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Experience, stereotypes and discrimination. Employers' reflections on their hiring behavior

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ABSTRACT


This article explores the relationship between labor market discrimination, stereotypes and employers' experiences with immigrant workers. Based on interviews with 58 employers, recruited as part of three randomized field experiments on ethnic discrimination in the Norwegian labor market, we find that experience matters in three distinct ways: first, employers with *negative* experiences with immigrant workers were unwilling to give job applicants from the same group an opportunity; second, employers with *positive* experiences with immigrant workers were more willing to hire workers from the same group, and third, employers *without* experiences with immigrant workers seemed to be risk averse and resort to general stereotypes of immigrants. Our findings contrast with a US study, where some employers, despite their positive experiences with black workers, still were unwilling to give job applicants from the same group an opportunity. Theoretically, we suggest that the role of employers' experiences for labor market discrimination depends on how deeply embedded stereotypes of minorities are in the employers' society.

KEYWORDS Stereotypes; discrimination; experiences; employment; interviews; workers

Introduction

Employment discrimination due to ascriptions based on job applicants' ethnicity or race is documented beyond reasonable doubt, both in Europe and the USA.¹ Experimental studies of employers' hiring behavior in Europe show that they systematically prefer majority applicants to similarly qualified (first or second-generation) immigrants (e.g. Bursell 2014;

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¹See Bulmer (2016, 2018) for a discussion of the concepts and measurement of race and ethnicity.

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McGinnity and Lunn 2011; Zschirnt and Ruedin 2016; Ahmad 2019). In the US, several studies have documented that whites are systematically preferred to similarly qualified blacks (e.g. Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Jaquemet and Yannelis 2012), and to similarly qualified immigrants (e.g. Widner and Chicoine 2011).

These and other field experiments test the *outcome* of employers' hiring decisions. However, we lack knowledge of the underlying *causes* of discrimination – and in particular of employers' reasoning when making hiring decisions. Hiring new workers always involves an element of risk-taking; one cannot know if an individual will perform well in the job before this person is hired. Employers' may rely on application letters, CVs and letters of recommendation, but still be uncertain about applicants' unobservable characteristics, such as how reliable and responsible they are. It is well documented that employers often rely on job applicants' ascribed characteristics, such as ethnicity, as proxies for 'difficult-to-observe' characteristics (Pager and Karafin 2009: 73). If employers believe they know, from their own experience or from other sources, that members of group A are more reliable and productive than others, they might find this information useful when they consider if they should hire a member of group A. However, they could also be wrong, relying on mistaken beliefs about one or more groups. And even if their beliefs are correct, the individual job applicant may deviate from the group expectations.

Conceivably, employers might therefore use their own experiences with workers of particular ethnic groups as a proxy for 'difficult to observe' characteristics. However, this topic is significantly less researched, and we lack knowledge about whether and how employers utilize their own experiences in hiring decisions, and whether they change their general attitudes about groups based on personal experience. One exception is a study of 55 employers in New York (Pager and Karafin 2009), which showed that employers did rely on their own experiences, yet only to a limited degree. Specifically, Pager and Karafin found that employers who reported negative experiences with black workers seemed to interpret these experiences as confirmation of the negative attitudes they already had of black workers. They also found that employers with positive experiences with black workers did *not* update their general negative attitudes (Pager and Karafin 2009: 90). The authors attribute this difference to the mechanism of *sub-typing*, which involves categorizing black workers who perform better than expected as individual exceptions from their general negative attitudes towards black workers. This mechanism

implies that employers' positive experiences with black workers had no consequences for their subsequent hiring decisions. Accordingly, Pager and Karafin (2009: 90) concluded that '... simple contact and exposure are themselves insufficient to revise *deeply embedded* racial attributions' (our italics).

But what of less embedded attributions? While racism against black Americans dates back to the time of slavery, and negative stereotypes of blacks are deeply embedded in US culture (Campbell 2016; Quillian *et al.* 2019), many West European countries have a more recent history of immigration, with a myriad of different ethnic groups. In Norway, which is our empirical case, the immigrant population accounted for only 1.5% of the total population in 1970, rising to 18.2% in 2020, with no particular group dominating.² To investigate if and how employers rely on their own experiences with workers of specific groups in their hiring decisions, we have interviewed 58 Norwegian employers about their hiring processes. These employers had already been exposed to a field experiment, where we tested hiring discrimination against fictitious job applicants with typical Muslim-Pakistani names as compared to applicants with typical Norwegian names (Birkelund *et al.* 2014). We find that, contrary to the US study, these employers seem to rely on *both* positive and negative experiences with immigrant workers when making hiring decisions. They also seem to update their group attitudes based on both positive and negative experiences with workers of the same group. This praxis is possible, we suggest, because the negative stereotypes associated with immigrant groups in Norway are weaker and therefore more open to empirical adjudication, than the deeply embedded negative racial attributions in the USA.

Hiring decisions: statistics, stereotypes and employers' experiences

Hiring decisions are examples of decision-making under uncertainty, where employers often make decisions when time is limited and supply abundant, using imperfect information (Birkelund 2016). Apart from observable information about individual applicants (e.g. application letters and CVs), the literature on hiring decisions describes two additional sources of information that employers tend to rely on: statistical information and cultural stereotypes.

