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Emotions at Work

The Role of Affects in Recruitment

by Lauren A. Rivera

Are hiring decisions based on objective facts and rational thinking? Contrary to what portrayals of *homo economicus* suggest, emotion is a fundamental basis of decision-making. This is especially true when it comes to candidate evaluation, as Lauren Rivera shows in her study of the recruitment process in elite professional service firms.

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The dominant scholarly model of labor markets presents personnel decisions as based predominantly on objective, detached assessments of worker productivity. Even in sociology, where literature on discrimination highlights systematic biases in employers' assessments, employers are generally still portrayed as human-capital maximizers, basing evaluations of workers on rational calculations of whose cognitive skills best match the technical demands of a job.[1] However, robust literatures in

[1] Pager, Devah, and Hana Shepherd, "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets" in *Annual Review of Sociology* 34, 2008, pp. 181-208.

cultural sociology, cultural anthropology, and psychology highlight the relevance of symbolic processes for evaluation across numerous domains of social life.[2] Here, I highlight the importance of one symbolic factor that influences how employers evaluate workers in hiring decisions: emotion.[3]

Emotion and Evaluation

Employers' emotions are conspicuously absent from traditional sociological scholarship on personnel decisions in general and hiring decisions in particular. When mentioned, they are portrayed as undesirable intrusions into systematic estimates of productivity, in the form of error, noise, or discrimination via racial animus.[4] Yet, contrary to portrayals of *homo economicus*, emotion is a fundamental basis of decision-making.[5] How we choose which soap to use, which house to buy, or whom to marry is of course intimately intertwined with not only how these entities perform but also how they make us feel.[6] Emotion does not simply make us feel good after we have made a decision; it serves as a fundamental basis by which we compare, evaluate, and select among alternatives in nearly all domains of social life.[7] In the case of hiring (as those who have ever sat on a recruitment committee can attest), subjective feelings a bout job candidates—not just concerns about skills or productivity—can sway the direction of a search.

Furthermore, the workplace is not only a site of task execution and skills application but also one of socioemotional experience and intimacy.[8] Many people

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[2] Lamont, Michèle, "Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation", in *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, 2012, pp. 201- 221.

[3] This chapter is adapted from: Rivera, Lauren A., "Go with Your Gut: Emotion and Evaluation in Job Interviews." *American Journal of Sociology* 120, 2015, pp. 1339-89.

[4] Bandelj, Nina, "Emotions in Economic Action and Interaction" in *Theory and Society* 8, 2009, pp. 347–366. See also Fernandez, Roberto, and Jason Greenberg, "Race, Network Hiring, and Statistical Discrimination," in *Research in the Sociology of Work* 24, 2013, pp. 81-102.

[5] Lawler, Edward, and Shane Thye, "Bringing Emotions into Social Exchange Theory", *Annual Review of Sociology* 25, 1999, p. 217. Thoits, Peggy, "The Sociology of Emotions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15, 1989, pp. 317-42.

[6] Lerner, Jennifer, and Larissa Tiedens, "Portrait of the Angry Decision Maker: How Appraisal Tendencies Shape Anger's Influence on Cognition" in *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 19, 2006, pp. 115-137.

[7] Keltner, Dacher, and Jennifer Lerner, "Emotion" pp. 317-352 in *Handbook of Social Psychology,* edited by S.Fiske and D.Gilbert, Hoboken, Wiley, 2010.

[8] Hochschild, Arlie, *The Managed Heart,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.

spend the bulk of their waking lives at work, and positive emotional connections with co-workers can provide employees with enhanced job satisfaction, organizational attachment, and meaning in their lives .[9] Burgeoning qualitative evidence suggests that employers actively seek workers whom they believe will not only successfully execute job functions but also make them feel good on and off the job.[10]

Despite their relevance for decision-making in general and hiring in particular, employers' emotional reactions have received minimal theoretical and empirical attention in mainstream sociological models of how employers hire. Drawing from a larger study of hiring in elite professional service firms,[11] I show here that employers' emotional reactions to candidates are crucial mechanisms of candidate evaluation.

