

Kisses of Death in the Psychology Faculty Hiring Process

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Abstract

Competition for full-time psychology faculty positions is intense, and some behaviors and types of information could lead to the rejection of even highly qualified candidates; the current research explored these so-called kisses of death in the hiring process. Qualitative analysis of faculty reports of kisses of death in Study 1 ($N = 155$) produced seven categories: lack of collegiality, questionable qualifications, lack of professional polish, poor preparation, lack of fit, poorly constructed materials, and lack of enthusiasm. Study 2 ($N = 297$) explored the severity of kisses of death. Ratings of the severity of lack of collegiality, professionalism, preparation, and enthusiasm were similar across baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral institutions, but teaching- and research-related kisses of death showed significant differences. The results suggest that, in addition to building basic qualifications, aspiring faculty should be aware of the skills and strategies that will allow them to avoid kisses of death in the hiring process.

Keywords

college teachers, teacher recruitment, job applicant interviews, applicant selection, occupational success

Aspiring psychology faculty face mixed messages about their chances of finding full-time employment. On the optimistic side, college teaching is a stable profession with 1.3 million people employed as of 2014 and a projected 13% increase by 2024 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In psychology specifically, the number of students graduating at every degree level is increasing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017), and departments are hiring both new and replacement faculty (Hart, Finno, Kohout, & Wicherski, 2009; Morphew, Ward, & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). On the pessimistic side, the ratio of full-time faculty per student is on the decline across all types of 4-year colleges and universities (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014), and more than 50% of faculty are now part-time employees (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2017). As such, the average tenure-track positions in psychology receive about 50 applications, and there may be 100–200 applicants for highly desirable positions (Benson & Buskist, 2005; Sheehan & Haselhorst, 1999; Sheehan, McDevitt, & Ross, 1998; Troisi, Christopher, & Batsell, 2014). Overall, full-time faculty positions in psychology continue to be available, but the process of applying and interviewing for the jobs is intensely competitive. Thus, psychologists seeking faculty positions should be motivated to maximize their strengths as applicants and avoid unnecessary errors that lead to immediate rejection, errors otherwise known as kisses of death. The purpose of the current research is to define and examine institutional differences in the perception of kisses of death in the hiring of psychology faculty at 4-year colleges and universities.

Applicants seeking advice on the academic job search process will find extensive guidance in the published literature.

Searching, applying, and interviewing for faculty positions is complex enough that there are several book-length guides written for a cross-disciplinary audience (e.g., Kelsky, 2015; Vick, Furlong, & Lurie, 2016). Within psychology, there are numerous publications offering wisdom and advice from both the applicant's perspective and the search committee's perspective (Brems, Lampman, & Johnson, 1995; Darley & Zanna, 2004; Horner, Pape, & O'Connor, 2001; Huang-Pollock & Mikami, 2007; Iacono, 1981; Wells, Schofield, Clerkin, & Sheets, 2013). There is even advice tailored to seeking jobs at specific types of higher education institutions (e.g., Ault, 2014; Sikorski & Bruce, 2014; Troisi et al., 2014). All of these resources are relevant, logical, and vital, but they are also anecdotal. Empirically based guidance is needed too.

Research on the hiring of psychology faculty, although relatively sparse, provides some clear indications of what qualities search committees are looking for when evaluating job candidates. According to surveys of search committee chairs, top factors influencing the success of applicants include fit with the position, teaching experience, research output, letters of recommendation, interview performance, and job talk performance (Benson & Buskist, 2005; Landrum & Clump, 2004; Sheehan & Haselhorst, 1999). Although

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psychology departments at all 4-year colleges and universities seek faculty with demonstrated competency in teaching, scholarship, and service, the importance of each factor varies based on institution type.

