Racial Prejudice in Hiring Practices
Jennifer L. Cotton, Michaelia Gilbert
Hanover College
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Abstract

This study looked to see what effect a racially charged name would have on participants hiring decisions. Participants were randomly assigned four job résumés which differed in the name of the applicant, with each name representing one of four major racial groups: African American, Asian American, Caucasian, and Hispanic. The résumés contained approximately equal qualifications in order to control for confounding variables. Participants used a Likert scale to rate each applicant on how likely they would be to hire the participant and how comfortable they would feel working for the particular applicant. Participants also indicated how much each applicant should be paid annually. Lastly, participants ranked the résumés from best to worst. Overall, it was found that participants only differentiated among the races significantly when rating how comfortable they would feel working for an applicant. However, there could be several explanations as to why participants were less discriminatory in other categories.
Imagine you are responsible for hiring a new employee and are interviewing two applicants who were chosen based on exemplary résumés. One applicant walks in with neatly trimmed hair, wearing a well-pressed black suit and dress shoes. The second applicant arrives with greasy hair, wearing faded jeans, a well-worn tee shirt, and sandals. Which applicant are you most likely to hire? When interviewing for a job, we tend to put extra effort into our clothing and appearance, because we generally accept the idea that one’s appearance can affect the probability that they will be hired. In fact, multiple studies have found that appearance does have an effect on hiring decisions (Forsythe, Drake, & Cox, 1985; Bardack & McAndrew, 1985; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Shannon & Stark, 2003).

However, the effect of appearance is not limited to clothing and grooming practices. Such unalterable aspects as race and sex can also affect one’s probability of being hired for a certain job (Stewart & Perlow, 2001; Espino & Franz, 2002; Andolina & Mayer, 2003; Kawahara & Van Kirk, 2004; Petersen, Saporta, & Seidel, 2005; Ziegart & Hanges, 2005; Kim & Tamborini, 2006). Although overt expressions of racism have declined over the past 35 years (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997 as cited in Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000 as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005), racial discrimination continues in modern employment decisions (Maass, Castelli, & Arcuri, 2000 as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005).

A 2001 meta-analysis by Stewart and Perlow found a variety of results concerning the effects of race consideration in hiring and college admissions decisions. While some studies showed no effect or negative effects for African Americans when race was taken into consideration. Other studies actually showed a positive effect for African Americans when race was considered. These differences can be accounted for when job type is taken into
consideration. Multiple studies have shown that although Caucasians are more likely to be hired for jobs which tend to be held by Caucasians, African Americans are more likely to be hired for jobs which are generally thought to be held by African Americans (Terpstra & Larsen, 1980 and Heilman, 1983 as cited in Stewart & Perlow, 2001). Also, in instances where Caucasians and African Americans were hired equally, the participants felt more confident with their decisions when the race of the applicant was the same as the race typically associated with the position.

A recent study with college students did not find an effect for race in hiring practices based on a face-to-face interview (Frazer & Wiersma, 2001). However, when participants were asked to recall the answers given by the applicants, African American applicants’ answers were remembered as being less intelligent than those of Caucasian applicants, despite the fact that the answers were identical. Thus, there appears to be a discrepancy between the participants’ attitudes toward African Americans and their actions regarding employment.

One phenomenon which may explain why the participants’ actions differed from their attitudes is the self-presentation bias (Dunton & Fazio, 1997 and Plant & Devine, 1998 as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). This term refers to the tendency for a person to alter their responses in order to avoid causing others to have a negative impression of them. In the Frazer and Wiersma study, participants may have decided that others would look unfavorably upon them if they would not hire a qualified African American applicant. Therefore, they altered their behavior in order to avoid negative reactions from others.

Another potential reason why the participants’ actions did not match their attitudes is that they simply were unaware of their true attitude. The majority of modern racism can be classified as aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; McConahay, 1986 and Brief, 1998 as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Aversive racism is a
term used to describe the attitudes of many people who openly endorse egalitarian views and who regard themselves as nonprejudiced, but who discriminate in “subtle, rationalizable ways” due to unconscious negative feelings and beliefs about other races. These negative feelings tend to be anxiety and fear of offending, rather than anger or dislike. Aversive racists tend not to discriminate in situations where it would be obvious to others or themselves. Rather, they tend to discriminate when bias is not obvious or when it can be rationalized on the basis of some factor other than race.

