

How your scar or birthmark can affect your job interview

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Credit: Rice University

If you're interviewing for a job and you have a mole on your face, new research indicates you might want to say something about it—right away.

Birthmarks, moles and scars may impact how a job applicant is evaluated during a Skype [interview](#), but employers are less likely to focus on facial imperfections when the interviewee acknowledges them up front, according to a newly published study from Rice University and the University of Houston.

The study, "To Look or Not to Look: Acknowledging Facial Stigmas in the Interview to Reduce Discrimination," examines how facial imperfections play a role in the interview process and it appears in the current edition of *Personnel Assessment and Decisions*. It was written by Rice alumnus Juan Madera '08, associate professor of management at the University of Houston's Hilton College, and Mikki Hebl, the Martha and Henry Malcom Lovett Chair of Psychology at Rice.

The researchers conducted an experiment with 112 people who reviewed a series of 8-minute mock job interviews. The study participants listened to a computer-mediated interview while looking at a picture of someone with a [scar](#) or a port wine stain. Half of the "applicants" acknowledged their facial stigma within the first minute of the interview, and the other half did not. After the interviews, the 112 participants took a survey.

The researchers found that when an interviewee said something about the facial imperfection, the people in the study were less likely to pay attention to it throughout the interview process.

"Facial stigmas draw attention during social interactions, including interviews," Madera said. "Our experiment showed that it draws attention at the start of an interaction, and then people look away. Seconds later they look back at it, and this cycle of looking back and forth is continuous. We theorize that people try to make sense of it. They may ask themselves, "What is it?" "How did they get that?" "Is it from an accident?" or "Were they born with it?" In an interview setting, an interviewer also needs to pay attention to an applicant's answers, which is

probably why they continuously look away from it."

"Our research shows that if a person does not acknowledge their facial scar, people seem to get stuck in a vicious cycle of staring at the scar and looking away, only to return to looking at it again," Hebl said.

"Importantly, acknowledging the scar immediately heightens people's attention to it, but then that attention dissipates. They seem to have figured out what and why it is there, and it no longer become worthy of their attention."

The work builds on previous research by Hebl and Madera in the field of how looks matter, including the relationship between facial imperfections and the traditional interview process. A previous study illustrated how interviewers recalled fewer details about interviewees who had birthmarks, moles or other facial blemishes.

The researchers hope the study will bring attention to this form of workplace discrimination and illustrate how physical features can impact the interview process. "It is ironic that sometimes bringing attention to something can lessen its impact," Hebl said.

Provided by Rice University

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