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Short communication

Why does height matter in hiring?

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ABSTRACT

Previous research shows the existence of a height premium in the workplace with tall individuals receiving more benefits across several domains (e.g., earnings) relative to short people. The current study probes deeper into the height premium by focusing on the specific favorable traits, attributes, and abilities tall individuals are presumed to have, ultimately giving these individuals an advantage in hiring. In an experiment, we made a male job applicant taller or shorter by digitally manipulating photographs, and attached these to job applications that were evaluated by professional recruiters. We find that in the context of hiring a project leader, the height premium consists of increased perceptions of the candidate's general competence, specific job competency (including employability), and physical health, whereas warmth and physical attractiveness seem to matter less. Interestingly, physical height predicted recruiters' hiring intentions even when statistically controlling for competence, warmth, health, and attractiveness.

1. Introduction

Accumulated research evidence suggests that there is a height premium in the workplace with tall people being more likely to receive various types of benefits compared with short people (see Judge and Cable, 2004, for a meta-analysis). Specifically, tall people are earning higher salaries, are more likely to hold high-status jobs, and to ascend into leadership positions. Although height has been related to actual job performance, research shows that height exerts a stronger effect on subjective evaluations of performance (Judge and Cable, 2004). Indeed, in a now classical study, when recruiters were asked to make a hypothetical hiring decision between two equally qualified job candidates, they chose the taller candidate (Kurtz, 1969).

Why do tall people receive such benefits? Specifically, what favorable traits, attributes, and abilities are tall people presumed to have that put them ahead in their careers? Are there any key dimensions on which tall people are perceived more favorably relative to short people, or are tall people perceived more favorably across the board?A simple model based on the halo error (Thorndike, 1920) would suggest that if employers view tall applicants favorably with respect to some personality dimension, they tend to do so with respect to numerous other dimensions as well. Recently, however, research on the Stereotype Content Model (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick, 2007) suggests that stereotypes are not necessarily uniformly positive or negative but rather consist of a mixture of warmth- and competence-related traits. Warmth speaks to the social group's functioning in social situations whereas competence speaks to its functioning at tasks. For example, Asians and Jews tend to be positively stereotyped on competence, but negatively on warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick, 2007), resulting in both negative and positive consequences. This distinction is important when it comes to height and hiring as, for example, short individuals should have much to win from crafting their résumés in a way that counteracts the stereotype. If short people are stereotyped as low with respect to competence but not to warmth, there is no need for them to try to create an extremely friendly impression in the personal letter. Rather, they should make sure to emphasize their competence-related abilities (e.g., productivity) instead.

From the animal kingdom to human beings, physical size has served as a proxy for power, status, and respect (Judge and Cable, 2004). Because power, status, and respect help individuals achieve their goals, i.e., the hallmark of competence (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick, 2007), tallness should be linked to perceptions of competence. Indeed, research shows that tall people are perceived to be more intelligent, dominant, and "leader-like" (e.g., Blaker et al., 2013; Jackson and Ervin, 1992).

The link between height and warmth is less clear, however. One the one hand, powerful people are typically perceived as psychologically distant (Trope and Liberman, 2003), less likely to understand other people's perspectives (Galinsky et al., 2006),

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and less prone to express empathic concern (Woltin et al., 2011). Because tall individual are more likely to be assigned traits that signal power (e.g., dominance; Blaker et al., 2013), they may be perceived as colder relative to their shorter counterparts. If this is true, we would have a mixed stereotype where tall people are perceived as competent (+) but cold (−). On the other hand, a halo effect model predicts that tall people would be evaluated more positively across the board, insofar as tallness is a desirable characteristic in society. Indeed, research shows that warmth and competence ratings typically correlate positively, unless two targets are explicitly or implicitly compared, in which case these ratings tend to be negatively correlated (see Abele and Wojciszke, in press, for an overview). As for the actual research evidence concerning the specific link between height and warmth, it has been inconsistent (see e.g., Jackson and Ervin, 1992), warranting further scrutiny.Moving beyond warmth and competence, tall people are generally considered to be more physically attractive (Martel and Biller, 1987). Because attractive people are perceived as more competent (Jackson, Hunter, and Hodge, 1995) and are more likely to be hired than unattractive people (Marlowe et al., 1996), attractiveness may play a role in the height premium.

Finally, research suggests that tall individuals are perceived to be more physically healthy than short individuals (Blaker et al., 2013). Because poor physical health predicts absenteeism (Farrell and Stamm, 1988) and lower productivity (Ford et al., 2011) short people might face yet another disadvantage when seeking employment.