Research shows that the characteristics of successful job candidates are different at baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral institutions. When asked to rank the three most important variables in hiring faculty, search chairs at baccalaureate colleges ranked teaching experience first and teaching demonstrations second (Benson & Buskist, 2005). At master's universities, teaching experience was tied for first with job talks, closely followed by research presentations and publications. Among chairs at doctoral institutions, research presentations and publications were ranked first with no other variables approaching their level of importance. Similar trends emerged in a study of faculty descriptions of successful job talks (Boysen, Jones, Kaltwasser, & Thompson, 2018). Baccalaureate and master's faculty emphasized job talks as indicators of dedication to undergraduate education, and doctoral faculty emphasized job talks as indicators of research potential. As can be expected from their educational missions, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral institutions have varied definitions of success during the faculty interview process, and applicants who fail to heed institutional variations are making a mistake with the potential to end their candidacy.

Previous research has focused on defining the strengths of faculty job candidates, but there is also some information about candidates' mistakes. Qualitative evidence emerged from one study in which chairs reported errors made by applicants; the most common errors were giving a poor job talk and poor interpersonal behaviors (Sheehan et al., 1998). In another study, faculty answered open-ended questions about things candidates must avoid in order to conduct a successful teaching demonstration or research talk (Boysen et al., 2018). For teaching demonstrations, things to avoid included being boring, inaccurate, or obnoxious; for research talks, things to avoid included poor preparation, presenting weak research, or answering questions poorly (Boysen et al., 2018). Quantitative evidence emerged from one survey of search chairs that focused on candidates' strengths but also identified a few factors that can hurt candidates such as sending out generic cover letters and not addressing courses listed in the job advertisement (Landrum & Clump, 2004). Although past findings suggest that mistakes are important for candidates to consider, additional research is needed to provide a broader definition of mistakes, more extensive quantitative data, and comparisons between institution types.

The current research addresses the need for additional information about candidate mistakes in the faculty hiring process by adopting the kiss-of-death approach originally applied to personal statements for graduate school. Appleby and Appleby (2006) defined kisses of death as "aberrant types of information that cause graduate admissions committees to reject otherwise strong applicants" (p. 19). Kisses of death reported by graduate school selection committee members included poor personal statements, poor letters of

recommendation, ignorance about the program, poor writing, and inappropriate bragging or flattery. Appleby and Appleby's kiss-of-death approach provided specific and useful suggestions about the process of applying to graduate school, and it should be similarly useful if generalized to the process of applying and interviewing for faculty positions.

Study I

Study 1 consisted of a qualitative investigation of the mistakes made by candidates during the application and interview process for faculty positions at 4-year institutions. Full-time psychology faculty reported the types of behaviors or information that would lead to the rejection of otherwise qualified job candidates during the application and interview process. The research question was as follows: What do faculty perceive as kisses of death during the psychology faculty hiring process?

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 155$) consisted of full-time psychology faculty who were primarily male (53%) and White (85%; multiethnic = 5%, African American = 2%, Latino/Hispanic = 2%, American Indian/Alaskan Native = 1%, Asian American = 1%, and other = 4%). The average age was 49 ($SD = 11$). Participants reported working at baccalaureate (35%), doctoral (35%), and master's (29%) institutions, with majority of the institutions being private (57%). Participants estimated that 75% of their teaching responsibilities occurred at the undergraduate level. Experience with faculty hiring was extensive; 88% indicated that they had been on more than two faculty search committees, and 30% indicated that they had been on more than 10. Recruitment of participants occurred through random selection of 4-year institutions from the Carnegie Classification list; exclusion of 2-year colleges occurred because of their different hiring process (Frantz, Manber, & Neufeld, 2014; Twombly, 2005). Researchers examined college and university websites to obtain e-mail addresses for full-time psychology faculty. This process resulted in the collection of 540 e-mails (29% response rate). Participants received e-mails asking them to volunteer for a study on hiring of psychology faculty. As an inducement, participants could enter themselves into a lottery for a gift card.

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed a brief online survey asking them to list kisses of death in the hiring process for psychology faculty. Based on Appleby and Appleby's (2006) definition, the instructions defined kisses of death as "aberrant behaviors or types of information that cause hiring committees to reject otherwise strong job candidates." Three open-ended questions asked participants to list kisses of death related to (a) the job application process, (b) the job interview process, and (c) other aspects of hiring. Creation of a codebook and analysis of responses followed Hruschka et al.'s (2004) procedures. The final codebook included 28 kisses of death that fell into seven categories (see Table 1). Two researchers

Table 1. Study I Kiss of Death Frequencies.

