

MANAGING SIMILARITY ATTRACTION BIAS IN THE HIRING PROCESS. A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract. *The current study aims at investigating and exploring how similarity attraction affects hiring decisions in various selected multinational financial organizations. The existence of cognitive biases has become a significant challenge as well as the subject of extensive research, and managers at all levels are making every effort to understand the causes, effects, and methods for removing their influence on the decision-making process. In addition to the foregoing, businesses try to create diversity in the workforce, which is prone to being reduced due to cognitive biases and, especially, similarity attraction in hiring procedures. The concept of "similarity attraction" refers to a general similarity between a candidate and a hiring responsible personnel, founded on either attitudinal characteristics or similarities of demographic attributes. Hence, the primary objective of the research paper will be to preliminarily examine the fundamentals of the similarity attraction bias and how it affects the hiring managers' decisions of selection, with particular attention paid to selection criteria, selection criteria choices, selection rationales, reasons for similarity attraction, consequences of similarity attraction, impact on diversity, and overcoming similarity. Simultaneously, the study will theoretically tackle how hiring responsible employees could manage and might reduce the influence of the similarity attraction bias on their hiring-related decisions, specifically what type of knowledge should be necessary and what strategies or tactics could be employed to overcome the aforementioned cognitive prejudgment.*

Keywords: *similarity attraction bias; hiring process, workforce diversity; decision making; recruitment.*

Introduction

The similarity attraction bias that frequently arises throughout the hiring process, more specifically when selecting the applicant for a job position, represents the main phenomenon in this study (MacLean, Brimacombe, & Lindsey, 2013, as cited in Lieberman, Rock, Halvorson, & Cox, 2015). The organizational setting implies that the selection of employees is primarily based on procedures that necessitate human

assessments, which are frequently subject to cognitive biases (Lee, Pitesa, Thau, & Pillutla, 2015).

The similarity attraction bias, according to Garcia, Posthuma, and Colella (2008), represents a generic resemblance between a recruiter and a candidate based on either demographic factors or attitudinal features. In this sense, a wide range of studies have demonstrated that similarity in demographic characteristics between people can lead to more favorable attitudes and favoritism (O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Jackson, Brett, Sessa, Cooper, Julin, & Peyronnin, 1991; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Riordan & Shore, 1997; Goldberg, 2005; Vătămănescu, Alexandru & Gorgos, 2014; Vătămănescu, Alexandru, & Andrei, 2015; Vătămănescu, Andrei, & Pînzaru, 2018). Recruiters may assume that applicants share the same values, views, and outlook on life because of similar demographic characteristics (Goldberg, 2005).

Following this line of reasoning, studies indicated that it is highly essential for recruiters to be aware of such beliefs and behaviors that might risk their ability to manage the recruitment process and establish a diverse workforce, as the current global marketplace demands distinctive talent to provide competitive goods and services (Vătămănescu et al., 2015; Vătămănescu & Constantin, 2015; Chamberlain, 2016). Substantial research shed light onto the fact that the diversity in the workforce has benefits that go well beyond being essential to a company's ability to succeed. Indicators of profitability as sales revenue, number of clients, vast amounts of trade are closely correlated and compatible with increased variety (Sip, Bavel, West, Davis, Rock, & Grand, 2017). Despite important financial investments being allocated for diversity initiatives with the goal of enhancing the status of varied employment, the current labor force still experiences the diversity gap (Herring, 2009; Pratt, 2015, as cited in Sip et al., 2017).

Conventionally, biases limit the pool of talent that is available in the market and fail to take into consideration the most qualified job prospects (Sip et al., 2017). Cotter (2011) indicated that high degrees of resemblance can also inspire confidence and trust in a prospective employee and, as a result, may signify a promise of a productive working relationship, but it can have significant negative implications for the hiring process (Cotter, 2011). Equally important, gender stereotypes in recruiting practices are a hot topic that has been the subject of extensive research. To illustrate, a study conducted in Spain demonstrates that recruiting managers frequently discriminate against women (González, Cortina, & Rodriguez, 2019).

