

Cultural Reproduction in the Labor Market: Homophily in Hiring

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Abstract

Homophily - defined here as the preference for others similar to oneself - plays a crucial role in shaping the structure and content of individuals' personal and professional associations. However, the sociological literature on homophily suffers from two primary gaps: (1) the social and cultural mechanisms underlying homophilic effects are underspecified, and (2) whether particular types of characteristics are stronger sources of interpersonal attraction than others remains unexamined. Using qualitative and quantitative evidence from hiring decisions in professional service firms, I investigate the role of homophily in job interviews. Based on interviews with evaluators, ethnographic observation of a hiring committee, and quantitative analysis of hiring records, I develop a typology of homophilic mechanisms in hiring. I then argue that in this elite, primarily upper-middle class segment of the labor market, homophily on the basis of cultural and experiential similarities (i.e., matches in tastes, lifestyles, and extra-curricular pursuits) outweigh similarities based on ascriptive characteristics alone. To support this, I use fixed effects modeling to show that race and gender matches between interviewers and interviewees do not significantly boost evaluations of candidate performance; in fact, such matches actually decrease ratings of interpersonal competence for women and ethnic minorities. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for recent developments in cultural sociology, organizational studies, and social inequality.