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Image Norms: A Model of Formation and Operation

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This paper presents a model describing the formation and operation of image norms. Image norms are discussed from both the individual and the organizational perspective. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of image norms for individuals' career choice decisions. The implications of image norms for organizations are also presented. Suggestions for future research on image norms are provided.

This paper will discuss the formation and operation of image norms. Image norms are the belief that individuals must present an image that is consistent with occupational, organizational, or industry standards in order to be hired or promoted (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 1996). An understanding of the role that image norms play in individuals' careers and organizational decisions begins with an examination and understanding of the effects of physical attractiveness on employment decisions.

Physical attractiveness has been associated with more favorable educational (Ritts, Patterson & Tubbs, 1992), occupational (Dipboye, Fromkin & Wiback, 1975; Quereshi & Kay, 1986; Cairn, Siegfried & Pearce, 1981; Gilmore, Beehr & Love, 1986; Morrow, McElroy, Stampe & Wilson, 1990; Frieze, Olson & Russell, 1991; Roszell, Kennedy & Grabb, 1989), and life (Adams, 1977) outcomes. A meta-analysis (Hosoda, Stone-Romero & Coats, 2003, p. 436) suggests that "although attractiveness may not be the most important determinant of personnel decisions, it may be the deciding factor when decision makers are faced with difficult choices among job applicants or incumbents who possess similar levels of qualifications or performance". Research on physical attractiveness has focused on individual physical characteristics such as hair color, height, and disability (Miller, 1986; Colella, DeNisi & Varma,

1997). These specific dimensions of attractiveness have been found to affect organizational employment decisions and individuals' career outcomes.

While the role of physical attractiveness in employment decisions has received fairly strong research support, the role of image has received limited academic attention. One reason for this may be that few definitions of image exist. Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson (2006) define image as the totality of an individual's personal appearance, one's persona, or the way one is seen. Image is a broader, more general construct than physical attractiveness (Dollinger, 2000), and it may encompass several dimensions of attractiveness.

Understanding the effects of image may increase our understanding of the distinction between the role of image and the role of appearance on hiring and promotion employment decisions. Separating out the influence of image may help to explain situations where an individual, although physically attractive, is not hired or promoted because their image is not appropriate for a certain job or a specific company. One purpose of this paper is explore how employment decisions may be based on a more general assessment of an individual's image, rather than an evaluation of any one specific physical characteristic. For example, while recruiters would not be expected to say "You are not pretty enough to work here.", their evaluations of candidates may be influenced by their desire to hire applicants whose physical appearance is consistent with their company's image.

Applicants, as well as organizational members, form perceptions about the importance of image in the workplace. While these perceptions may reflect occupational and organizational stereotypes (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006), they also become the basis for image norms. This paper will examine the formation and operation of image norms from both the individual and organizational perspective. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of image norms for individuals and organizations.

Formation

The Individual's Perspective

While the formation of image norms has been carefully detailed in past research (Giannnantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006) this section of the paper will briefly describe the formation of image norms from the individual's perspective. A model of image norms is shown in Figure 1 which describes three sets of perceptions individuals form about image norms. The first set of perceptions individuals form focus on their own image. This includes perceptions of their personal appearance and their level of physical attractiveness. Perceptions of one's own image may operate as expectancies, influencing an individual's beliefs about the likelihood of their success in different occupations.

The second set of perceptions individuals develop involve the importance of image in various occupations. These perceptions may form based on occupational stereotypes and one's own experiences in occupational exploration (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006). Individuals' perceptions of the image norm requirements for specific occupations may influence their decision to pursue or to avoid certain

occupations. While these perceptions are likely developed in the exploration stage of career development (Cron, 1984), such beliefs may be reinforced in later stages of career development as well (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006).

Occupational image norms may be influenced by societal mores and cultural traditions. A recent study found that parents and schools have a large impact on student's career expectations (Diemer, 2007). Research has found that women's career choices are influenced by many factors including gender stereotypes, societal messages, and family expectations (Hopkins, 2006). Culture may also influence the development of image norms. In Ireland, IT work is seen as "clean" work (Quesenberry, Trauth, & Morgan, 2006). In China, it is a compliment to refer to a woman who works in information technology (IT) as a geek.

Image norms that reflect society's perceptions of the gender appropriateness of an occupation may actually influence the sex composition of various jobs. The decrease in the percentage of female IT workers in the United States from 1996 to 2004 is widely believed to be a result of the stereotype of IT workers being male (Hopkins, 2006).