An additional study on the subject of racial stereotypes was carried out in Ireland in 2009. It revealed that natives are often twice as likely to receive an invitation to a job interview as non-natives (McGinnity, Nelson, Lunn, & Quinn, 2009). In addition, there it is a meta-evaluation study on racial discrimination that was conducted in nine nations and included 200,000 job applications and 97 field experiments. In all countries, the study indicated severe discrimination against indigenous non-white people, which is consistent with the findings. However, it has been shown that there it is little discrimination against white non-natives (Quillian, Heath, Pager, Midtben, Fleischmann, & Hexel, 2019).

The majority of the studies mentioned in the previous paragraphs have focused on racial, ethnic, and age disparities in hiring practices. According to the literature reviewed above, these traits speak to the idea of similarity attraction and have a skewness in the decision-making of hiring personnel. Additionally, the aforementioned studies have recently been theoretically refined and make a significant contribution to the ongoing research.

The primary objective of the research paper will be to preliminary examine the fundamentals of the similarity attraction bias and how it affects the hiring managers' decisions of selection, with particular attention paid to selection criteria, selection criteria choices, selection rationales, reasons for similarity attraction, consequences of similarity attraction, impact on diversity, and overcoming similarity. Simultaneously, the study will theoretically tackle how hiring responsible employees could manage and might reduce the influence of the similarity attraction bias on their hiring-related decisions, specifically what type of knowledge should be necessary and what strategies or tactics could be employed to overcome the aforementioned cognitive prejudice.

The paper will further explore what knowledge should be necessary and what additional techniques could be employed to defeat this cognitive partiality. Consequently, the outcomes could significantly aid in determining if applicants are qualified for a certain job position, which further contributes to a stable job market. Since no other study of this kind has been conducted in specific contexts, the study looks to be novel and welcome.

Theoretical framework: a preliminary overview

To begin with, the similarity attraction bias, in which human resource professionals choose applicants who seem to be similar to them in certain respects, has received a significant amount attention from researchers (Diaz, Ramirez-Marin, & Diaz, 2019). The main driver for the increased interest in this particular topic could be explicated by the popularity and the status of the similarity attraction relation, the consistency and the reliability with which the phenomenon has been explored, and last but not least, the ease with which shared attributes could be fairly controlled and measured in an experimental setting (Byrne & Griffitt, 1973).

Interpersonal attraction has been compared by Batool and Malik (2010) to convergences in attitudes, social groups, ideals, and convictions. According to the authors, when people learn that others have similar attitudes and not distinctive ones, they express positive and good feelings towards them.

Since the early 1970s, Byrne has developed the similarity attraction paradigm, which is connected with the social identity theory, which, in turn, establishes how people perceive an individual based on group belongingness (Byrne, 1971, as cited in Goldberg, 2005). In essence, this theory indicates that people who are similar to one another are interpersonally drawn or attracted to one another and may therefore be given priority over people who belong to a group with distinctive traits (Goldberg, 2005).

In addition to the social identity theory and the attraction paradigm, the relational demography theory asserts that individuals who share referents' demographic

characteristics may produce favorable employment outcomes (Goldberg, Riordan, & Zhang, 2008). Wells and Aicher (2013) also recognize that the core concept of the abovementioned relational demography theory is the degree to which members of various groups have comparable demographic characteristics.

Towards an in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon of similarity attraction, the conceptual framework should encompass the Social Identity Theory, the Relational Demography Theory and the Attraction Paradigm, which will design the foundation for appraising the similarity attraction and delineating how shared characteristics affect the decision-making process of recruiters and most importantly, the workplace diversity in organizations.

The brief conceptual framework is represented in Figure 1, which is shown below. This framework offers theories about the similarity attraction bias, its causes, how it affects judgment, and methods for managing the bias.

