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The effect of facial piercing on perceptions of job applicants

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how facial piercings affect impressions of a job candidate and whether these impressions are affected by gender or job type. Findings, based on two samples, indicate that individuals with piercings were viewed as less suitable job applicants and as possessing more negative characteristics than those with no piercings. These negative impressions were pervasive and unaffected by either applicant gender or job type. Specifically, using students, we found that pierced individuals were perceived as more extraverted, less agreeable, less conscientious, less attractive (from a social and task perspective), of more questionable character, less competent, less sociable, and not as trustworthy, and these imputed characteristics mediated the piercing—job suitability relationship. The results of a second sample of working adults found pierced applicants as less conscientious, less open, having less character, being more sociable, and being less trustworthy, with most of the imputed characteristics mediating the piercing—job suitability relationship.

The old adage goes, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression", and this statement is particularly pertinent in employment contexts. Selection research is replete with a number of interviewer biases, which can have a deleterious effect on job applicants (e.g., Bragger, Kutcher, Morgan, & Firth, 2002; Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981; Davison & Burke, 2000; Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975; Dougherty, Turban, & Calender, 1994; Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, 1986; Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale, & Spring, 1994). Most research has focused on applicant characteristics such as gender, attractiveness, and obesity. However, recruiters and interviewers are now faced with new challenges and potential biases in the form of applicant body modifications (e.g., piercings and tattoos).

The trend in the U.S., especially among younger people (i.e., men and women under 40) is that body modifications such as tattoos and piercings (i.e., those outside the ear lobe) are becoming increasingly common. Despite finding that 44% of managers have tattoos or piercings other than in their ears, 42% of them said they would have a lower opinion of a person due to visible body art (Chen, 2001). Almost 82% of business people in one survey indicated they would not hire anyone with visible tattoos or body piercings (Dale, Bevill, Roach, Glasgow, & Bracy, 2009) and 87% of human resource respondents in another indicated a negative attitude toward visible tattoos and piercings on job candidates (Swanger, 2006).

However, work by Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler (2007a), Wohlrab et al. (2007b) suggests that attitudes toward body modifications may be changing. For example, a survey of 1412 students reported that 47% believed that having a visible piercing (or tattoos) would not hinder their ability to get a job (Dale et al., 2009). This is further supported by studies on the number of people who have such body art. Laumann and Derick (2006) found that 14% of respondents in a survey of 500 people between the ages of 18 and 50 had a piercing in a body location other than their earlobe, while in a sample of 400 college students this percentage rose to almost 70% of women and 28% of men (Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007).

These figures suggest a disconnect between the behavior of young people entering the workforce (e.g., increased incidences of piercings) and the perceptions among managers/recruiters toward candidates who choose to adorn themselves with body art. As such, we examine how people with facial piercings are viewed in employment contexts. We set out to determine whether job applicants with facial piercings[1] create a stigma (Goffman, 1963) that affects how others perceive their viability as job candidates. Furthermore, we explore the why behind this stigmatizing effect by examining the nature of characteristics attributed to

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[1] While there are several regions of the body one can pierce (Stirn, 2003), we focus on facial piercings as they are the most visible.

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applicants. Finally, we assess whether this stigmatizing effect holds across job type and gender.

Specifically, this paper contributes to extant research in the following ways. First, we address a new phenomenon impacting the selection process. Drawing on stigmatization theory (Goffman, 1963), we expand Heilman's (1983) lack of fit model by examining how facial piercings can signal lack of fit through stigmatization. Second, because "fit" is important to hiring decisions and recruiters rely on a variety of applicant characteristics to judge fit (Kristof-Brown, 2000), we explore whether the lack of fit is associated with personal characteristics attributed to those with facial piercings that are different from those attributed to applicants without facial piercings. Ascertaining how something as simple as facial piercings can impact these important perceived characteristics is an important step in order to recognize possible bias. Third, we examine whether a job applicant's suitability or job fit with regard to facial piercings is, in fact, mediated by the rater's imputed characteristics.

Theory and hypotheses

Stigmatization theory

Stigmatization is a process by which certain individuals are alienated from specific types of social interactions, because they possess a certain negative characteristic. These people are devalued, because they possess an attribute that is deeply discrediting (Goffman, 1963), such as a physical deformity. This attribute, in effect, spoils the individual's overall social identity, because it runs counter to societal norms. This implies that the individual is incapable of fulfilling a particular role in social interaction and results in the individual being excluded from participation in that interaction. Although still the gold standard for explaining stigmatization, a number of other perspectives on why this happens have been offered (Kurzban & Leary, 2001).

