (recruiters') behavior and is not confounded with the individual differences in the behavior of the applicant. .

Method

Participants

Seventy-three participants (42 females, 31 males, mean age 26 years, $SD = 9.88$) were recruited on two university campuses in the French speaking part of Switzerland. The majority of the participants (77%) were master or bachelor students of different domains (e.g., psychology, sociology, or geology) and the rest were employees (e.g., teachers, engineers, or nurses). Participants were either approached by a research assistant or they were contacted via email (participant pool list of our department). Each participant obtained a lottery ticket (price of the ticket 2 US\$) with which they could gain prizes up to 1'000 US\$.

Material and Measures

The virtual world. Immersive Virtual Environmental Technology (IVET) immerses participants in a physical and social environment in which the immersed participant can interact with human avatars. IVET has been applied and validated for different domains of

psychological research (Blascovich et al., 2002a; Blascovich et al., 2002b). The participant wears a head-mounted-display (HMD) through which he/she perceives the virtual world and is able to move and look around in the virtual world quite similarly to the real world. IVET therefore provides a highly ecologically valid social interaction environment. Furthermore, it enables the experimenter to control for factors, which are uncontrollable in real life. For instance, the behavior (e.g., verbal and nonverbal) of the social interaction partner (the human avatar in IVET) is always the same because it corresponds to a preset computer algorithm.

Participants were in the role of the recruiter, interviewing a job applicant (a human avatar) in a virtual office space (Figure 1). We programmed the human avatar to answer four questions that the recruiter (participant) was instructed to ask the applicant (described in more detail below).

Interpersonal sensitivity. The short version of the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity test (PONS; Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979) is a 27-min video containing 40 visual segments with no sound, each lasting about 2 sec. The scenes contain a Caucasian woman expressing different scenarios with her face and body. The test-taker chooses among 2 answer alternatives the one that he/she thinks is correct (e.g., returning a faulty item to the store or expressing motherly love). The correct answer is the one that the actress intended to display. The correct answers are summed up ($M = 30.00$, $SD = 2.53$).

Perceived applicant attractiveness. Applicant attractiveness is a strong predictor of the intended likelihood of hiring (e.g., Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003; Langlois et al., 2000). To control for how attractive recruiters perceived applicants to be, we assessed perceived attractiveness of the applicant with the following adjectives: *attractive*, *likable*,

friendly, *appealing*, and *disagreeable* (reversed adjective), each on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The scores on the 5 adjectives were averaged and higher numbers indicate more perceived attractiveness (Cronbach's alpha = .82, $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.57$).

Intended likelihood of hiring. To what degree the recruiter intended to hire the (virtual) applicant was measured with four items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*): “Would you hire this applicant for the job opening?”, “Do you find it realistic to hire this applicant based on the job interview you conducted?”, “Would you reject this applicant for the job opening?” (reversed item), and “Do you find it realistic to reject the applicant based on the job interview you conducted?” (reversed item). The scores were averaged and higher numbers indicate greater intended likelihood of hiring (Cronbach's alpha = .79, $M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.85$).

Procedure

First, participants performed the PONS (Rosenthal et al., 1979). They were then told that they will take on the role of a recruiter and interview a job applicant (human avatar). The applicant was either applying for a sales or an accounting opening and was either male or female. The design was a 2 (job domain: sales vs. accounting) x 2 (applicant gender) between-subjects design with random assignment of participants to one of the four conditions.

