Focusing on Employability Through the Lens of Stigma

PAMELA R. WALTZ, ALECIA M. SANTUZZI, AND LISA M. FINKELSTEIN
Northern Illinois University

By examining the psychological determinants of employability, Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Kaiser's (2013) model of employability provides a framework for exploring the hurdles that applicants with stigmatizing conditions must overcome in selection contexts. Specifically, the most qualified applicants not only must be willing and able to do the job, but they also must be rewarding to deal with. Reframing selection research in terms of perceptions of employability calls attention to the

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pamela R. Waltz.
E-mail: pwaltz@niu.edu
Address: Department of Psychology, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115

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subjective decisions that continue to disadvantage members of stigmatized groups. Our comments address several issues with respect to the desirability of compensatory selection procedures that emphasize perceptions of social desirability and P–O fit.

Stigmatized and ''Rewarding to Deal With''?

Some candidates come to the selection situation with negative social labels, making the possibility of being viewed as ''rewarding to deal with'' an uphill battle. A stigma is a discrediting attribute that marks an individual as tainted, discounted, and socially less desirable (Goffman, 1963). When an individual is a member of a stigmatized group, perceivers are likely to have well-learned cultural stereotypes available to inform their impressions about members of that group (Devine, 1989). Of particular relevance to determinations of social desirability, certain devalued groups, such as Blacks, agentic women, and religious minorities, may be stereotypically perceived as having negative interpersonal intentions in intergroup relations and ascribed traits associated with a lack of interpersonal warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Importantly, expectations based on stereotype-driven perceptions can produce self-fulfilling prophecies that influence the information perceivers attend to as well as their behavior in interactions with stigmatized individuals. For example, trainers' negative stereotypes of obese trainees have led to a self-confirming cycle of lower trainer expectations, lower quality training, and lower performance evaluations for obese trainees compared to average-weight participants (Shapiro, King, & Quiñones, 2007). Consequently, individuals whose stigmatizing attributes are stereotypically associated with ill-intent and lack of warmth may elicit negative emotional reactions from perceivers, leading to negative interpersonal interactions and unfavorable evaluations (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007).

Although formal discrimination has been lessened in organizations through laws and strong social norms, interpersonal discrimination in the form of rudeness, shortened interactions, and nonverbal behavior appears to be more tenacious (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). These behaviors may be particularly likely to occur in situations where the perceiver's prejudice is ''justified'' by negative stereotypes and where personal motivation to suppress prejudice is low (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). As a result of unchallenged stereotypes that foster negative interpersonal exchanges, targets of stigma may be perceived as socially unrewarding and as having less potential to make a positive contribution to an organization.

Unfortunately, certain stigmatized groups such as gays, ex-offenders, and unemployed individuals are not protected by either formal discrimination laws or strong social norms. These groups are particularly vulnerable both to overt and to subtle expressions of prejudice. In short, research indicates that stigmatized individuals continue to be at a disadvantage in employment contexts as a result of negative stereotype-driven perceptions.

Decision Making in Organizations: Compensatory Prediction Models

As Hogan et al. note, employers can be particularly selective in times of high national unemployment. Although there might be many qualified applicants in terms of ability and willingness, only a select few will likely be perceived as socially rewarding. When perceptions of social value factor into the selection process, the decisions become more subjective. Even though a highlighted implication of the proposed compensatory model is that deficits in interpersonal skills might be overcome by a willingness to work, it is important to note that the compensating factor—willingness to work—is determined by a subjective appraisal. Furthermore, the extent to which willingness to work does indeed compensate for weaknesses in other areas is a subjective judgment. For example,

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a high willingness to work might be acceptable compensation for a lack of interpersonal skills for currently employed but not for currently unemployed selection candidates.

Subjective judgments open the door to rater error and bias. As noted by much of the literature, subjective judgments are more susceptible to contamination by stereotypes and other irrelevant factors. For instance, Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, and Heilman (1991) described several points during a promotion decision where stereotyping could subtly influence the outcome. Even when supposedly objective criteria form the basis for such judgments, subjective judgments can interfere with an objective evaluation of criteria.