Kiss of Death	% (f)
Evidence of being a difficult colleague (25%)	
Personality problems	8 (31)
Complaining or negativity about others	4 (17)
Lack of collegiality	4 (16)
Evidence of poor professional boundaries	4 (14)
Violation of law or work policy	3 (12)
Inappropriate negotiation tactics	1 (5)
Being difficult during administrative procedures	1 (2)
Questionable qualifications (17%)	
Poor research record	6 (24)
Education does not meet standards	4 (16)
Poor letters of recommendation	3 (13)
Inconsistent employment record	2 (8)
Poor teaching record	2 (6)
Lack of professional polish (16%)	
Unprofessional style in application materials	9 (37)
Poorly delivered answers to interview questions	3 (13)
Unprofessional dress or demeanor	2 (8)
Inarticulate communication	1 (6)
Poor preparation (16%)	
Not researching the school or department	12 (48)
Giving a bad research talk	3 (11)
Inability to explain information in materials	1 (5)
Lack of fit with the position or school (13%)	
Generic cover letter	4 (17)
Poor fit expressed in application materials	3 (13)
Expressing inability to meet job requirements in interview	3 (12)
Expressing poor fit during the interview	2 (9)
Poor construction of application materials (7%)	
Factual mistakes about the position	3 (13)
Badly constructed CV	3 (13)
Missing application materials	1 (2)
Lack of enthusiasm during interview (6%)	
Not showing enthusiasm for the position	3 (13)
Not asking questions	3 (12)

independently coded responses and resolved discrepancies in coding through discussion with the lead author.

Results and Discussion

Kisses of death in the faculty interview and hiring process fell into seven categories (see Table 1). The most frequent kiss of death was evidence that a candidate would be a difficult colleague. Faculty want to hire a candidate who is easy to get along with and who can follow the written and unwritten rules of professional decorum. Thus, candidates should, at all times, be friendly, polite, positive, obliging, and rule-abiding.

The second most frequent kiss of death was candidates having questionable qualifications. If their educational, research, or teaching record does not match the position, they will be rejected. Letters of recommendation and a consistent pattern of full-time employment establish candidates' bona fides, and any equivocality in them can lead to rejection. Although participants described qualifications as having the potential to be a kiss of death during the hiring process, qualifications are really

about the professional development of candidates and selection of positions, and to avoid them, aspiring faculty need to plan their careers with specific institutions in mind and select institutions that fit their qualifications when sending out job applications.

The third most common kiss of death was lack of professional polish. Being unprofessional in writing style, speaking style, or dress is a kiss of death. Faculty tend to look down upon basic writing errors, so it is essential to extensively edit application materials. Absence of professional polish also emerges when answers to interview questions are inarticulate; content matters but so does delivery. In hiring a candidate, faculty are choosing a representative of their department, and they want that person to have the comportment of a competent professional.

The fourth most common kiss of death was poor interview preparation. By the time a candidate is being interviewed, faculty expect them to be knowledgeable about the position, the department, and the college; ignorance can lead to rejection. Also, candidates may be rejected if they are asked to explain their record or materials and cannot do so accurately and convincingly. Another key aspect of preparing for on-campus interviews is designing a job talk, and poorly planned or executed job talks are a kiss of death.

The fifth most frequent category was expressions of poor fit with the position or the college. When applying for positions, all of the materials submitted must be tailored to the position and its requirements or they can serve as kisses of death. During the interview process, making statements that suggest an inability to commit to or meet an institution's standards for teaching, research, or service can lead to rejection. Across all aspects of the hiring process, even highly qualified applicants can end their candidacy by communicating that they are not a good match for the position.

The sixth most common category was poor construction of application materials. Errors related to the position, such as using the wrong college name or mentioning nonexistent programs, can lead to rejection. Also, having a disorganized, difficult-to-interpret, or padded CV can be a kiss of death. Candidates' materials are reviewed early in the hiring process, and even seemingly minor errors can lead to rejection as members of search committees seek to narrow the field.

