

Age-Based Hiring Discrimination as a Function of Equity Norms & Self-Perceived Objectivity



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Background

Although legally protected, older adults experience pressure to retire and difficulty in both finding and keeping jobs (McCann & Giles, 2002), despite a lack of age-related declines in work performance (Salthouse & Maurer, 1996) and the unrealized economic benefits of a workplace with older, more experienced workers (Shea & Haasen, 2006). Thus, we tested two manipulations intended to reduce hiring discrimination.

Previous research (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007) found that individuals primed with a sense of *personal objectivity* are more likely to act on stereotypical beliefs; we investigated whether the opposite would also hold, so that recognition that one's judgments could potentially be non-objective would reduce hiring discrimination. Additionally, we manipulated the presence or absence of *equity norms*; it is common practice to establish equity norms for hiring new employees by stating non-discrimination statutes, but experimental research has focused on their effects on potential employees, rather than on employment decision-makers (Malinen & Johnston, 2007).

Method

Participants

1,588 consenting adults ($M_{age} = 30.5$, $SD = 12.9$, range = 18–80) were randomly assigned to this study from the pool of available studies at the Project Implicit Research website.

Self-Perceptions Manipulation

Control (5-item questionnaire after hiring decision) vs.

Self-Objectivity (e.g., "My judgments are based on a logical analysis of the facts.") or

Self-Biased (e.g., "My judgments are occasionally influenced by my own preconceptions, rather than just the facts.")

Hiring Decision

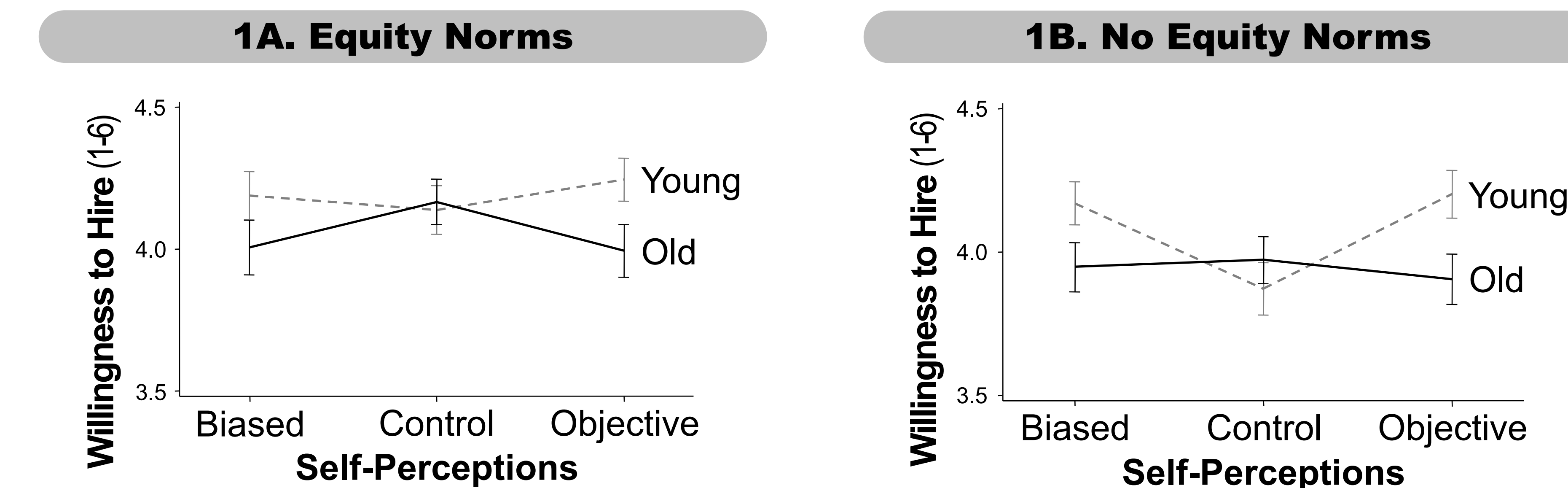
After completing the self-perceptions questionnaire, experimental-condition participants were presented with descriptions of a young-typed company, a job, and a job candidate, then evaluated the candidate's suitability for the job. The hiring decision manipulated:

- Presence vs. Absence of Equity Norms:** The instructions established equity norms with: "Keep in mind that hiring managers must follow state and federal laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of age, disability, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, or sex."
- Candidates' Age:** Aged 31 / 54, and B.A. received in 1999 / 1975

Note. Participants evaluated 1 of 4 counterbalanced candidate descriptions that included extracts from 2 recommendations, containing 3 negative ("Disorganization sometimes hinders productivity") and 4 positive (e.g., "Excellent capacity to quickly grasp new theories") attributes.

Effectiveness of the self-perceived bias manipulation

Agreement with the self-perceptions questionnaires indicates that although participants agreed that they were objective (6-pt agreement scale centered on 0: $M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.77$), we were less successful in eliciting agreement that one's judgments could be biased ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.91$). Agreeing that one is objective and disagreeing that one is biased had similar effects on hiring discrimination (Figure 1).



Here and elsewhere, error bars represent SE.