1.1. The current research

The overall aim of the current research is to probe further into the height premium, examining how this premium applies to male job applicants. The level of analysis concerns the favorable traits, attributes, and abilities (henceforth dimensions) that comprise the height premium in hiring. Based on previous research and theorizing, we have identified the following potential dimensions along which tall and short job applicants are likely to be perceived and evaluated differently: warmth, competence, specific job competency, leadership, physical health, and attractiveness.

The current research contributes to the extant literature in several ways. It extends previous person perception research (e.g., Chu and Geary, 2005; Jackson and Ervin, 1992) on the relationship between height and general character perception to the specific domain of hiring. In doing so, it also tests for height bias in a context where evaluators have more individuating information (conveyed through CVs and personal letters) about the target individuals. Because people rely less on stereotypes when the amount of individuating information increases (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990), the current study constitutes a more conservative test of height bias as compared to previous research where individuating information has been scarce (cf. Blaker et al., 2013; Chu and Geary, 2005; Jackson and Ervin, 1992).

Moreover, because most prior studies have used university students as research participants, it is not clear whether professional recruiters also demonstrate height bias with respect to the aforementioned dimensions. Although Judge and Cable's (2004) meta-analysis indeed suggests that employers exhibit height bias (e.g., in salary allocations) too, the evidence is mainly based on register data. Such correlational findings have limitations, of course, as it is possible that the correlation between height and the studied outcome variable (e.g., earnings) is caused by an unobserved third variable (e.g., actual social or negotiation skills) which the register data do not permit statistical control for. To address these limitations, we conducted a highly controlled experiment on professional recruiters. Importantly, the current experiment examines *true* height bias because the tall and short job candidates had identical personalities and credentials as conveyed in their personal letters and CVs.

Regarding the dimensions to be examined in the current research, perceived competence, specific job competency, and leadership abilities, of course, have considerable overlap, and the magnitude of this overlap will depend on the specific context. In this study, we focus on a position as a project leader. Consequently, leadership ability becomes an integral part of the job competencies. However, we can still differentiate between competence and job competency. The former deals with whether a candidate is generally competent, whereas the latter deals with if the candidate has the specific competencies required for the job. To illustrate, Bill Gates and Stephen Hawking could not simply switch jobs although both are extremely competent in a general sense. Furthermore, physical health and attractiveness are of course related to some extent, but since it is easy to come up with instances when physically healthy people are not very attractive, these two variables should be examined separately.

2. Method

2.1. Participants, materials and procedure

Sixty recruiters ($M = 34$ years; 63% females), employed at a recruitment firm in a large Swedish city participated in the experiment. They were asked by a colleague (who unbeknownst to them was also the experimenter) if they could help her with the evaluation of a job candidate for research purposes. The recruiters were informed that a male applicant had applied for a project leader position at a large company where he would be responsible for a considerable budget and some staff. They were then given the job application which consisted of a personal letter and a CV. The personal letter also included a photograph of the applicant.

We manipulated the physical height of the applicant in the photo by using imaging software. To facilitate perceptions of the applicant's height, he was standing in a doorpost. We constructed one tall and one short version of the applicant. They were identical in all respects except for the applicants' height. The material was pretested on 83 students, confirming that the tall applicant would be perceived as significantly taller than the short applicant.

The recruiters were randomly assigned to either the tall or short experimental condition by the experimenter (who was blind to conditions). They evaluated the candidate on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, and 7 = *to a very high extent*) with respect to the following dimensions: competence (talent, skill, intelligence; $\alpha = .89$), warmth (likeability, friendliness, honesty; $\alpha = .86$), health (physical fitness, health; $\alpha = .78$), attractiveness (physical attractiveness), and job competency (task-related competence, role fitness, leadership potential). As an assessment of the job candidate's overall job competency, they reported how willing (1 = *definitely not*, and 7 = *definitely yes*) they would be to hire the job candidate for the specific position as a project leader, had they been handling the recruitment alone ($\alpha = .86$ for the job competency scale). As mentioned previously, we chose to measure these dimensions because they have been theoretically and empirically linked to physical stature in prior research.[2]

Finally, they were asked to estimate the height (in cm) of the candidate (manipulation check). The reason why we measured

[2] The results from a factor analysis supported the dimensionality of our measured variables. However, because conducting a factor analysis on sample sizes of the current magnitude might yield unreliable results, the results from this analysis should be interpreted cautiously (see Tabachnick and Fidell, 2006).