

Looks do matter, according to new study: Facial disfigurements negatively impact job applicants

November 9 2011

People with birthmarks, scars and other facial disfigurements are more likely to receive poor ratings in job interviews, according to a new study by researchers at Rice University and the University of Houston.

"Discrimination Against Facially Stigmatized Applicants in Interviews: An [Eye-Tracking](#) and Face-to-Face Investigation" was published online last month in the [Journal of Applied Psychology](#) and is one of the first studies to examine how individuals with facial blemishes fare in job interviews. The findings show that interviewers recalled less information about these candidates, which negatively impacted evaluations of the applicants.

"When evaluating applicants in an interview setting, it's important to remember what they are saying," Rice Professor of Psychology Mikki Hebl said. "Our research shows if you recall less information about competent candidates because you are distracted by characteristics on their face, it decreases your overall evaluations of them."

Hebl co-authored the research paper with University of Houston professor and Rice alum Juan Madera.

The research included two studies, the first of which involved 171 undergraduate students watching a computer-mediated interview while their eye activity was tracked. After the interview, they were asked to

recall information about the candidate.

"When looking at another person during a conversation, your attention is naturally directed in a triangular pattern around the eyes and mouth," Madera said. "We tracked the amount of attention outside of this region and found that the more the interviewers attended to stigmatized features on the face, the less they remembered about the candidate's interview content, and the less memory they had about the content led to decreases in ratings of the applicant."

The second study involved face-to-face interviews between candidates who had a facial birthmark and 38 full-time managers enrolled in a part-time MBA and/or a Master of Science in a [hospitality management](#) program, all of whom had experience in interviewing applicants for their current or past staff positions.

Despite the increase in age, experience and education, the interviewers had a tough time managing their reactions to the stigma, Madera said. In fact, the effects of the stigma were actually stronger with this group, which he attributed to the face-to-face interview setting.

"It just shows that despite maturity and experience levels, it is still a natural human reaction to react negatively to facial stigma," Madera said.

Both Hebl and Madera hope the research will raise awareness about this form of workplace discrimination.

"The bottom line is that how your face looks can significantly influence the success of an interview," Hebl said. "There have been many studies showing that specific groups of people are discriminated against in the workplace, but this study takes it a step further, showing why it happens. The allocation of attention away from memory for the interview content explains this."

More information: Study: "Discrimination Against Facially Stigmatized Applicants in Interviews: An Eye-Tracking and Face-to-Face Investigation": psycnet.apa.org/psycarticles/2011-23754-001.pdf

Provided by Rice University

Citation: Looks do matter, according to new study: Facial disfigurements negatively impact job applicants (2011, November 9) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-11-facial-disfigurements-negatively-impact-job.html>

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