Context sensitivity of hiring discrimination

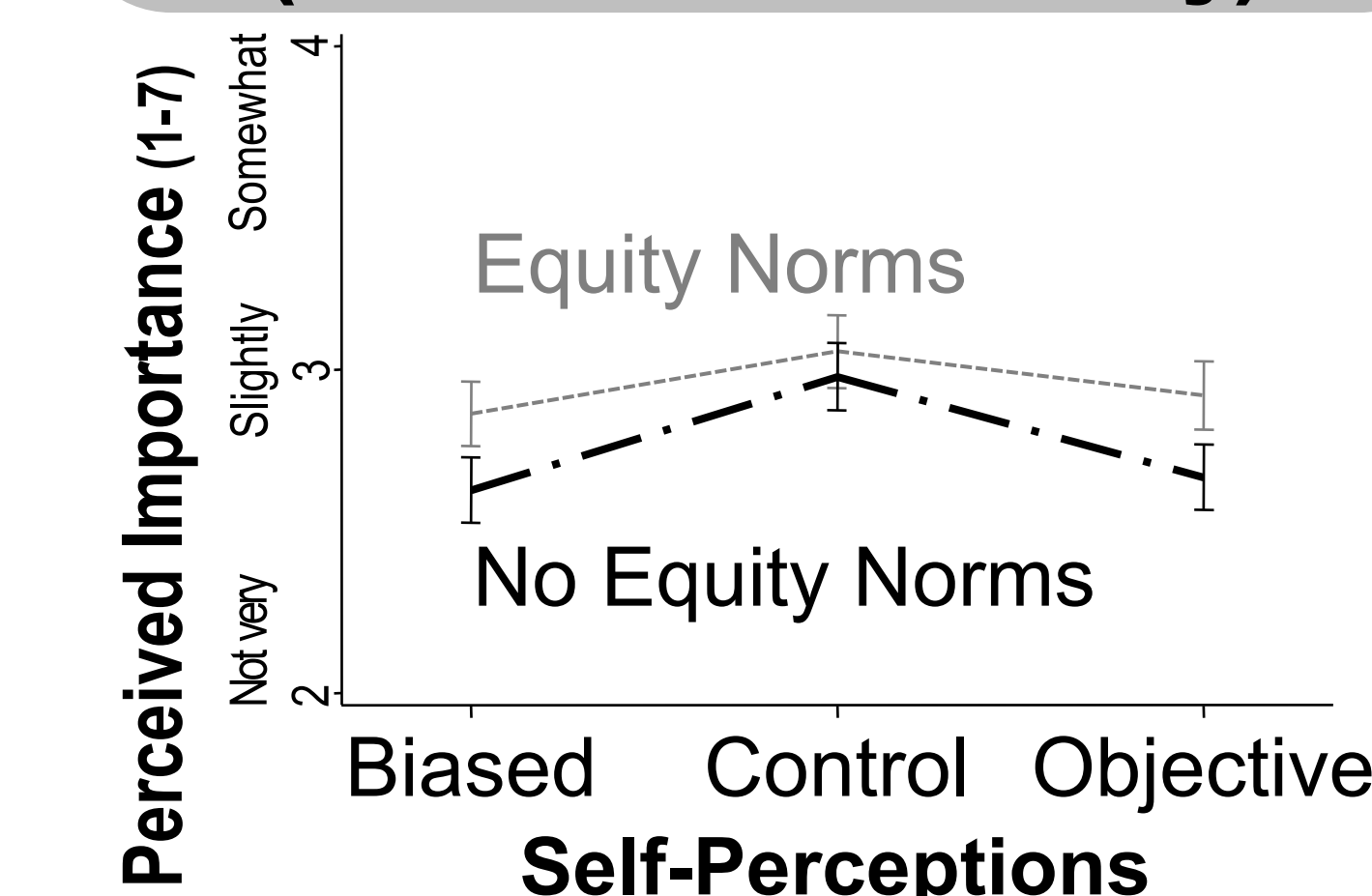
In the control condition, the presence of equity norms increased enthusiasm for *both* young and old job candidates (Cohen's $d = 0.23$; Figures 1A & 1B). However, the equity statement had no effect when participants thought of themselves as objective ($d = 0.08$) or as not biased ($d = 0.05$). In those conditions, the younger job candidate was evaluated more favorably than the older candidate ($ds = 0.29, 0.21$, respectively).

Casualty & equity norms

Although they did not decrease age discrimination, the presence of equity norms increased the post-decision perceptions of the importance of *expertise*, a normative factor, and decreased the perceived importance of *age*, a non-normative bias. This suggests that equity norms increased individuals' *motivation* to suppress prejudice without changing the behavioral effect of the bias.

Older Candidate's Age: Participants appeared to recognize that age discrimination was possible, as the perceived importance of age was significantly greater for the old rather than the young candidate ($d = 0.27$). However, among those who evaluated the older candidate, the presence of equity norms significantly decreased the perceived importance of the candidate's age, $d = 0.18$ (Figure 2).

