Bringing Sexy In: The Effect of Gender and Perceived Attractiveness on Hypothetical Admissions Decision

We studied the effect of attractiveness of mock candidates to medical school. Using evolutionary theory, we highlight the impact of attractiveness on rater cognition when assessing personal qualities.

Medical school selection relies on faculty and student raters to make judgments on the suitability of applicants. Several studies have shown cognitive biases may influence these judgments (e.g., the physical attractiveness of applicants may affect raters' evaluations). In an experimental study, we manipulated mock applicant profiles for attractiveness to examine the impact of applicant attractiveness, gender, and rater characteristics.

Methods

Brief applicant profiles (short biographies and responses to two short answer questions on motivation and ethics) were created and then validated by independent raters (n=21) to establish equivalency. Four profiles were then attached to face portraits (2 female, 2 male). Faces were manipulated for attractiveness using a previously validated protocol. Complete profiles were distributed in an online survey to medical students and faculty for rating. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two manipulations each showing different attractiveness manipulations. We analyzed the relationship between profile attractiveness and gender against rater gender and type (faculty vs. students).

Results

One-hundred and twenty five raters completed the study (faculty=30, non-faculty=93). We detected a significant interaction between rater gender and the gender of the profiles (F(1,119)=8.8, p<0.004) which was driven by higher ratings of female profiles by male raters. There were no differences between faculty and non-faculty raters.

Attractiveness effects were not found for profiles without pictures.

Discussion

This study builds on previous exploratory work demonstrating attractiveness effects but locates the effect to differential rating by male and female raters. We discuss social and evolutionary mechanisms for this finding as well as general methods of counteracting attractiveness and other rater biases.

Level of Audience: Mid-career

Focus of Presentation: UME

References:

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