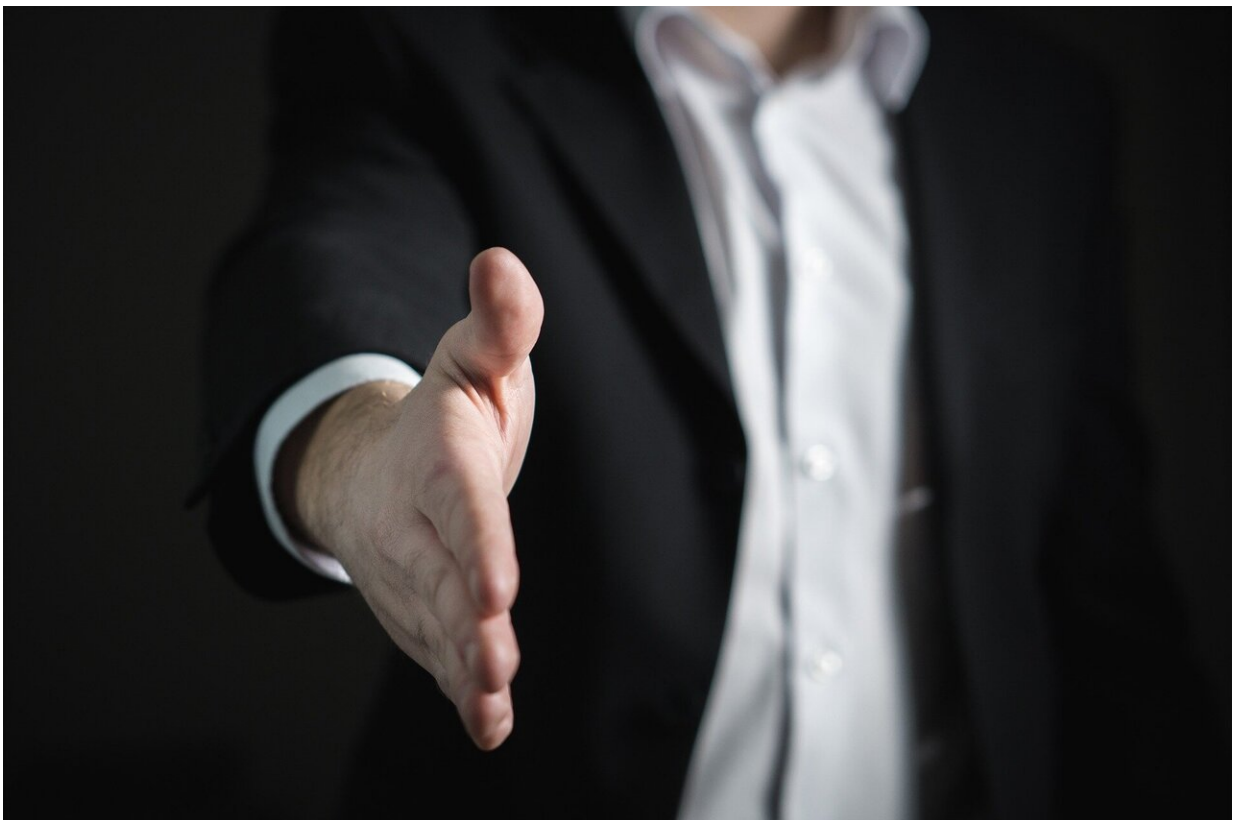


When hiring a candidate, knowing about socioeconomic disparities impacts fairness perceptions, study finds

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Both liberals and conservatives are more likely to believe that merit-based hiring is unfair after learning about the impacts of socioeconomic

disparities, according to a study [published](#) in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

People from across the [political spectrum](#) also are more likely to support programs that encourage socioeconomic diversity after learning about the effects of social class and low income, according to the research.

"Socioeconomic disadvantages early in life can undermine [educational achievement](#), test scores and work experiences. In this way, inequality can undermine equal opportunity," said lead researcher Daniela Goya-Tocchetto, Ph.D., an assistant professor of organization and human resources at the University at Buffalo-State University of New York.

"Yet when we evaluate the fairness of merit-based processes, people tend to ignore this broader context and the effects of inequality."

The researchers conducted five online experiments with a total of more than 3,300 participants. In two experiments, participants read about a merit-based hiring or promotion process where the most qualified candidate would be selected.

Half of the participants weren't given any additional information, while the other half were informed about the past socioeconomic disadvantages for one candidate and the advantages for another candidate. Both liberal and conservative participants who received the background information perceived the merit-based hiring or promotion process as less fair with less equal opportunity.

In two additional experiments, participants also found merit-based hiring or promotions to be less fair after learning how low income can hinder educational opportunities and career advancement.

A final experiment found that knowledge about socioeconomic

disparities increased support for hiring programs that seek to foster social class diversity, such as removing the names of prestigious universities or companies from resumes and making prior internships a lesser requirement for being hired.

The experiments didn't include race as a factor so the findings may have been different if race had been the focus instead of socioeconomic disadvantages, Goya-Tocchetto said.

Prior research has found that learning about racial inequity can lead to defensiveness among white conservatives. Conservative participants in the current research were more likely to believe that merit-based hiring and promotion were fair in general, but they still adjusted their fairness perceptions after learning about socioeconomic disparities.

Programs meant to address [racial diversity](#) have been more polarizing with a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling limiting affirmative action admissions policies at colleges and universities. Conservative groups also have filed lawsuits against racial diversity programs at various companies and [government programs](#) that support minority-owned businesses.

Workforce diversity programs that focus on addressing socioeconomic disadvantages may avoid some political backlash and still help increase racial diversity, Goya-Tocchetto said.

"Members of marginalized racial groups tend to experience socioeconomic disadvantages more often than members of privileged racial groups, and the negative consequences of these disadvantages can be even worse for racial minorities," she said.

"Focusing on socioeconomic considerations could garner more support and still help address racial inequality."

Hiring managers should learn about the effects of socioeconomic inequalities on access to opportunities and consider a broader range of work experience when evaluating different candidates, Goya-Tocchetto said.

More information: Can Selecting the Most Qualified Candidate Be Unfair? Learning About Socioeconomic Advantages and Disadvantages Reduces the Perceived Fairness of Meritocracy and Increases Support for Socioeconomic Diversity Initiatives in Organizations, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.1037/xge0001525](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001525)

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