Methods

I study hiring for entry-level jobs to top-tier investment banks, management consulting firms, and law firms. These jobs are highly competitive, and the stakes of obtaining them is high: positions catapult recently minted undergraduate and graduate degree holders into the top echelons of the U.S. and global economies. While there are differences between industries, work within these firms is extremely time-intensive and requires similar social and cognitive skills; firms also share recruiting and hiring procedures. [12] I conducted 120 semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in undergraduate and graduate hiring decisions in top-tier firms (40 per industry). Participants included hiring partners, managing directors, and mid-level employees who conduct interviews and screen résumés. I recruited participants through stratified sampling from public directories of recruiting contacts, university alumni directories, and multi-sited referral chains. Interviews typically lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, took place at the time and location of the participant's choosing, and were tape-recorded and transcribed word-for-word when participants consented. Following Lamont's protocol for probing evaluative criteria, I

[9] Hodson, Randy, *Dignity at Work*, New York,, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
[10] Rivera, Lauren A, "Hiring as Cultural Matching", in *American Sociological Review* 77, 2012, pp. 999-1022. Sharone, Ofer, *Flawed System/Flawed Self*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.
[11] Rivera, Lauren A, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University, 2015b
[12] Rivera 2015b.

asked evaluators specific questions about what qualities they look for and about candidates whom they recently interviewed.[13]

I coded interview transcripts for criteria and mechanisms of candidate evaluation. Following Charmaz's approach to grounded theory, I developed coding categories inductively and refined them in tandem with data analysis.[14] In primary coding rounds, I coded transcripts line by line, paying particular attention to mentions of any criterion or mechanism that participants used to evaluate candidates. In inductive fashion, I did not set out to analyze emotion, nor did my interview protocol contain specific questions about emotion. However, when first coding the data I noticed the high frequency with which employers spontaneously reported using emotion in evaluation, and I developed secondary codes to capture various uses and sources of emotion as well as meanings employers attached to particular emotional states. I quantified and compared code frequencies using the data analysis software ATLAS-ti.

Go with your gut

Whereas traditional accounts of hiring treat employers' emotions as peripheral, evaluators described using their emotional responses to candidates as a central means of assessing candidates and making hiring decisions. Nearly 80% of participants spontaneously reported using their emotions to evaluate job candidates, making it the second most common mechanism of evaluation in my study, ranking in prevalence only behind homophily.

Evaluators insisted that value was not something that they could cognitively ascertain from candidates' "paper" résumé qualifications alone. Rather, it was something that they felt. "Gut," as evaluators commonly referred to their personal emotional responses to candidates, was a crucial way they evaluated and compared them, *especially at the job interview stage*. When describing how she evaluates candidates, a legal recruitment director summarized, "A lot of it is complete gut instinct." Many likened assessing interviewees to the selection of romantic partners, arguing that emotional factors were central. One banker summarized, "It's like

[13] Lamont, Michèle, *How Professors Think,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009.
[14] Charmaz, Kathy, "Grounded Theory" in *Contemporary Field Research,* edited by R. Emerson, Prospect Heights, Waveland Press, 2001, pp. 335–52.

dating...You meet a lot of people and then sometimes there's just chemistry. You just know it in your gut. We try to make it 'objective' by having trainings to tell us what to ask and what not to ask and by having evaluations, but ultimately it's just something you feel."

Many evaluators believed that using emotion in candidate evaluation was inevitable, commonly referring to it in terms of "human nature" or "instinct." Indeed, people have short attention spans. Ambady and Weisbuch discuss how people typically develop an impression of a person within minutes or even seconds of encountering them; these initial impressions are very resistant to change.[15] According to Iyengar in hiring, interviewers tend to decide whether they will recommend a candidate within the first several minutes of meeting them and subsequently cherry-pick information to confirm their initial impressions.[16] Similarly, my participants described how they and other interviewers tended to "check out" from an interview or "fall in love" with a candidate based on the first few minutes of conversation.

Likewise, psychologists have shown that individuals experiencing positive feelings overweigh other people's strengths in evaluation and discount their weaknesses. Conversely, those experiencing negative feelings exaggerate others' weaknesses and discount their strengths. Moreover, people use their feelings as measures of quality, assuming that people who make them feel good are good.[17] A consulting partner observed similar trends over his years running recruitment for his office:

"Interviewers tend to fall in love with candidates. If they really like them from the first few moments of conversation, they'll be rooting for them throughout the rest of the interview. They'll end up overrating them on all the dimensions. And if they don't fall in love, they overweigh the candidate's weak spots."

