
**Retort: Dermatology resident
application photos: A trigger of
implicit bias?**



I applaud James et al for their advocacy for an impartial complex residency application process.¹ Pursuing objectivity is challenging with the ample data accompanying each application, augmented by applicants and programs strategizing for favorable outcomes. However, a prescriptive approach to eliminate head shots from applications fails to appreciate slippery-slope ethical arguments and conjecture about such a suggestion.

Firstly, if optimizing objectivity is the ambition, logical next steps include removing elements that may trigger implicit bias—something that, at face value, seems aspirational. Elimination of potential factors that tempt implicit bias would include removal of standard residency application content, some even acknowledged by the authors. Removing all content that may elicit bias would prompt blinded reviews, including removal of personal data such as names, age, race, sex, gender identity, ethnicity, language proficiencies, birthplace, or even addresses. Each can prompt bias and result in discrimination. One could also consider removing institutions attended, research publications/experience, letters of recommendation, personal statements, and test scores, all of which may precipitate degrees of bias regarding their legitimacy, applicability, and significance when it comes to selection of residency candidates. Each component of the application has potential to entice biases based on specific protected classes, performance in specific areas, or even demographics that reviewers may implicitly or explicitly weigh differently.

Moreover, removal of data that may stimulate biases can have unintended consequences of impeding diversity efforts. To suggest that removal of photographs will result in increased diversity ignores the reality of conflicting research of outcomes in which diversity goals are hampered with blinded reviews.^{2,3} Without clarity regarding what truly happens when reviewers are blinded, there actually may be a role for explicit bias to achieve goals of inclusion and diversity. This is uncomfortable for virtue-obsessed academicians challenged to reconcile historical inequities by the use of intentional bias.

Although it could seem obvious that photographs may elicit bias, some data suggest that outcomes may not necessarily be affected by them. Similar to the

discussion of the research reported by Corcimaru et al,⁴ the authors also errantly attribute match outcomes to bias. They simply do not acknowledge that the outcome may prove an association between photographic characteristics and match rate, but they do not definitively demonstrate bias.⁴ Furthermore, Kassam et al⁵ showed that although photographs may correlate with matching, it does not follow that reviewers are biased regarding the photographs because the match rate was the same whether reviewers were shown head shots or not.

Although I appreciate goals of minimizing unwarranted bias, indiscriminate removal of application standards that may conceivably incite bias without removal of others suggests...bias. Consideration should be not to eliminate biases, but to properly manage them. With holistic application reviews becoming the norm, considering all elements, each of which may elicit bias, allows programs to appraise application components that may variably affect the goals and values of each unique program. If all-inclusive diversity is the stated goal, so that the workforce matches the diversity of the population, then there may have to be concessions of impartiality to get there.

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Conflicts of interest

None disclosed.

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