The final kiss of death category was lack of enthusiasm during the interview process. Absence of enthusiasm can manifest through disinterest, expressions of favorability for other positions, or simply not seeming eager enough for the position. Another sign of enthusiasm is asking questions, and failure to be sufficiently inquisitive can be a kiss of death. Although candidates should apply for multiple faculty positions, they must also strive to act as if each position is their top choice.

Study I provided the first comprehensive definition of what behaviors and types of information constitute kisses of death in the hiring process for psychology faculty. The results expanded upon the limited number of candidate mistakes that emerged in previous hiring studies. Past research identified poor personal interactions as a common mistake made by job candidates

(Sheehan et al., 1998), and this corresponds with the various offenses to collegiality that made up the most common kiss-of-death category. A failed job talk is another mistake noted in previous research (Boysen et al., 2018; Sheehan et al., 1998), and although it did not have its own category, kisses of death related to job talks emerged in the categories of poor preparation, questionable qualifications, and lack of professional polish. Going beyond research on the faculty hiring process, the kisses of death in the current research showed substantial overlap with kisses of death in graduate school applications (Appleby & Appleby, 2006). Ignorance about a program, poor writing, poor letters of recommendation, and revealing personal failings in application materials are kisses of death in both selection processes.

Although Study 1 defined kisses of death in the job search process, additional information is needed to increase the usefulness of the findings. The qualitative results of Study 1 do not indicate the severity of kisses of death. For example, although an unprofessional style of communication was a frequently reported kiss of death, it may be relatively minor compared to kisses of death like personality problems or ignorance about a position. Determinations of relative severity require quantitative ratings. Perceptions of what constitutes a high-quality job candidate vary significantly between institutions (Benson & Buskist, 2005; Boysen et al., 2018; Landrum & Clump, 2004), and this makes it essential to also compare the severity of kisses of death at 4-year colleges and universities with different emphases on teaching and research. Thus, the purpose of Study 2 was to establish the severity of kisses of death and explore their variations.

Study 2

Study 2 expanded on Study 1 by having faculty rate the severity of kisses of death in the hiring process. The sample included faculty from various types of 4-year colleges and universities, and the analyses compared their perceptions of kiss-of-death severity. These methods allowed for the investigation of two research questions. What is the severity of commonly reported kisses of death in the faculty hiring process? How do perceptions of kiss-of-death severity vary among faculty from baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral institutions?

Method

Participants. The sample ($N = 297$) was primarily female (60%) and White (83%; Latino/Hispanic = 4%, multiethnic = 3%, Asian American = 2%, African American = 2%, and other = 3%), and the average age was 49 ($SD = 12$). Participants reported working at doctoral (40%), baccalaureate (33%), and master's (28%) institutions, with the majority being public institutions (60%). They estimated that 79% of their teaching responsibilities were at the undergraduate level. The majority of participants (87%) indicated that they had been on more than two faculty search committees, and 29% indicated that they had been on more than 10. Recruitment of participants occurred

using the same procedures as Study 1 (1,141 valid e-mails; 26% response rate).

Materials and procedures. Participants completed a brief online survey in which they evaluated kisses of death as they related to hiring psychology faculty at colleges like their own. Participants used a 5-point scale (*not at all, slightly, somewhat, very much, and extremely*) to rate 41 behaviors and types of information based on how much they would be a kiss of death during the hiring process. The items were modifications of responses from Study 1 and can be seen in Table 2.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the analyses was to examine participants' perceptions of the severity of kisses of death in the faculty hiring process. Ratings for each kiss of death served as a dependent variable in a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with college type (baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral) serving as the independent variable. To streamline the results, Table 2 includes only post hoc results for significant ANOVAs (ANOVA results available upon request). Results are organized according to the kiss-of-death categories identified in Study 1.

As an overall category, fit with the position or school showed the most significant differences. The pattern of significance was identical across the items. Faculty from baccalaureate and master's institutions rated teaching-related kisses of death as significantly more severe than faculty from doctoral institutions, and faculty from doctoral and master's institutions rated research-related kisses of death as significantly more severe than faculty from baccalaureate institutions.