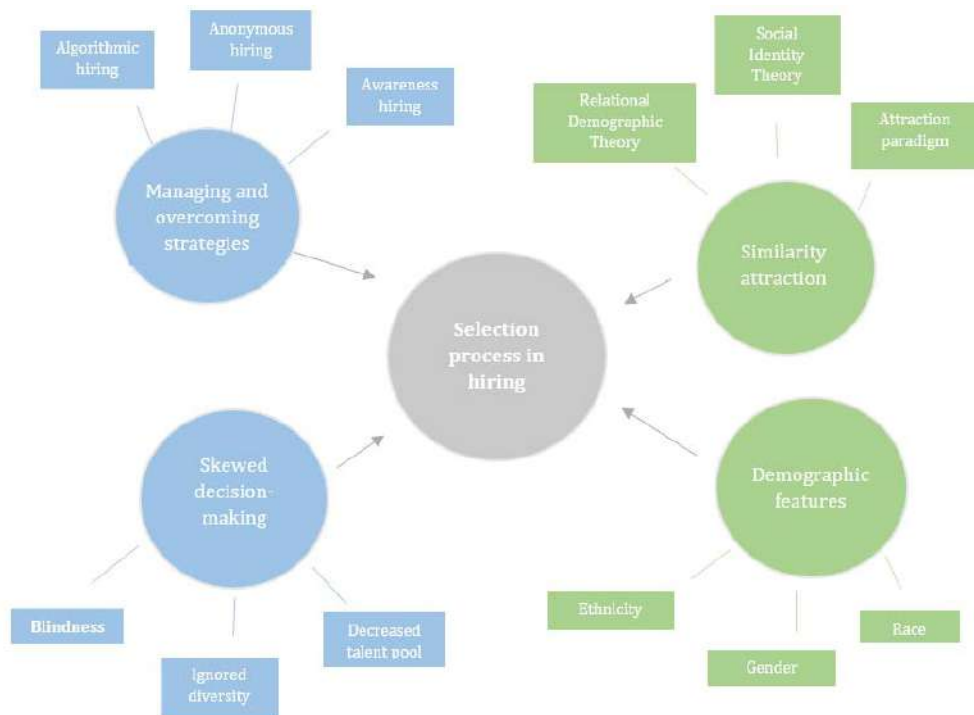


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

Additionally, the relational demography theory (often referred to as RDT), which contends that people are more likely to view others favorably if they share similar demographic characteristics, provides support for the current study (Goldberg, Riordan, & Zhang, 2008).

Despite having been developed in the 1970s and 1980s, Tajfel and Turner's social identification theory (abbreviated as SIT) continues to serve as the groundwork for this study on the phenomenon of similarity attraction. People typically define their own

social identity by classifying themselves and joining specific social groupings (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, as cited in Goldberg, 2005). Furthermore, extensive range of studies examine the attraction paradigm, which claims that a person's equivalent attributes make them attractive and implies a relationship between attraction and a person's combined personal traits (Byrne, 1971, as cited in Díaz, Ramirez-Marin, & Díaz, 2019).

It is clear from the theories' publication years that scholars were already interested in the phenomenon since back in the early 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, despite the attraction paradigm's age, academics still highly value it today, and they have used it as a foundation for subsequent studies on candidate recruitment and selection.

In their research, Lee et al. (2015) employed the attraction paradigm to explain why decision-makers, particularly hiring managers, use prejudice against applicants during the pre-assessment or screening procedures. According to the study, people connect with others more frequently and lean toward positive reinforcement when they have similar traits. As a result, it is certain that decision-makers might favor one applicant over another due to the substantial number of similarities (Lee et al., 2015). In this spirit, according to Bogen and Rieke (2018), making a hiring choice should not be seen as a single action but rather as a series of related actions that are concluded by an employment offer or rejection.