Moreover, the emotion culture[18] of these firms was one in which emotions were perceived as legitimate ways to make hiring decisions. The ideal worker[19] was not only

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[15] Ambady, Nalini, and Max Weisbuch, "Nonverbal Behavior," Pp. 464-97 in S.Fiske and D.Gilbert (Eds) *Handbook of Social Psychology,* Hoboken, Wiley, 2010.
[16] Iyengar, Sheena, *The Art of Choosing,* New York, Twelve Books, 2010.
[17] Clore, Gerald, and Justin Storbeck, "Affect as Information about Liking, Efficacy, and Importance" in *Hearts and Minds*, New York, Psychology Press, 2006, pp. 123-142.
[18] Gordon, Steven, "The Sociology of Sentiments and Emotions," in M.Rosenberg & R.Turner (Eds),*Social Psychology*, New York, Basic Books, 1981, pp. 562-92.
[19] Acker, Joan, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," in *Gender and Society* 4, 1990, pp. 139–58.

a competent colleague but also a fun and exciting playmate. Evaluators sought new hires with whom they could envision themselves developing intimate relationships on and off the job.[20] They believed doing so would make long workweeks more enjoyable, although not necessarily more productive or successful. A crucial means of assessing whether a candidate would make a good playmate was how he/she made the interviewer feel. A consultant explained why emotion was a legitimate selection tool. "It's like a marriage," he asserted. "Would you marry someone who was perfect for you on paper but didn't make you feel good? Of course, you wouldn't. You'd be miserable." Such perspectives were institutionalized in firms' official recruitment policies, which mandated that evaluators select candidates they believed would "fit in" culturally and socially with existing employees. In job interviews, they commonly judged cultural fit by whether they experienced feelings of "chemistry" when interacting with applicants.

Evaluators saw using emotion in hiring as not only legitimate but also effective. Many believed that their emotional reactions to candidates were more reliable metrics of candidate quality than résumé characteristics. They frequently described candidate assessment as "an art, not science." Some insisted that sticking to "paper" qualifications would lead them to miss great candidates who, for some reason, fell below threshold on these metrics. A banker explained:

> "I think I can pick out great people...You shouldn't shun someone based on what's on paper. There's [sic] plenty of people I've interviewed [that]... don't have the [right work] experience but I've just gotten like good gut feelings about them."

In fact, firms purposely structured evaluation around the principle that individual value was best assessed subjectively through the eyes and hearts of the beholder. Although firms set out specific qualities that evaluators should assess, such as fit, intelligence, and communication skills, they typically left the measurement and weighting of these criteria up to the discretion of individual evaluators. A law firm hiring manager described why her firm left evaluation open, asserting, "Our attorneys bring their own styles to interviews...We trust their instincts."

Finally, evaluators believed that using emotions to make hiring decisions was efficient. Firms in these industries have each year way more applicants than they can hire; many have lower acceptance rates than the best U.S. universities. Even after narrowing résumés by educational prestige, a basic grade floor, and extracurriculars, firms still needed to cut down the applicant pool, commonly by more than half.

[20] Rivera 2012.

Employers could have screened more intensively on class rank, relevant coursework, relevant work experience, writing skills, standardized test performance, or diversity—as applicants varied substantially along these lines—but they did not. Part of this was driven by the aforementioned distrust of résumés and beliefs that emotions were legitimate, effective decision-making tools. But part was also due to practical constraints. Evaluators in these firms were not HR officials but rather revenue-generating professionals who balanced recruitment with full-time client work. The tradeoff between time, effort, and evaluative rigor was top-of-mind for them; they perceived gut as a fast, easy way to distinguish between multiple applicants. A consultant explained:

> "While I don't think it's always fair to base this judgment [of who to hire] on how you feel... I can't think of a more efficient way of doing it because you know you have to balance the ability to evaluate a candidate with time."

The importance of excitement

Most evaluators believed that going with their gut was a legitimate, effective, and efficient means of evaluating candidates at the job interview stage. They used a number of emotions when evaluating candidates, but the most common was excitement. [21] Evaluators described how perceptions of competence, although necessary, were insufficient for giving a candidate a positive hiring recommendation. Candidates also had to generate strong, positive emotions—most commonly excitement—from their evaluators. A banker explained, "Most of the people that are borderline for me...they don't really get me excited about them." A consulting partner concurred, "You see people who are like...there is nothing wrong... they did a solid job but there wasn't a spark." Without generating such emotional sparks in at least one evaluator, even a highly competent candidate was unlikely to receive an offer. A law firm partner summarized, "You see people who have got the grades and they have great résumés and good references but you know people are like, 'Where's the enthusiasm [for them]?'...Yeah, they got good grades in our range, the résumé's solid, but they don't get offers at our firm because it's like, 'Oh well, there's no enthusiasm

[21] Rivera, Lauren Aristote "Go with Your Gut: Emotion and Evaluation in Job Interviews," in *American Journal of Sociology* 120, 2015a, 1339-89.

for this person [from their interviewers]." An attorney elaborated on the tension between competence and excitement in selecting new hires:

> "I once read this newspaper article about the Bush-Gore election about how the reason Bush won the election was just because most Americans thought that Gore is someone who is really smart but Bush is someone that they'd rather have a beer with. And I think that quality—it's something that you can't explain or articulate—plays into every interview, whether a person is willing to admit it or not. You think, "Is this someone I want to hang out with? Just someone who'd I'd rather go and get a beer with after work?" They need to be able to light up an interview like that; they have to make me think that they're cool...you have to be excited about them."