The questionable qualifications category contained the second most significant differences. As with the fit-with-position category, faculty from baccalaureate and master's institutions rated teaching-related kisses of death as significantly more severe than faculty from doctoral institutions. However, research-related kisses of death showed significant differences between all three institution types, with severity being lowest among baccalaureate faculty and highest among doctoral faculty.

Significant differences were less consistent across the other categories. However, differences tended to follow the same institutional pattern. Specifically, the ratings of faculty at baccalaureate and master's institutions clustered together on teaching-related kisses of death, and the ratings of faculty at doctoral and master's institutions clustered together on research-related kisses of death. Overall, the patterns of significance across kisses of death reflect the more singular teaching- and research-focused missions of baccalaureate and doctoral institutions and the mixed mission of master's institutions.

Three overall categories showed few variations by institution type. Lack of professional polish and lack of enthusiasm yielded no significant differences, and evidence of being a difficult colleague showed only one significant difference. These results suggest that the basic standards for professional, collegial, and engaging behavior generalize across institutions.

Table 2. Study 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Post Hoc Results.

	Overall M (SD)	BA M (SD)	MA M (SD)	PhD M (SD)
Kiss of Death				
Evidence of being a difficult colleague				
Exhibiting difficult personality traits	4.34 (0.74)	4.31 (0.80)	4.50 (0.65)	4.26 (0.74)
Speaking negatively about students	4.02 (0.94)	4.22 (0.86) _a	4.15 (0.93) _a	3.78 (0.96) _b
Exhibiting poor social skills	3.58 (0.95)	3.57 (0.98)	3.67 (0.88)	3.52 (0.97)
Untimely responses to e-mails	3.15 (0.91)	3.01 (0.91)	3.32 (0.96)	3.15 (0.87)
Speaking negatively about current position/college	3.05 (1.00)	3.12 (1.01)	3.10 (0.91)	2.97 (1.05)
Trying to negotiate contract details before the offer	2.93 (1.17)	2.95 (1.17)	3.01 (1.11)	2.85 (1.21)
Being inflexible when setting up the interview	2.61 (0.92)	2.55 (0.95)	2.73 (0.89)	2.59 (0.91)
Communicating too frequently about the position	2.15 (0.92)	2.16 (0.97)	2.16 (0.91)	2.13 (0.88)
Questionable qualifications				
Lukewarm reference letters	3.98 (0.92)	3.79 (0.92) _a	3.94 (0.93) _b	4.16 (0.88) _b
Having a degree from a questionable university	3.82 (1.00)	3.89 (1.08)	3.89 (0.86)	3.72 (1.02)
Having mediocre teaching evaluations	3.72 (0.99)	3.98 (0.97) _a	3.94 (0.93) _a	3.34 (0.93) _b
No experience instructing a full course	3.31 (1.18)	3.77 (1.05) _a	3.51 (1.07) _a	2.78 (1.15) _b
No reference letter from graduate advisor	3.23 (1.22)	3.16 (1.20)	3.10 (1.22)	3.38 (1.24)
Having few publications	3.20 (1.18)	2.64 (1.08) _a	3.06 (1.10) _b	3.77 (1.05) _c
Having no first-authored publications	3.15 (1.30)	2.46 (1.11) _a	2.87 (1.15) _b	3.92 (1.14) _c
Having frequent job turnover	3.10 (0.91)	2.96 (1.00)	3.22 (0.92)	3.15 (0.82)
Working for long periods outside of academia	2.41 (1.05)	2.32 (1.02)	2.29 (1.01)	2.55 (1.09)
Lack of professional polish				
Poorly delivered answers to interview questions	4.00 (0.81)	3.91 (0.80)	4.06 (0.87)	4.03 (0.77)
Multiple writing or editing errors in materials	3.97 (0.91)	3.90 (0.92)	4.16 (0.81)	3.90 (0.96)