Participants were informed that they would interview a job applicant with four questions to be asked: 1. “Why do you think we should hire you for this job?”, 2. “Could you give me an example illustrating your sense of responsibility?”, 3. “Could you give me an example showing how you mastered a stressful situation?”, and 4. “Could you give me

an example showing that you are able to set priorities in terms of your different tasks at work?” Participants were told not only to ask each of these questions but also to elaborate on each of them and to add information and to make the job interview as similar as possible to a real job interview. Participants were given 5 min to prepare the interview. Then, participants entered the virtual world. In front of them was a human avatar standing next to a wall (Figure 2). The participant was instructed to welcome the applicant and then to start asking the first question. The answers of the applicant (human avatar) were identical in all conditions with reference to either sales or accounting. The answers were preregistered and activated via key strike by the experimenter. They were constructed to promote a positive picture of the applicant without being too brilliant to prevent a ceiling effect (the applicant being so perfect that everybody would want to hire him or her). The goal was to obtain enough variance in the intended likelihood of hiring variable. After the job interview (average duration of 4 min), participants completed the intended likelihood of hiring measure and reported how attractive they perceived the applicant to be. Participants were debriefed, given a lottery ticket, and thanked.

Results

Because recruiter gender and perceived applicant attractiveness influence the hiring decision process (e.g., Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2004; Langlois et al., 2000; Przygodzki-Lionet et al., 2010), we tested whether recruiter gender and applicant attractiveness affected the intended likelihood of hiring (to either exclude these two variables from the main analysis if they are unrelated - to maintain more statistical power of the analysis - or to control for them if they are related). We conducted a multiple regression analysis, regressing intended likelihood of hiring on recruiter gender (dummy coded: male = 0, female = 1) and on

perceived applicant attractiveness (mean centered). Results showed that recruiter gender did not have an impact on the intended likelihood of hiring ($b = -.03$, $SE = .18$, $p = .862$). However, perceived applicant attractiveness affected the intended likelihood of hiring significantly ($b = .67$, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$). Based on these results, recruiter gender was not included in our main analysis, whereas perceived applicant attractiveness was included as a covariate¹.

We collapsed the female-accounting and the male-sales conditions to obtain the gender-occupation incongruent condition because the results did not differ between the two conditions. Similarly, we combined the female-sales and the male-accounting conditions into the gender-occupation congruent condition. Table 1 shows the correlation matrix of all the variables separately for the gender-occupation congruent and incongruent conditions. The percentage of employees present in the sample did not differ between the congruent (22%) and the incongruent (25%) conditions.

We conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis with recruiter interpersonal sensitivity (mean centered) and gender-occupational congruency (dummy coded: incongruence = 0, congruency = 1) as predictors in the first step (Aiken & West, 1991). Moreover, we included perceived attractiveness as a control variable. In the second step, we added the two-way interaction between recruiter interpersonal sensitivity and gender-occupational congruency. Results of the second step show a significant recruiter interpersonal sensitivity main effect and a significant two-way interaction between recruiter

¹ Note that there was no interaction between recruiter gender (dummy coded: male = 0, female = 1) and applicant gender (dummy coded: male = 0, female = 1), $b = -.30$, $SE = .61$, $p = .622$.

interpersonal sensitivity and gender-occupational congruency (Table 2). There was no significant gender-occupational congruency main effect. To better understand the two-way interaction, we analyzed the simple slopes of the two conditions separately (Figure 3).

For gender-occupational incongruent applicants, the simple slope was positive and significantly different from 0, $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .001$ (Table 2): the more interpersonally sensitive the recruiters were, the more likely they hired the (gender-occupational incongruent) applicants. For gender-occupational congruent applicants, the simple slope was negative but not significantly different from 0, $b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .608$. When male and female applicants applied for jobs they are expected to apply for, recruiter interpersonal sensitivity did not influence the recruiter's hiring decision.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate whether when confronted with gender-occupation incongruent applicants, the more a recruiter is interpersonally sensitive, the more likely he/she hires those applicants. This was pitted against a situation in which gender role expectations and job expectations were congruent. In this case, we did not expect recruiter interpersonal sensitivity to influence hiring decisions. Our results confirm these predictions: Increased recruiter interpersonal sensitivity was related to greater likelihood of hiring members of stereotype-incongruent groups but recruiter interpersonal sensitivity was unrelated to hiring decisions of stereotype-congruent group members. In other words, a backlash effect (e.g., Rudman & Glick, 2001) occurred for recruiters who were less interpersonally sensitive when confronted with gender-occupational incongruent applicants. Thus, recruiters low on interpersonal sensitivity behaved according to common stereotypes.

