Invitation

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DOCTOR OF ECONOMICS

by Hannah Van Borm

An Arab, a woman, and an old guy walk into a job interview: Examining explanations for discrimination in hiring.

Supervisor: Prof. dr. Stijn Baert

Friday, 26 November 2021 at 18h30
in the Ceremony Hall of Campus Aula, Voldersstraat 9, 9000 Ghent
(Entrance: wooden doors to the right of the stone pillars)

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ABSTRACT

Although work is a substantial aspect of people's lives—shaping one's social identity and influencing one's financial stability, health, and well-being—paid employment is not always as accessible for everyone. Indeed, some people experience barriers in the labour market, preventing them from obtaining or performing paid work.

In this PhD dissertation, my co-authors and I investigate one barrier in particular: hiring discrimination. Even though an increasing number of countries have introduced legislation that forbids unequal treatment based on specific grounds in the hiring context, hiring discrimination still prevails. Throughout past decades, a large number of researchers employing correspondence tests (i.e., experiments in which researchers send out fictitious job applications to real employers and measure recruiters' positive reactions) to measure hiring discrimination identified high levels of discrimination in multiple contexts—e.g., different types of firms, sectors, and countries—and against various (minority) groups—e.g., people older than fifty, (particular groups of) women, ethnic minority job applicants, and gender- and sexual orientation minority job candidates (i.e., LGBT+).

To combat this severe problem, it is crucial to know why and in which circumstances employers discriminate. In other words, to design adequate policy measures targeted at the right employers in the right way, one needs to gain insights into the underlying mechanisms and moderators of hiring discrimination.

In the economic literature, two theoretical models have been put forward to explain hiring discrimination: the models of taste-based (Becker, 1957) and statistical discrimination (Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972). On the one hand, taste-based discrimination implies that employers' hiring decisions are mainly driven by employers' (co-workers') ((customers')) attitudes towards particular job applicants. Racists, for example, will not hire a job applicant with an ethnic background due to their negative attitudes towards that job applicant. Moreover, if employers think that their co-workers or customers dislike ethnic minority job applicants, employers might decide not to hire job applicants with an ethnic background—regardless of their attitudes towards ethnic minority job applicants. On the other hand, statistical discrimination departs from the idea that employers make their hiring decisions not only based on objective characteristics related to an individual but also on productivity-related stereotypes about the group to which the job candidate belongs. For example, employers might refuse to hire an older job applicant because they believe in the stereotypical idea that older persons dispose of less technological know-how, which does not necessarily mean that the employers have negative feelings towards older job applicants.

Although researchers have recently shifted their focus from measuring hiring discrimination to explaining it, most existing empirical evidence is only suggestive in nature. Many studies test different predictions related to taste-based and statistical discrimination using correspondence tests (e.g., if one measures higher levels of ethnic discrimination in jobs with much customer contact, researchers often interpret this as (suggestive) evidence for customer-taste-based discrimination). However, the number of empirical studies that investigate employers' motives to discriminate directly is limited. With this PhD dissertation, we fill this black box in the academic literature by measuring recruiters' attitudes and stereotypes towards specific job applicants directly and investigating whether these attitudes or stereotypes impact employers' hiring intentions.

To this end, we conduct multiple vignette experiments in which we ask participants to assess fictitious job applicants for a hypothetical vacancy. Not only do the participants need to indicate their intentions to hire the fictive job candidate but they also have to evaluate the candidates on different statements related to their willingness to collaborate with the job applicants (i.e., in line with the model of taste-based discrimination) and various stereotypes about the group to which the job applicants belong (i.e., in line with the model of statistical discrimination). In each of the five studies in this PhD dissertation, we sequentially focus on one group of job applicants. More specifically, we focus on people older than fifty (Chapter 2), ethnic minorities (Chapter 3), women (Chapter 4), trans women (Chapter 5), and trans men (Chapter 6).

Overall, we find that stereotypes about these different (minority) groups mainly drive participants' hiring intentions.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Hannah Van Borm (°1994, Antwerp) obtained her Masters in Socio Economic Sciences in 2017 at the University of Antwerp. Since October 2017, she has been employed as a researcher at the Department of Economics at Ghent University.

Hannah presented her research at several international conferences, among which, the European Association of Labour Economists conference (Lyon, France; Uppsala, Sweden), the Linneaus University Conference on Hiring Discrimination: Measures, Moderators and Mechanisms (Växjö, Sweden), The ROA Workshop on Older Workers' Skills and Labour Market Behavior (Maastricht, The Netherlands), the Linneaus University Conference on Economics of Sexual Orientation, and the IDHEAP Workshop on Survey Experiments in Migration and Integration Research. The second chapter of her PhD thesis is published in *Labour Economics* and both the fifth and sixth chapters are published in *International Journal of Manpower*. Outside her PhD thesis she has published in *Economics of Education Review* and *Gedrag & Organisatie* (2 times).