Speaking inarticulately	3.97 (0.81)	4.00 (0.79)	3.90 (0.80)	3.99 (0.84)
Dressing unprofessionally	3.25 (0.98)	3.21 (0.90)	3.40 (0.91)	3.18 (1.08)
Poor preparation				
Giving a research talk of poor quality	4.19 (0.89)	3.85 (1.07) _a	4.21 (0.81) _b	4.46 (0.66) _b
Giving a teaching demonstration of poor quality	4.14 (1.15)	4.58 (0.66) _a	4.59 (0.65) _a	3.45 (1.40) _b
Giving poor answers to questions research/teaching talk	4.04 (0.71)	3.91 (0.75)	4.13 (0.72)	4.09 (0.66)
Seeming to have not researched the institution/department	3.77 (0.85)	3.80 (0.86)	3.85 (0.80)	3.69 (0.88)
Seeming to have not thought about how to conduct their research at your institution	3.64 (0.97)	3.44 (1.08)	3.73 (0.89)	3.73 (0.91)
Seeming to have not thought about courses to be taught at your institution	3.54 (0.98)	3.89 (0.78)	3.88 (0.81)	3.03 (1.03)
Lack of fit with the position or school				
Lack of enthusiasm about teaching	4.03 (1.08)	4.63 (0.67) _a	4.35 (0.79) _a	3.31 (1.12) _b
Lack of a clear, long-term research program	3.41 (1.13)	2.98 (1.10) _a	3.16 (1.00) _a	3.94 (1.02) _b
Writing a generic cover letter	2.77 (1.12)	2.92 (1.09)	2.89 (1.13)	2.57 (1.11)
Emphasizing research over teaching	2.40 (1.27)	3.16 (1.19) _a	2.71 (1.08) _b	1.54 (0.92) _c
Inquiring about reductions in teaching load	2.24 (1.23)	2.64 (1.25) _a	2.43 (1.20) _a	1.78 (1.07) _b
Emphasizing teaching over research	2.02 (1.10)	1.54 (0.76) _a	1.70 (0.81) _a	2.65 (1.22) _b
Placing research first on CV	1.38 (0.77)	1.61 (1.00) _a	1.37 (0.68) _b	1.19 (0.52) _b
Placing teaching first on CV	1.35 (0.69)	1.13 (0.49) _a	1.21 (0.54) _a	1.62 (0.83) _b
Poor construction of application materials				
Factual errors about your institution in materials	3.50 (0.98)	3.61 (0.93)	3.55 (1.00)	3.38 (1.01)
Poorly organized CV	3.36 (0.87)	3.38 (0.86)	3.41 (0.80)	3.30 (0.93)
Mixing research together on CV to pad publications	2.84 (1.03)	2.61 (0.93) _a	2.93 (1.07) _b	2.97 (1.06) _b
Mixing teaching responsibilities together on CV to pad experience	2.70 (1.01)	2.67 (0.93)	2.88 (1.05)	2.60 (1.04)
Lack of enthusiasm during interview				
Absence of enthusiasm for position	4.22 (0.76)	4.32 (0.78)	4.23 (0.73)	4.13 (0.75)
Not asking questions	3.60 (0.87)	3.52 (0.93)	3.66 (0.86)	3.63 (0.84)

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance; SD = standard deviations; M = mean. Ratings of kisses of death occurred on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Bolded items represent significant one-way ANOVAs between BA, MA, and PhD, all $F_s > 3.20$, all $p_s < .042$, and all $\eta_p^2_s > .02$. Means that do not share a subscript showed significant differences in post hoc Tukey tests, all $p_s < .05$.

Table 2 also includes overall severity ratings based on the average of all three institution types. The means illustrate that most behaviors and types of information received ratings ranging from 3 to 4, which corresponds to an evaluation of them as *somewhat* or *very much* a kiss of death. Some of the lowest

means fell under the fit-with-position category, and this is logical because teaching and research fit varies significantly by institution type. However, the category also included the only 2 items that received an overall rating of being *not at all* kisses of death: putting research first on CVs and putting

teaching first on CVs. Although the order of teaching and research on CVs seems to be *slightly* important to faculty at baccalaureate and doctoral institutions, it is far from being an *extreme* kiss of death.