This theory is supported by studies which found that discrimination in hiring and college applications are more likely when the applicant has ambiguously strong qualifications rather than when he or she has clearly strong or clearly weak qualifications (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002 as cited in Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). When qualifications are ambiguously strong, discrimination is less obvious and can be attributed to the qualifications rather than racial prejudices.

The present study examined racial discrimination in hiring decisions when race was not obvious. Participants were presented with four résumés, each of which was associated with a name that would generally be considered to belong to either a Caucasian, African American, Asian American, or Hispanic male. The job for which the applicants were competing was that of an engineer, a job which involves a great deal of mathematical ability. Due to the fact that a common stereotype represents Asian Americans as being good at mathematics, we expected that Asian American applicants would be hired more often than applicants of other races. We also anticipated that Caucasian applicants would be hired more than African American or Hispanic applicants. In addition, we expected participants to say that they would feel more comfortable working for the Caucasian applicants than for applicants of other races.
Method

Participants

We sampled a group of 89 participants, consisting of 25 males (28.1%) and 63 females (70.8%). Originally there were 114 participants, but 25 were dropped for several reasons including the failure to indicate answers to four or more questions or because the data indicated duplicate responses from the same participant. Participants were recruited from psychology courses at a small, rural liberal arts college with several of the participants receiving extra credit from their professors for their participation. Participants were also recruited through emails to acquaintances of the researchers and through a social networking website. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 79 years of age, with an average age of 29.49 years. Participants varied in ethnicity with 84.3 percent White, 4.5 percent Black, 2.2 percent Hispanic, 1.1 percent Asian and 4.5 percent indicating other ethnicities.

Materials

The materials used for this study are four résumés and a short questionnaire that allowed the researchers to ascertain the participants’ age, race, and gender. In addition, the questionnaire contained four questions concerning the résumés which were used to assess participants’ attitudes towards individual applicants. Two of these questions were rated by participants using a one to seven Likert scale, with one (1) being very unlikely or very uncomfortable and seven (7) being most likely or very comfortable. The questions were as follows, “How likely would you be to hire this applicant?” “Would you feel comfortable working for or under this applicant?” In addition, participants were asked, “How much do you think this applicant should be paid annually if hired?” On this question, the participants were given a range of annual salaries starting at $50,000 and increasing in increments of $10,000 up to $120,000. Participants were informed that the ranges given were the average ranges for an architectural engineer.
Finally, participants were asked “How would you rank this applicant in comparison to the others?” using a one to four scale, with one (1) being the best and four (4) being the worst.

Each résumé was a standard résumé, approximately one page in length. The résumés contained the following sections: objectives, education, work experience, awards, volunteer service and references. Furthermore, the résumés were similar in design, with each having the same setup and border in order to control for biases against aesthetic appearances. However, while each résumé was similar in appearance and sub-sections, they varied slightly. The four résumés had a different male name which represented one of four racial groups: African American (Lamar Johnson), Asian American (David Yamamoto), Caucasian (Jake Wyatt), and Hispanic (Miguel Gonzalez). The names of the applicants were chosen from a list of most common names for each race compiled from similar lists from Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz (1998) and Levitt and Dubner (2005). These names were randomly assigned to each of the four standard applications, thus allowing us to have 24 race- résumé combinations. Twenty-four combinations were possible because there are 24 different orders for the four names. Furthermore, only the order of the names change, not the order of the résumés (e.g. the Michigan applicant was always first, the Kansas applicant was always second, the Pennsylvania applicant was always third and the Texas applicant was always fourth).

In addition to the differences in names atop the résumés, the places of education, work experience, awards, and volunteer service all varied slightly. The applicants had fictional contact information that varied by city and state. Each applicant attended a “state school” (Michigan State University, University of Kansas, Pennsylvania State University or Texas A&M University) in order to control for the biases that may have arose if applicants were to have attended such strongly well regarded schools such as Harvard or Yale. Each applicant
graduated from their respective school between the years 1999 and 2001, so that each had approximately the same amount of experience in the workforce. Furthermore, the places of employment were all fictional corporations where an engineer would likely be employed. Awards were also similar, consisting primarily of basic academic awards such as “Honors Graduate” or membership in an honors society. Volunteer service was also similar for each applicant with each volunteering at places such as the Metro United Way or the Boys and Girls Club of a particular community. Lastly, each applicant had two references which were fictional people of the same caliber, such as directors or managers at previous places of employment. Even though each sub-section differed slightly, they were as similar as possible so that each applicant appeared, at least on paper, to be equally qualified for the position.