Image norms also reflect the prestige attributed to certain occupations. In the United States, a widely accepted norm suggests that as families move from the middle class to the upper class, the occupational choices of their children will be from the higher end of the occupational prestige continuum (e.g. medicine, law, and the social sciences). Interestingly, in the United States, engineering is no longer viewed as a glamorous or prestigious profession. This is in contrast to China where, the brightest students are encouraged to go into engineering and the sciences.

The role of the media in influencing occupational image norms cannot be under estimated. A study of African American junior high students found that the younger they were, the more likely they were to be influenced by role models on television in terms of their anticipated career choices (King & Multan, 1996). Research has found that many children have decided against careers in science and math by the time they are 14 (Carnes, 1999). This decision may be influenced "by television shows and movies that portray technical professionals as either "mad geniuses" or unfashionably dressed, socially inept "geeks" or "nerds"." (Carnes, 1999). When researchers asked students in grades 3 through 12 to draw technology workers, their drawings reflected image norms such as those portrayed in the media. The students drew characters with "high-water pants, pocket protectors, bow ties and beanie hats. Also, the images were predominantly white and male." (Carnes, 1999).

A recent article (Murray, 2005) found that the profession of engineering had the "worst of all cultural images: uncoolness." The US Air Force is attempting to influence Hollywood's portrayal of engineering in a positive light by funding screenwriting classes for engineers and scientists. The individuals responsible for this funding feel that "popular culture is lacking not only in positive scientist portrayals but also in technical accuracy. Movies such as *Falling Down, Mosquito Coast*, and even last year's *The Aviator,* feed the popular perception of engineers as eccentric at best and anti-social at worst, they say." (Murray, 2005).

Other professions' images are portrayed more positively in today's media, resulting in more positive occupational image norms. For example, forensic science has been positively portrayed in television shows such as the numerous CSI series (Robertson,

Blain & Cowan, 2005). This is an example of how an occupation's image has been dramatically changed because of the way it is portrayed in the media. The dramatic increase in the number of individuals interested in forensic science has been termed The CSI Effect. One college's forensics program saw its number of graduates rise from 4 to 400 in 4 years, and many universities are beginning to offer degrees in forensic science. In an attempt to provide a more realistic image of the work, forensic scientists note that many of the images of forensic scientists portrayed in television shows are inaccurate. Students learn quickly that they will not be wearing glamorous clothes and fabulous hairstyles while working in the lab and in the field. Instead they are told to wear aprons and hairnets (Maquire, 2005).

The final set of perceptions individuals develop involve the importance of image in different companies. These perceptions may arise from individuals' beliefs about an organization's image. Given the uncertainly inherent in the job search and choice process, job applicants may be attracted to companies with favorable organizational images (Barber, 1998). Several dimensions may comprise an individual's perception of an organization's image (Dutton & Dukerich, 1994), including perceptions about the types of people who work for a company. These perceptions include beliefs about the image of the people who work for a company, the company's desire to hire a workforce with a specific image, and the role of personal appearance in advancing one's career in that organization.

The Organization's Perspective

This section of the paper explores the ways that image norms form from the organization's perspective. Organizations contribute to the formation of image norms in a number of ways. First, companies may send direct messages to candidates about the importance of projecting a certain image in hiring and promotion decisions. Explicit comments about the "appropriateness" of a candidate's appearance are likely to be more common in some industries than others. Organizations may outline appearance requirements in employee handbooks or during employee orientation sessions. Dress codes and company uniforms provide employees more explicit directions regarding image norms within a company (Aramark, 2008).

Secondly, an organization may indirectly send messages about the importance of image through its choice of recruiters and other organizational representatives. Recruitment research on the signaling hypothesis illustrates the important role of recruiters in shaping applicants' perceptions of hiring organizations (Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995). The recruiter's image may send signals about the company's desire to hire a workforce with a certain image or the role of image in selection decisions. Visual images of other organizational representatives may be found in the company's recruiting materials including brochures, videotapes, CD-ROMs, and Web sites. These visual representations of the company's employees may send signals to applicants about the gender, racial, and age composition of the workforce. They may also reinforce stereotypes about the physical attractiveness of the company's workforce and the company's desired image. Patterns among the individuals who are selected to represent the company send strong signals to outsiders about the company's desired image of its workforce (Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2006).