2. Importance of Age (Older candidate only)

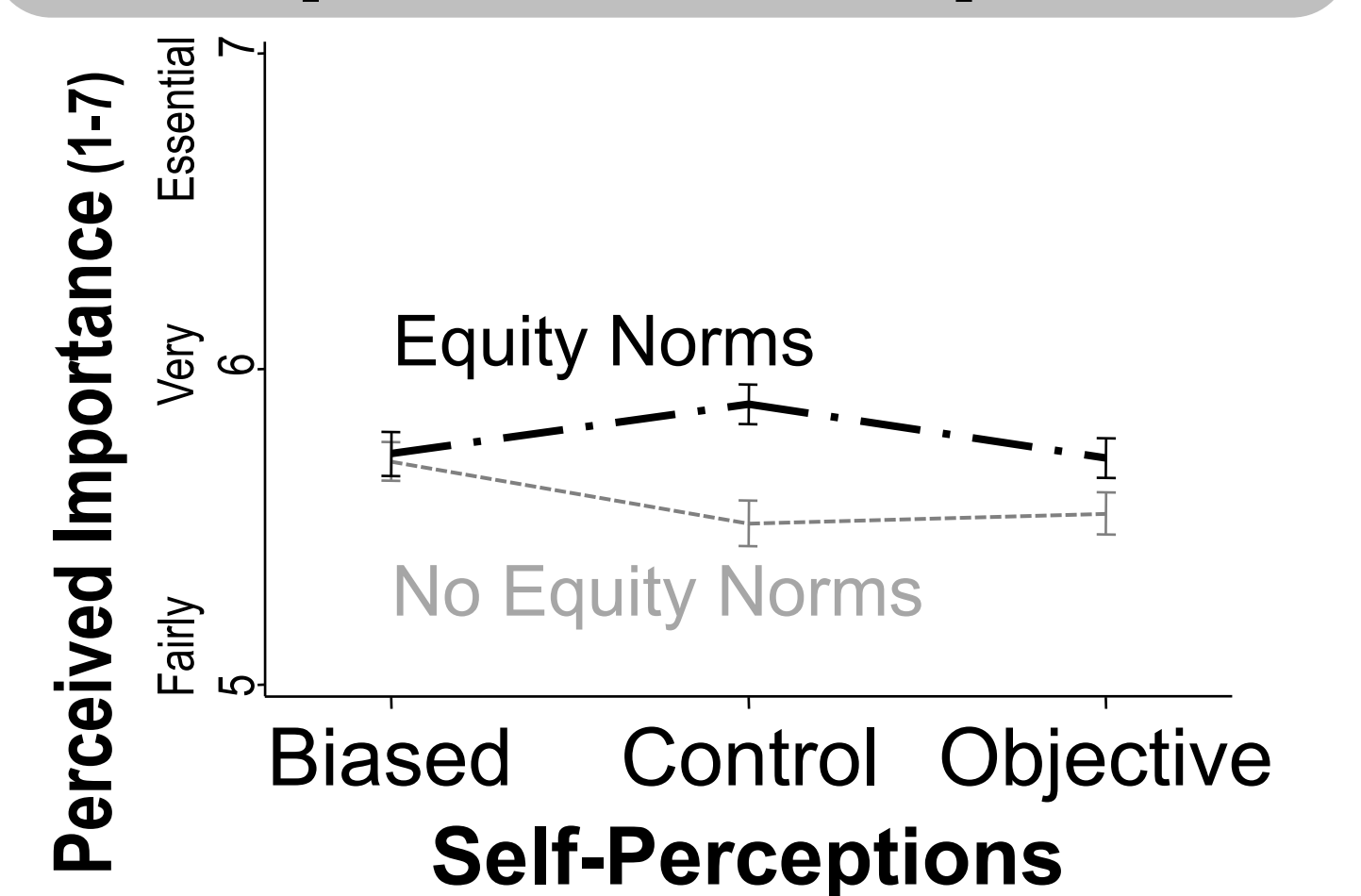


Results

Casualty & equity norms (con't)

Expertise: Regardless of age, the presence of equity norms significantly increased the perceived importance of expertise ($d = 0.18$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$), though this effect interacted with participants' self-perceptions ($\eta_p^2 = .005$).

3. Importance of Expertise



Expertise Predicted Hiring Decisions:

The positive relationship between hiring decisions and the perceived importance of expertise in that hiring decision was significantly stronger in the control condition ($\beta = .367$) than in the self-biased ($\beta = .128$) or the self-objective ($\beta = .177$) conditions. This suggests that when individuals already thought of themselves as being objective, they were less affected by environmental priming to be equitable. Although further research is needed, this suggests that when individuals perceive themselves to be objective, anti-bias interventions may be less effective.

Summary

Although the presence of an Equal Opportunity statement increased enthusiasm for both candidates, it did not reduce age discrimination, at least when individuals thought of themselves as objective. Instead, the presence of equity norms increased *casualty* (Norton, Vandello, & Darley, 2004) by affecting individuals' perceptions that their decisions had been more reliant on expertise and less reliant on age. This suggests that individuals were unable to adequately identify and correct for age biases (Wilson & Brekke, 1994).

References

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