Similarly, work on theories such as the *shifting standards model* (Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991) has demonstrated that subjective judgments are more susceptible to differences in interpretation by raters than are objective judgments. If the content of the judgment has a flexible interpretation, the outcome evaluation can look very different for comparable candidates from different social groups.

As an example, imagine that two objectively comparable individuals have applied for the same job: One candidate is currently unemployed, whereas the other has maintained employment. On the surface, the compensatory model could work in favor of the unemployed individual if that person's motivation to seek employment shines in the application materials, thereby gaining social value to compensate for the stigma of unemployment. However, given that social value is a subjective judgment, the willingness to work expressed by the unemployed candidate might fall below expectations. If unemployed people are expected to accept work with a debt of gratitude and without negotiation, anything less than that might be perceived as a lack of motivation. Even though, objectively, the two candidates showed the same characteristics, the subjective interpretation of those characteristics yielded a more negative outcome for the unemployed candidate.

Emphasis on P–O Fit Rather Than P–J Fit: Focus on Similarity

Hogan et al.'s model of employability results in a shift in selection procedures from job-relevant criteria to perceptions of organizational fit. Whereas P–J fit assesses applicants' fit with the requirements of the job, P–O fit may unduly emphasize applicants' similarity to an organization's existing workforce. An emphasis on similarity may put stigmatized applicants at an additional unfair disadvantage. The similarity—attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), developed in social psychology but over the years applied to a number of workplace contexts, asserts that the perception of similarity is a key predictor of interpersonal attraction; conversely, dissimilarity perceptions can produce a repulsion effect (Chen & Kenrick, 2002). Schneider's (1987) well-known ASA framework emphasizes the selection of people who fit the current personality and values of the organization.

Work on similarity in organizational contexts has emphasized the distinction between surface-level similarity (e.g., demographic characteristics) and deep-level similarity (e.g., attitudes, values, preferences, and styles). Many stigmas are nonconcealable and likely to be categorized as surface level, which tend to influence early impressions of others (such as in the initial employee screening process). Moreover, raters may assume that surface-level distinctions are indicative of more meaningful differences. Visible stigmas, thus, can signal lack of similarity to organizational gatekeepers or even trigger repulsion. In consequence, stigmas may not only evoke negative stereotypes (as discussed above), but separately, they may serve as signals of dissimilarity ("not one of us") and lack of P–O fit.

Rewarding to Deal With: An Unfair Burden for Stigmatized Groups

Hogan et al. propose that future researchers focus on the factors of selection biases that contribute to organizational effectiveness ''as opposed to factors that are associated

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with unfair discrimination'' They suggest that doing so may improve the fairness of selection procedures as well as help individual job seekers.

We agree that a better understanding of the qualities associated with employers' perceptions of the ideal candidate is useful information that some job candidates may be able to use to their benefit. For example, Muslim applicants who provided stereotype-inconsistent information on their resumes by describing a volunteer experience received more positive interpersonal evaluations than Muslim applicants who did not (King & Ahmad, 2010). However, the proposed model offers insights into the increased burden that stigmatized employees may face to put on a socially desirable performance during the hiring process. Although targets of stigma do take on the responsibility of managing social interactions to prevent discomfort in others (Goffman, 1963), selection practices should not shift the burden to disadvantaged groups to manage the discrimination they encounter.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Hogan et al.'s focal article cites evidence supporting the current emphasis that employers place on selecting applicants who are rewarding to deal with. Although this practice could benefit both employers and employees by giving them the opportunity to hire someone who contributes positively to the work environment and ultimately supports productivity, there is a downside for targets of stigma. Broadly speaking, if there is ambiguity in the measures, criteria, and standards that form the basis of employability perceptions, the decision-making process is likely to be affected by subjective judgments and a reliance on stereotypes (Heilman & Haynes, 2008). As such, the continued investigation of the determinants of employability for stigmatized selection candidates is critically important.

There is ample empirical evidence demonstrating the susceptibility of stigmatized and stereotyped candidates to negative outcomes in subjective job decisions. Therefore, we recommend that the decision processes involved in compensatory selection practices be carefully tested for the possibility of adverse impact. Without a better understanding of the model's implications for disadvantaged groups, we believe that it cannot yet effectively bridge the gap between researchers' and employers' perceptions of the qualities that make a successful employee.

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