Finally, organizations may attempt to create a specific organizational image in the minds of potential applicants and other constituents by engaging in image advertising (Barber, 1998). Image advertising is focused on attracting future applicants to the company itself; it does not necessarily involve advertising for specific job openings. Such advertising could establish a perceived relationship between personal appearance and the company's organizational image, resulting in the creation of image norms.

Operation

The Individual

Once image norms are formed, they may operate to influence the occupational and organizational choice decisions of individuals throughout their careers (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006). The work of two theorists, Victor Vroom and Donald Super, may provide partial explanations for the effects of image norms on occupational and organizational choice.

Donald Super's (1957) work illustrates how individuals choose an occupation which allows us to play a role that is consistent with our self concept. Our self-concept includes the attributes we believe define us, such as our abilities, personality traits, and values. Abilities may be broadly defined to include both physical and mental characteristics. Individuals perceive themselves to possess a number of physical (e.g. "I am strong.") and mental (e.g. "I am good with numbers.") abilities. Most people also hold perceptions about their own level of physical attractiveness. Irrespective of accuracy, these perceptions may influence (and constrain) the number of occupations that are considered as allowing for the implementation of the self concept (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006).

Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) may also explain how image norms operate to influence occupational choice. Perceptions about one's own level of physical attractiveness may operate as expectancy beliefs in Vroom's model. If an individual does not believe that they are attractive enough to succeed in an occupation (and they believe that physical attractiveness is a necessary requirement for entry or advancement in that occupation), then the person is not likely to choose that occupation for their career. Vroom's theory may explain the role of image norms in organizational as well as occupational choice. Significant others in one's social network may share their experiences regarding physical attractiveness norms within specific organizations.

The belief that possessing a specific image is a hiring requirement or is necessary for advancement in certain companies may result in applicant self-selection into or out of those companies. Self-selection may operate because job applicants rely on organizational images as one way of determining their potential fit with specific companies (Gatewood, Gowan & Lautenschager, 1993).

The Organization

Image norms may operate within organizations to influence the hiring and promotion decisions made by corporate decision-makers. Attractiveness effects have been found in a number of employment decisions including selection, evaluation, and compensation (Hosoda, Stone-Romero & Coats, 2003). The importance of image and

appearance in person perception is not surprising. An individual's appearance is one of the first things we notice about a person (Kenny, 1994). It is also one basis for differentiating people into meaningful categories. Once categorized, a variety of personality and psychological constructs are attributed to individuals falling within the referent category (Pendry & Macrae, 1994). In both work and non-work settings, personal appearance serves as the basis for social evaluations.

Companies may use image as a hiring requirement or as the basis for advancement in their company (Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2006). How directly or subtly this information is conveyed to applicants and organizational members may be difficult to measure. The importance of image and physical attractiveness in hiring and promotion decisions may be expected in industries that are perceived as glamorous (McDonald, 2003). While image norms are less likely to be expected to influence employment decisions in other industries, any organization may potentially use image norms in their hiring and promotion decisions.

Two theoretical explanations from the physical attractiveness literature may offer additional explanations for how image norms operate in organizations. Implicit personality theory (Ashmore, 1981) offers one explanation for these effects. Once a person is classified as attractive or unattractive, the observer links a variety of personality characteristics to that individual (Pendry & Macrae, 1994). Organizational decision makers may be particularly vulnerable to these effects since most evaluation and judgment tasks in organizations require the processing of a large amount of social information about a candidate or employee, usually under time pressures, and without complete information about each person being evaluated. Since many human resource management decisions occur under these constraints, there is a potentially large role for image norm effects in employment decisions.

The lack of fit model offers another explanation for image norms effects in organizations (Pendry & Macrae, 1994). An examination of physical attractiveness research supports this statement. Physically attractive individuals have received more positive evaluations than unattractive individuals in the areas of hiring (Marshall, Stamps, & Moore, 1998), promotion (Morrow, McElroy, Stamper & Wilson, 1990), and compensation (Frieze, Olson & Russell, 1991). Heilman and Stopeck (1985) apply the lack of fit model to explain this attractiveness bias. They argue that an organizational decision maker forms two sets of perceptions. First, they hold perceptions about the personality characteristics that are associated with different stereotypes (e.g. an attractive vs. an unattractive person). Second, they hold perceptions about the requirements for successfully performing a job. Then, as with any matching model, the evaluator compares their perception of the candidate/job incumbent to their perceptions of the characteristics needed to successfully perform the job. If there is a match, the person is evaluated favorably. If there is not a match, the person receives a negative evaluation.