The present results fall in line with previous research showing that people high in perspective-taking or empathy (constructs that are related to interpersonal sensitivity) stereotype less than people with lower scores on these constructs (Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Interpersonal sensitivity does not only seem to be the opposite of stereotyping (Fiske et al., 1999), it can prevent or *buffer* stereotyping. In a situation in which stereotypes are salient and activated (when facing gender-occupation incongruent applicants), increased interpersonal sensitivity is related to increased likelihood of hiring, most likely because more interpersonally sensitive people try to form accurate impressions of others, put effort into the task, and/or rely less on quick and automatic stereotypical judgments.

It is possible that personality characteristics related to interpersonal sensitivity explain why more sensitive recruiters were less under the influence of the gender-occupational stereotype when taking a hiring decision. Interpersonal sensitivity is related to extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness (see meta-analytical review Hall, Andrzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009). Thus, maybe interpersonally sensitive recruiters are more conscientious and therefore more motivated to overcome biased decisions. Future research might want to investigate whether cognitive and/or motivational factors explain the buffer effect.

We used the PONS to assess recruiter interpersonal sensitivity. Research suggests that people who perform well on the PONS use local information processing style (i.e., deliberate information search focusing on individual features)(Schmid, Schmid Mast, Bombari, & Mast, 2011). Maybe if we used a different test to assess interpersonal sensitivity, the results might have come out less strongly because other interpersonal

sensitivity tests might favor a more global information processing style (Bombari et al., in press.).

The goal for the recruiter is to find the best person for the job. A recruiter missing a highly qualified applicant because he/she did not fulfill the recruiter's stereotypical expectations is costly for the company. This is why recruiter training programs are of great importance. Our results suggest that recruiter interpersonal sensitivity might be crucial to overcome gender-stereotypes contributing to ongoing discussions about how to resolve stereotype usage in the work and organizational context. Brief (2008) argues that self-regulating training might be successful in reducing stereotype usage because it focuses on the refinement of self-observation skills in social interactions. Thus, training on the self, such as improving recruiter's interpersonal sensitivity could be an important asset in recruiter training (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000).

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Table 1

Correlation Matrix with Variables Included in the Study

Measure	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Intended likelihood of hiring	-			3.76/3.47	0.79/0.89
2. Perceived applicant attractiveness	.33*/.51**	-		3.97/3.74	0.48/0.62
3. Recruiter IS	-.13/.48**	-.13/.04	-	30.19/29.69	2.46/2.61
4. Recruiter gender	-.17/-.06	-.32+/-08	.15/-.07	1.62/1.53	0.49/0.51

Note. Values reported before the slash are correlation coefficients for the gender-occupational *congruent* condition and values reported after the slash are correlation coefficients for the gender-occupational *incongruent* condition. Recruiter gender was coded as follows: 1=male, 2=female.

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses with Recruiter Interpersonal Sensitivity, Gender-Occupational Congruency Predicting Intended Likelihood of Hiring with the following Dummy Coding: 0=Incongruence, 1=Congruency (Perceived Applicant Attractiveness Included as a Control Variable)

Variable	Step 1		Step 2	
	B (SE B)	β	B (SE B)	β
Perceived applicant attractiveness	0.66 (0.16)	.44***	0.63 (0.15)	.42***
Recruiter IS	0.07 (0.04)	.21*	0.16 (0.05)	.47***
Gender-occupational congruency	0.11 (0.18)	.06	0.17 (0.17)	.10
Recruiter IS X Gender-occupational congruency			-0.18 (0.07)	-.38**

Note. $\Delta R^2 = .07$ for Step 2 ($p = .009$). Recruiter IS means recruiter interpersonal sensitivity.

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Office Space Presented in the Virtual World (IVET)

Figure 2. Male and Female Applicant Presented in the Virtual World (IVET).

Figure 3. Intended Likelihood of Hiring by Level of Recruiter Interpersonal Sensitivity (Recruiter IS) and Gender-Occupational Congruency





