

Professionals often attribute applicants' success to personal traits, not circumstance

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Professionals evaluating graduate school or job applicants frequently attribute applicants' credentials to their personal qualities rather than their circumstances, according to research published July 24 in the open access journal *PLoS ONE* by Samuel Swift from the University of California, Berkeley and colleagues from other institutions.

Higher grading schools and [work environments](#) that make it easier to succeed can play a significant role in inflating applicants' qualifications. In this study, participants were presented fictitious examples of graduate school applicants with high GPAs from schools with higher grade distributions than students who had lower GPAs from lower-grading schools.

The researchers found that participants were more likely to select applicants with high GPAs from higher-grading schools than those who had lower GPAs from lower-grading schools, and their higher grades were also more likely to be attributed to the applicants' individual traits, rather than the school they attended. Similar results were seen when participants were asked to evaluate managers up for a promotion in a business scenario. The study concludes, "Our results indicate that candidates who have demonstrated high performance thanks to favorable situations are more likely to be rated highly and selected. Across all our studies, the results suggest that experts take high performance as evidence of high ability and do not sufficiently discount it by the ease with which that performance was achieved."

Swift explains, "Professionals' admissions and hiring did not differentiate the truly skilled from the fortunate and made their evaluations and selections accordingly. Results from both experimental lab studies and field data from tens of thousands of real MBA admissions decisions show that the good fortune of a favorable situation is just as important as skill and effort in getting hired or admitted."

More information: *PLoS ONE* 8(7): e69258.
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