A Study of Biases in Perception

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As humans, we like to believe that we are fully in control of our minds. However, we are discovering that subconscious biases greatly affect our perceptions. Learning more about the roots of these misperceptions could lead to methods to mitigate them. Since the teenage years are an important time for the brain to develop connections, adolescents may be key to understanding how underlying judgements are formed. This study examines the effects of gender bias and handwriting bias on the perception of high school students. A short candidate statement for a fictitious school election was written, then reproduced with two differences: the gender of the alleged author (male, female, or unspecified) and the presentation of writing (messy handwriting, neat handwriting, or typed). 586 high school students each received a random version of the text, then evaluated the statement and its author on a five-point scale in four qualities: competence, likability, intelligence, and writing quality. Authors of statements written in messy handwriting were evaluated in the lowest two categories for all qualities more often than authors of statements written in neat handwriting, suggesting that presentation affects the perception not only of the text, but also of the author. This study showed no evidence of a gender bias. These results may be applicable in many areas, including hiring decisions and the grading of standardized tests. Further research might include mitigating the effects of handwriting bias, finding the effects of gender bias in different age groups, and exploring how the adolescent brain processes biases.

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