It is important to mention that biases are generally thought of as subconscious elements that affect how people perceive the outside world and divert attention from more logical or rational explanations (Lieberman et al., 2015). Cognitive biases could be compared to invisible air particles that a person inhales into his or her lungs and which have a significant impact on a person's behavior without the respective person even being aware of it. Hence, when faced with complexity and uncertainty, the human mind has a straightforward protective reaction that involves making an immediate decision that will have positive outcomes and judging with the least amount of psychological and mental effort for the person in question (Lieberman et al., 2015; Bratianu, Vătămănescu, Anagnoste, & Dominici, 2021).

It is worth highlighting that cognitive biases do not necessarily have a negative connotation and should not be seen exclusively negatively for the decisions being made (Sip et al., 2017). Due to the fact that it enables the human brain to get through a day filled with complicated and difficult decisions, unconscious partiality may play a very helpful function in decision-making. In other words, a prejudice provides a way to avoid delving too deeply into the root of the issue (Sip et al., 2017). According to Lieberman et al. (2015), the prejudice makes recruiters use a form of cognitive shorthand and causes them to make decisions with less effort, which supports the bias' favorable meaning. Consequences of unconscious prejudices might include preventing people from properly evaluating a wide range of possibilities when making a big and responsible decision by blinding them to additional information that is available at a particular time (Sip et al., 2017).

People have always attempted to make decisions consistently, albeit the extent of consistency varies based on the situation, motivation, and requirements (Collisson & Howell, 2014). High consistency people could spend significant amounts of time and

energy trying to make the decision-making process less uncertain. The primary goal is to reduce the degree of stress, strain, and pain; as a result, people frequently focus on achieving and maintaining the cognitive balance in their thoughts. Individuals with a low level of consistency, on the other hand, think about giving everything they have so as not to compromise the decision-making process. In this way, the responses with a similar level of consistency may be preferred by the people with a strong precedence for consistency, first and foremost, revealing a stronger similarity attraction effect (Collisson & Howell, 2014). The balancing theory, as named by Collisson and Howell (2014), may provide an explanation for why people favor responders who are similar to them and give them less weight than those who appear to be different from them.

More recently, in 2014, West, Magee, Gordon, and Gullett concluded that similarity can develop mutual understanding, encourage information sharing, and help find a middle ground in settling conflicts. It can also act as a "barrier" for possible connections. People view similarity as a relational defense tactic in an established or developing relationship. By choosing the most fortunate candidate, people ultimately prefer to save much more moral and psychological work and hence embrace similarity attraction as a modest mental and cognitive investment.

Notably, being aware of the discussed theories is essential in managing these possible threats, as the diversity in corporate practices may boost team engagement, productivity, and cohesion while lowering the likelihood of conflicts and misunderstandings. Similar to this, diversity might promote innovation and creativity by encouraging a wider range of ideas and innovative solutions (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015).

The key component of an organization's added value is its employees, which functions in tandem with diversity (Chamberlain, 2016). When an organization focuses on support future development, it should consider and hire individuals with diverse personalities, according to the outcomes that department managers and recruiters have aligned and agreed upon. Workforce members must constantly communicate with one another since the workplace serves as a battleground for encounters. Thus, it is clear that communication affects team performance and that diversity and communication go together. According to Hunt, Layton, and Prince (2015), variety has a number of advantages. First of all, diversity tends to encourage higher employee happiness, lower the possibility of disputes and misunderstandings among team members, raise team cohesion and productivity, and foster more loyalty among team members. Subsequent, diversity often encourages invention and creativity by providing a greater range of responses to problems that arise.

According to Schaffer (2018), businesses may benefit from forming heterogeneous groups and integrating their global vision with their strategic goals. These various groupings possess distinctive qualities resulting from a variety of psychological, political, intellectual, and demographic traits. In order to enhance and sustain the degree of diversity, corporations and their owners should place a strong emphasis on the ongoing implementation of diversity trainings and development programs. However, one should keep in mind that the relationship between a company's success and its

commitment to diversity is not one-to-one, as the latter is more beneficial (Sip et al., 2017).