It is important to note that excitement differs from liking. Excitement is a high-arousal, forward-looking state in which one anticipates receiving future social or material rewards.[22] Liking is a lower-arousal, more generalized positive evaluative sentiment towards another.[23] Moreover, although they may coexist, liking and excitement do not always co-occur. Furthermore, evaluators discussed how, while common, liking was not a strong enough emotion to motivate action. A lawyer explained, "Most of the people I interview I like. But they don't overwhelm me either way...there has to be something that makes me excited about them [for me] to pass them on." Consequently, although evaluators also used liking in evaluation, feelings of excitement were described as being more crucial in evaluation. Such findings are consistent with neuroscience research showing that liking and excitement involve different neurological pathways, and that the latter is more consequential for motivating action.[24]

While I present a full theory of emotion development elsewhere,[25] feelings of excitement experienced immediately before interviews as well as during the first few moments of conversation were crucial sources of evaluation: they served as a halo that colored all other impressions of candidates, including perceptions of their hard and soft skills. Participants openly discussed qualities that produced feelings of excitement in initial encounters. Similarities in background and leisure interests as well as

[22] Johnson, Cathryn, Rebecca Ford, and Joanne Kaufman, "Emotional Reactions to Conflict: Do Dependence and Legitimacy Matter?" *Social Forces* 79, 2000, pp. 107-137.
[23] Thoits 1989.
[24] Berridge, Kent, and Terry Robinson, "Parsing Reward," *TRENDS in Neurosciences* 26, 2003, pp. 507-13
[25] Rivera 2015a.

candidates' own emotional displays, notably their levels of excitement, were most common.

Conclusion

When articulating the criteria they use to evaluate candidates in job interviews, less than a quarter of participants listed competence, intelligence, or any technical skill as the most important. Instead, they emphasized their personal emotional reactions to candidates. They sought new hires who not only were competent but also pumped them up with feelings of excitement; with whom they personally feel a sense of fit and chemistry; and with whom they can foresee developing intimate, personally gratifying relationships (not just collegial or trusting ones) on and off the job. In many respects, the way employers hire in the banking, legal and consulting professions may bear a closer resemblance to the selection of friends or romantic partners than how sociologists typically portray the decision to hire. Thus, far from mere error, noise, or discrimination, emotional reactions to job candidates are active, meaningful, and patterned bases on which real-life employers evaluate applicants and make hiring decisions.

Using emotion to evaluate workers is not unique to hiring or elite professional device firms. Inspired by psychological research showing that emotion can facilitate judgment[26] and several high-profile CEOs who publicly attribute their most successful business decisions to gut, an entire industry touting the intelligence of emotions has emerged within the management world.[27] A slew of popular press books, management publications, and self-help gurus depict going with your gut as more effective and efficient than systematic reasoning.[28] Many corporate managers have internalized this notion; one survey estimated that 45 percent of managers reported relying more on their gut than on facts and figures in running their businesses.[29] Drawing from such ideas, some evaluators in my sample directly cited popular press books and articles they had read about the wisdom of emotions, such as Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*.[30]

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[26] Damasio, Antonio, *Descartes' Error,* New York, Penguin, 2005.
[27] Bandelj 2009.
[28] Hayashi, Alden, "When to Trust Your Gut", *Harvard Business Review*, February 2001.
[29] Bonabeau, Eric, "Don't Trust Your Gut", *Harvard Business Review*, May 2003.
[30] Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink. The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Back Bay Books, 2005.

It is important to emphasize that emotion and reason are not mutually exclusive; they work together in decision making. Nor do I claim that qualifications or assessments of skill do not matter in hiring or other types of personnel decisions; indeed in this and other contexts they do. Rather, to fully understand how employers make hiring decisions in real life, it is necessary to consider emotional factors in addition to more commonly studied evaluative metrics and processes. Incorporating emotional factors can help scholars more accurately model reality from the perspective of employers and better understand the mechanisms underlying the hiring decisions they make.

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