Image norms are compatible with implicit personality theory in explaining physical attractiveness effects (Ashmore, 1981). Image norms may influence a decision-maker's perceptions about the requirements for successfully performing a job. If evaluators believe that it is necessary to possess a certain level of physical attractiveness to succeed in a job or a company, then attractive individuals may receive more favorable

evaluations than unattractive individuals on a variety of job outcomes.

Implications

Both individuals and organizations need to consider the effects of image norms on employment decisions. Individuals need to consider the effects of image norms on their occupational and organizational choice processes. Individuals' beliefs about their own image, as well as the perceived demands for projecting a specific image in certain occupations, organizations, and industries may influence the decision to pursue or avoid different career paths. Occupations and organizations may not be pursued if the individual believes internal and external messages about the importance of projecting a certain image for entry or advancement into certain jobs and companies (Giannnatonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006). Applicant pools and labor market participation rates may be unnecessarily restricted if candidates self-select out of jobs and companies based on inaccurate image norms or inaccurate perceptions about their own image.

Image norms may also influence individuals' behavior during the job application process. Applicants may engage in numerous impression management techniques to enhance the perception that they meet the image norms required to work in certain jobs. Image norms may also play a role in the occupational and job-choice decisions of individuals at several stages in their career (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006). Individuals should examine the role of image norms throughout their careers. While this is especially important in the exploration stage of career development (Cron, 1984), image effects may also operate in middle and late career stages.

For organizations, the implications include examining how image norms are directly and more subtly communicated during the hiring and promotion process. Image norms may explicitly operate within organizations if physical attractiveness standards are applied to hiring and promotion decisions. Image norms may also operate in a more subtle fashion. Hiring and promotion decisions should be examined for signals about the perceived importance of image for entry and advancement in the organization. In times of labor shortages, it would be unfortunate to lose qualified candidates and valued employees because of misperceptions about hiring and promotion standards. Unlike earlier career system models where individuals hoped to stay with one company for their lifetime of work, newer career system models suggest individuals may see changing careers as important to their career success (Ackah & Heaton, 2003; Baruch, 2004). Because of this, organizations need to be very cognizant of the image they are portraying to potential applicants, as well as to their current employees.

Finally, organizations need to consider the possible legal ramifications associated with image norms. While physical attractiveness is not a recognized Bona Fide Occupational Qualification, it appears that image norms may underlie image discrimination lawsuits. Image norms that are a pretext for engaging in discrimination based on sex, color, race, religion, or national origin seem likely to violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Image norms may also violate the American with Disabilities Act. While unattractiveness has not been recognized as a disability under the ADA, image norms based on health or fitness may violate the provisions of the Act.

Image norms concerned with youth and vitality may violate the Age Discrimination in Employment Act if candidates feel the work environment would not be comfortable for employees over the age of forty. Applicants may not pursue employment opportunities where they do not feel comfortable fitting in with younger, more attractive employees.

Organizations must consider the legal implications associated with enforcing dress and appearance policies. Polices regarding dress, grooming, jewelry, piercing, and tattoos should be carefully drafted and reviewed by a legal firm to avoid disparate treatment or violate religious freedom. It is extremely important that personal appearance policies are applied to all employees equally. Of course organizations do have rights regarding personal appearance and image where issues of safety are concerned.

Employers may legally enforce a dress and appearance policy to promote their specific company image. However, managers should make every attempt to make reasonable accommodations to avoid the perception and reality of image discrimination. Recent court settlements (e.g. Abercrombie & Fitch, 2004) suggest that image discrimination is an emerging aspect of employment law. Image discrimination occurs when organizations attempt to hire applicants whose physical appearance is consistent with the company's organizational image, product image and/or customer preferences.

In the United States a few jurisdictions have outlawed discrimination based on physical appearance. For example, in Washington D.C. personal appearance is a protected class where personal appearance is defined as "the outward appearance of any person irrespective of sex with regard to bodily condition or characteristics, manner or style of dress, and manner or style of grooming including but not limited to hair styles and beards" (McDonald, 2003, p. 118). While image is not a federally protected characteristic, discrimination on the basis of image or physical appearance has the potential to violate several employment laws including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

A better understanding of the formation and operation of image norms from both the individual and the organizational perspective offers researchers an important avenue for understanding the role of image in organizations.

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