In this respect, scholars have agreed that a major obstacle to closing the diversity gap is consequently the hiring bias specified by researchers as "similarity attraction" (Sip et al., 2017). As the human brain is predisposed to rely on cognitive leanings in decision-making, which are largely unconscious and may sabotage the recruiting process, the diversity gap still exists (Banaji, Greenwald, & Martin, 2016).

Conflating the research directions mentioned above, at this stage, a potential conceptual model may be proposed. In line with this, Figure 2 depicts the relationships between variables and their influence on each other. As detailed below, the model presumes that the similar demographic traits and similar attitude traits positively influence the skewed decision-making in the hiring process; the hiring process negatively influences personnel diversity. Algorithm hiring, Anonymous hiring and Awareness hiring negatively moderate the relationship between similar demographic traits and similar attitude traits and the skewed decision-making in the hiring process.

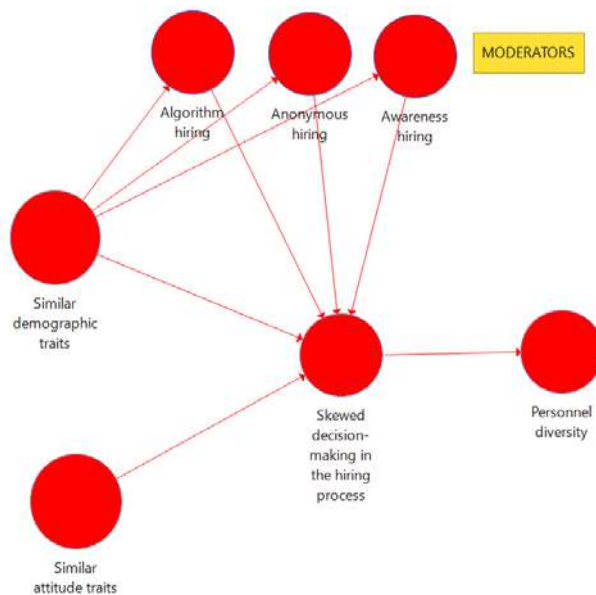


Figure 2. A potential conceptual model

Final considerations and implications

The current endeavor set out to preliminary examine the fundamentals of the similarity attraction bias and how this might affect the hiring managers' decisions of selection, with particular attention paid to selection criteria, selection criteria choices, selection rationales, reasons for similarity attraction, consequences of similarity attraction, impact on diversity, and overcoming similarity. Adjointly, the theoretical approach covered how hiring responsible employees could manage and might reduce the influence of the similarity attraction bias on their hiring-related decisions. In this

respect, the approach intended to provide some theoretical cues regarding the beliefs and actions that the recruitment professionals must be aware of, as they could compromise their capacity to attract, create and establish a diverse workforce, especially when the current global marketplace context demands distinctive and diversified talent to provide competitive services or products.

Unfolding such an analysis would have relevant organizational and managerial implications. The study may be particularly useful for corporations working in the financial sector by enhancing workplace diversity and identifying the best applicants, as well as identifying patterns of behavior whether they are controlled, presented in a particular manner, or unintentionally guided. More specifically, recruitment stakeholders who are involved in the selection of candidates, such as the hiring agent, recruitment team, head-hunters, and managers, may directly benefit from the findings derived from the current research because they will explain and reveal the effects of similarity attraction in the hiring process, its impact on diversity, and offer room for self-reflection on the objectivity and fairness of the selection. The aforementioned parties may get approaches designed to lessen the influence of similarity attraction during the decision-making process. The associated findings could help employers in offering greater focus on ethical hiring processes and conserve the most precious resources, including time and financial rationales, while searching for the best, or most suitable, candidates.

Nevertheless, despite the potential benefits of conducting a thorough investigation on the topic, the present endeavor emerges only as an introductory theoretical framework for a future in-depth scrutiny, as a synopsis of current scholarly and practical preoccupations regarding this area of interest.

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