Procedure

Participants were asked to log onto a website in order to partake in a research study on factors which influence hiring decisions. When participants logged onto the website they were asked to give their informed consent to participate in the study, and, once consent was obtained, participants were taken to a web page containing the research study.

The study contained a set of four job résumés to which the participant was randomly to view one of the 24 possible name- résumé combinations. Once presented with a group of résumés, the participants were asked a series of four questions relating to their opinion of the résumés. After completing these questions, participants completed demographic questions and then were taken to a debriefing page that informed them of what the researchers were actually studying, racial biases in hiring.

Results
Table 1 displays participants’ mean answer to the question “Would you feel comfortable working for or under this applicant?” These means were calculated by averaging the ratings of each participant for each applicant. A three-way within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants significantly rated their level of comfort differently across applicant race, $F(3, 258) = 2.784$, $p = .041$. As table 1 displays, participants felt significantly more comfortable working for the Hispanic applicant. A Tukey post-hoc test confirmed this significance, $F(1, 86) = 7.426$, $p = .008$.

While significance was found for levels of comfort across applicant race, there were no other significant findings in this study. Participants did not significantly differentiate among applicant race for salary allocation, $F(3, 261) = 1.334$, $p = .615$. The significance of this finding will be discussed later, as it does not follow the norm of today’s business settings. Furthermore, participants’ race did not significantly influence how participants ranked applicants in relation to each other, $F(3, 240) = 1.103$, $p = .349$.

Discussion

None of our hypotheses were supported by the results. Our results indicate that applicant race did not significantly affect the probability of hiring or the salary to be paid to the applicant. In addition, no significant effect was found for race upon the ranking of applications. These results support the idea of aversive racism in that discrimination in these decisions would be fairly obvious, at least to the participant, if not to others as well. (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; McConahay, 1986 and Brief, 1998 as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005)

However, participants did express that they would feel most comfortable working for Hispanic applicants and least comfortable working for Asian applicants. It is not surprising that
comfort was the one aspect where discrimination was seen in that it is the aspect which could most easily be explained by factors other than race. However, the discrimination was not seen in the direction in which we anticipated. It is difficult to determine why participants would be more comfortable working for Hispanic applicants than for applicants of another race, but we anticipate that it may be due to a stereotype which labels Hispanics as being laid-back and casual, thus causing less stress for their employees.

The results of this study were limited by multiple variables. For one thing, the participant sample lacked racial diversity, which reduced the extent to which these results can be generalized to other populations. In addition, the lack of racial diversity among participants made it difficult to compare the results across participant racial categories and made these tests less likely to result in significance. Due to the similarity among applications, the fact that the study was computer-based, and the minimal introduction to the hiring company, the study may have lacked sufficient experimental realism, causing results to be less likely to represent what would occur in real world situations. In addition, multiple participants made comments which either directly stated or implied that they had deduced our hypotheses.

If this study were to be replicated, it should either present more information about the position being offered and what qualities are most important to the company or should imply that the applications are actual applications of potential employees for a certain job in order to improve the experimental realism of the study.

In addition, future studies may want to choose jobs with which participants are more familiar and knowledgeable. For example, if still wishing to search for perceptions of mathematic abilities across races, a mathematics professor may be a better choice for the position being studied than an engineer. This is due to the fact that, in general, people are more familiar
with the position of professor and the qualifications required. Thus, participants would likely feel more comfortable making decisions related to this position.

Future researchers may want to develop applications that present more distinct differences, while still controlling for confounding variables. Several participants commented that the applications were too similar to make accurate decisions on which application was actually the best. Moreover, a survey or some other task could be presented prior to the applications in order to keep participants from becoming aware of the true aim of the study. As mentioned above, several participants made comments that lead us to believe that they discovered the hypotheses of our study. Such discoveries could have altered our results, due to the self-presentation bias.

Assuming our results are accurate, this study offers further evidence to support the idea of aversive racism. We should be careful not to assume that a trend toward less discrimination in hiring practices means that the prevalence of racial prejudice is also decreasing. The pervasiveness of racism cannot necessarily be determined by overt means.
References


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Figure 1: Mean participant rankings of comfort across applicant race.