

Stereotypes, bias and personnel decisions

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In an article in the December issue of the journal *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Frank J. Landy questions research that is said to demonstrate that stereotypes about social groups bias personnel decisions. He argues that this research is based on faulty methods of studying the question. However, in one of 13 commentaries on Landy's article in the same issue, Madeline Heilman and Alice Eagly take issue with Landy's conclusions.

Landy reviewed experimental research on discrimination and stereotyping, including research that purports to assess automatic, or implicit, associations made about social groups. While conceding that stereotypes might play a role in the evaluation of one stranger by another, Landy argues that this research is so distant from most real work decisions (e.g. promotion, pay increase, or termination), where decision makers have experience with and information about the target of the decision, that it is largely useless for understanding employment discrimination .

He focuses on "stranger to stranger" experiments in which college students play the role of managers making decisions about hypothetical employees. Landy maintains that findings from such research cannot be generalized to the broader issues related to promotions, wage changes, or lay offs.

In contrast, Heilman and Eagly argue that experiments with college students provide only part of the research evidence concerning biased personnel decisions. They point out that research on discrimination and

stereotyping occurs in natural as well as laboratory settings. They also present evidence challenging Landy's assertion that knowing someone nullifies the effects of stereotypes on decision making. Similarly, they dispute his assertion that rapidly changing work conditions negate the findings of existing research.

Heilman and Eagly maintain that understanding of sex and race discrimination gains from a wide variety of research methods, including laboratory experiments. They also argue that a comprehensive, validated theory about the conditions that promote or restrain discrimination allows generalization to the workplace regardless of time and place.

Source: Wiley

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