One such perspective argues that stigmatization is caused by the attribution process that results following the observation of some deviant characteristic (Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984). Rather than devaluing the whole person, this approach suggests that the presence of a stigmatizing characteristic elicits attributions to specific traits that are deemed to be related to the stigma. For example, a morbidly obese person may be stigmatized not just by his or her weight but by characteristics others impute to them as the cause behind their weight (e.g., laziness, lack of self-discipline, etc.). A related perspective views stigma as a form of deviance that makes others consider them to be illegitimate parties to an interaction. Because of some form of deviance, they are presumed to be incapable of successfully interacting in a particular setting, or alternatively, are presumed to be a threat to the successful interaction of others. For example, until recently, the exclusion of women from Augusta National Golf Club was seen as a threat to the values of that particular country club. In short, it is the classification of someone as illegitimate for a particular interaction that leads to their exclusion (Elliott, Ziegler, Altman, & Scott, 1982).

Two other alternative views widen the perspective of what constitutes a stigma even further. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) see stigmatization as arising from more of a stereotyping perspective. That is, individuals are excluded from a particular form of social interaction, because of their perceived membership in a group that is negatively viewed relative to that form of social interaction. For example, professional athletic teams are less interested in drafting a short basketball player or a short quarterback. To the extent that membership in this stereotypical group elicits other characteristics associated with that group, then this perspective overlaps with the attributional approach of Jones et al. (1984) above. Last, Kurzban and Leary (2001) see stigmatization as an evolutionary process whereby people possess cognitive adaptive mechanisms, which they use to avoid poor social exchange partners. In other words, people are not excluded due to an overall spoiled identity or specific attributed characteristics, but because they do not fit into the shared values and preferences that have developed in a particular group overtime.

This research suggests that not all negative characteristics are equally stigmatizing. Specifically, for stigmatization to occur, the characteristic in question must be visible, controllable, disruptive, aesthetically unpleasing, and/or connoting danger (Jones et al., 1984). Facial piercings meet nearly all of these stigmatizing conditions. That is, facial piercings, when they are worn, are visible. More visible characteristics are deemed to result in greater stigmatization than characteristics that can be concealed (Frable, 1993). Facial piercings also are controllable. They are not something one is born with, but rather they are a choice, and thus within the control of the individual, which is why stigmatizing characteristics that are deemed to be preventable, such as obesity, are viewed more severely (Crandall, 1994). Facial piercings also may add to the difficulty of interpersonal relationships. They may disrupt relations not by virtue of the stigmatizing characteristic itself, but because of its stigmatizing effect (Jones et al., 1984). Finally, facial piercings meet the stigmatizing criteria of aesthetics. Aesthetically unpleasing characteristics, such as facial piercings (at least within the U.S. culture), will result in greater stigmatization. The lone factor that facial piercings does not meet is the connotation of danger. Other than the danger of a breakdown in the values of a majority group noted above, the process by which people ascertain the potential danger caused by a stigmatizing characteristic is not well known (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Taken as a whole, this research suggests that facial piercing qualifies as a stigmatizing characteristic. What remains unknown, however, is the extent to which people with piercings are stigmatized, particularly within the employment context.

Lack of fit

Little research exists on how others perceive people with piercings within the employment context. As noted above, there is research showing that while body modifications such as piercings are becoming more commonplace, evidence of a negative stigma remains. Specifically, there is still a stigma associated with tattoos and piercings in the workplace, even though numerous managers admit to having these modifications themselves (Miller, Nicols, & Eure, 2009).

Stigmatized individuals face exclusion and, as such, are more likely to be viewed negatively in employment contexts. Heilman's (1983) lack of fit model offers a theoretical framework for understanding the lack of acceptance of stigmatized individuals in the workplace. According to Heilman, the fit between an individual's perceived characteristics and the perceived requirements of a job results in expectations about how well an individual will perform in that job (1983: 278). A good fit results in positive expectations about the success of a job candidate, while a poor fit leads to expectations of failure. While Heilman uses this framework to explain workplace sex bias, it is equally applicable to stigmatization. The result of stigmatization is a lack of fit, which leads to expectations of failure, which results in the individual being excluded from further consideration in an employment pool.

Hypothesis 1. Job applicants with facial piercings will be viewed less positively as a job candidate than will individuals without piercings.