The results of Study 2 were consistent with established hiring differences between baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral institutions. Previous research showed that the evaluation of candidates at baccalaureate colleges is dominated by teaching qualifications, doctoral universities by research qualifications, and master's universities by a mix of teaching and research qualifications (Benson & Buskist, 2005; Boysen et al., 2018). Although less than half of the kisses of death in Study 2 varied significantly by institution type, the differences that emerged were consistent with expectable teaching versus research dynamics. Nonetheless, the results should be interpreted with the knowledge that great diversity exists within each institutional category; elite baccalaureate colleges may have expectations for scholarship that rival those of doctoral universities, and the missions of individual master's universities may resemble baccalaureate colleges or doctoral universities.

General Discussion

The kisses of death identified in the current research have important implications for both the general professional development of psychologists and the specific strategies psychologists use when seeking faculty positions. Professional mentorship and advising of aspiring faculty needs to begin early. Once the job search process begins, it is too late to overcome serious kisses of death such as having poor communication skills, poor interpersonal skills, weak references, little teaching experience, or few publications. Furthermore, teaching and research experience needs to be amplified to fit certain types of colleges and universities, and adding more independently taught courses or first-authored publications to a CV can require years of work.

The results of the current research also inform job search and interview strategies. Kisses of death related to qualifications, fit, and enthusiasm provide an argument against taking an all-inclusive approach to job applications. Candidates who use generic materials to apply for positions regardless of fit are unlikely to be rewarded with interviews because search committees will have a sufficient pool of applicants to reject anyone who does not possess the requisite qualifications or who does not explain their fit and enthusiasm for the specific position. Furthermore, even if an interview is earned for a poorly matched position, maintaining enthusiasm throughout the process may be difficult, and perceived lack of interest in or knowledge about a position is a kiss of death even for highly qualified candidates.

Personality-based kisses of death pose a conundrum. How does a job candidate eliminate off-putting interpersonal quirks—traits and habits that are likely to be both longstanding and unintentional—before they sink an interview? One approach is to make a simple list of rules to scrupulously

follow during interviews: be polite to everyone, be flexible, listen to others, express only positive sentiments, speak about professional topics unless otherwise prompted, and drink in moderation. Another approach is to seek interpersonal feedback. Job candidates should conduct mock interviews, practice job talks, and have discussions with mentors; in each case, they can ask for frank criticism on any behaviors or traits that might be off-putting during interviews. Once aware of potential problems, job candidates can attempt to intentionally modulate their behaviors; yes, successful interviewing may require introverts to be more extroverted, negative people to be more positive, and socially dominant people to be more docile.

Although the current research offered the first detailed description of kisses of death in the psychology faculty hiring process, there were some notable limitations to address in future research. The method required faculty who were not currently serving on search committees to self-report on kisses of death and their severities, and such reports may not be fully accurate. Future research could address these limitations by asking faculty in the process of conducting a search to reflect on the actual kisses of death that emerged when selecting candidates. Or, they could evaluate fictional, but realistic, application materials in an analog study. The advantage of an analog study is that it would allow for systematic variation of application materials and candidate qualifications to determine their relative impact and possible interactions. Another limitation was the specificity of kisses-of-death items in Study 2. The broad wording of items ensured their applicability across a wide variety of institutions, but the definition of what constitutes, for example, “mediocre teaching evaluations” or “few publications” varies across those institutions. Thus, future research could provide more specific definitions to determine precise institutional standards.

In conclusion, there are faculty jobs to be had for qualified candidates in psychology, but even the most accomplished candidates can self-destruct when a kiss of death emerges in their application materials or during an interview. To avoid kisses of death, job candidates must scrupulously construct application materials to be accurate, professional, and well-matched to each position. Furthermore, during interviews, they must maintain unfailing collegiality and professional comportment. Finally, across all aspects of the hiring process, they must be enthusiastic and prepared. Although it takes more than avoiding kisses of death to earn a faculty position, doing so keeps qualified candidates in the running.

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