²<https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/innvbf>

The use of statistical information for hiring decisions has primarily been discussed in the literature on statistical discrimination, originating from the work of Phelps (1972) and Arrow (1973). The theory of statistical discrimination assumes that employers aim at hiring the job applicant with the highest potential productivity, given the applicant pool and the job task at hand. Lacking sufficient information to establish the potential productivity of the applicants, the model assumes that employers classify applicants into groups (based on visible features such as gender or ethnicity), and attribute average group characteristics to them (Lang and Lehmann 2011; Fang and Moro 2011). As the estimated group averages are assumed to be derived from statistical facts, hiring decisions based on estimates of group productivity are assumed to be rational (although still discriminatory) responses to uncertainty and lack of information on the individual applicants.

The second source of information is related to cultural stereotypes. In part, the importance of stereotypes has been highlighted as a direct critique of economic models of statistical discrimination. For instance, studies from Chicago and Los Angeles have demonstrated that employers' views of job applicants (urban blacks in particular) are often based on crude stereotypes, and not objective facts about group behavior and productivity (e.g. Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Similarly, a study of immigrant groups in the low-wage market in Norway shows that employers seem to rely on stereotypes about specific groups, which they perceive as having particular soft skills, such as politeness and work ethics, making them suited for particular jobs (Friberg and Midtbøen 2018). This reliance on stereotypes can also be linked to cognitive and social psychology (Adler 2020), wherein all humans are assumed to instantly and automatically categorize strangers as members of our ingroup or out-groups. As Fiske (2000: 303) claims, 'People normally pre-judge, form ingroups, and reject outgroups'.

Recent contributions have also highlighted a third source of information, direct experience, of potential relevance when employers make hiring decisions. From a normative perspective, it matters whether employers, using group beliefs to assess applicants under conditions of uncertainty, learn from experience and update their group beliefs. Reflecting this, Pager and Karafin (2009) have developed a rational actor model of hiring decisions that incorporates a Bayesian learning process, wherein employers calibrate their group expectations in such a way that, given they realize they were wrong about a specific group, they would eventually correct their erroneous beliefs. This model therefore incorporates the

premise that employers' beliefs of group characteristics might change over time, due to their experiences with workers at the workplace, or other influences, such as the media. However, when Pager and Karafin analyzed their interviews with New York employers, they found that these employers did not update their beliefs: positive experiences with black male workers did not affect employers' negative attitudes towards this group; rather, '[t]he majority of employers who report positive experiences with black workers (or no differences between black and white workers) nevertheless maintain strong negative attitudes about black men generally' (Pager and Karafin 2009: 90). This indicates that the employers sub-typed black workers who behaved better than expected, seeing these as individual exceptions from the general negative stereotypes of black workers. Thus, employers' positive experiences with individual workers had no consequences for their subsequent hiring decisions – hence the title of their seminal contribution: Bayesian Bigot.

The findings of Pager and Karafin suggest that direct experience is of little interest to those studying labor market discrimination. A critical nuance, however, is found in their summarizing claim that '... simple contact and exposure are themselves insufficient to revise *deeply embedded* racial attributions' (Pager and Karafin 2009: 90; our italics). This qualification leaves open the possibility that direct experience with minorities might play a greater role in situations where 'racial attributions' – or more generally, group stereotypes – are *less* deeply embedded. Pager and Karafin do not, however, elaborate this point in their article.

To untangle the relationship between experience, stereotypes, and 'embeddedness' in hiring decisions, it is useful to point out that all hiring decisions necessarily rely on a heuristic of *substitution*: the substitution of a complicated question with a simpler one (Kahneman 2011). When employers assess a job applicant – let us call him Khan – they may ask: 'Will Khan be a good worker?' This question is hard to answer, unless they first see how Khan performs, which is difficult to do before Khan is hired. Substituting the difficult question with an easier one will make hiring decisions easier. In Pager and Karafin's study, substitution seemingly takes place by treating Khan as a member of some larger group X (e.g. black Americans) and asking: 'Are members of group X good workers?' This allows employers to judge Khan on the basis of stereotypes about 'group X', which significantly simplifies their decision they have to make. We can call this *stereotype-based reasoning*.

Crucially, we suggest, stereotype-based reasoning is more common when stereotypes against particular groups are deeply embedded in the

society. In this case, the stereotype takes on a taken-for-granted character that individuals might simply assume to be true, and they might therefore be unlikely to update them, even in light of contradictory experiences (Fiske 2000; Pager and Karafin 2009). Thus, the most readily available substitution question would then be to ask, ‘Are members of group X good workers?’

If, in another context, stereotypes are weaker, a more relevant substitute question might be: ‘Was Ahmed, who is of the same ‘type’ as Khan, a good worker?’ As above, it is presupposed that employers categorize individuals into groups (Khan and Ahmed belong to the same group), and second, that they have experiences to draw on. But in a context where the employer does not hold very deeply embedded stereotypes about the group that Khan is seen as belonging to, employers may find their own experiences with members of the same group (e.g. Ahmed) a relevant source of information. Ahmed is then treated as a representative of his group, and his performance at work is seen as an adequate proxy for predicting the potential of Khan. Let us call this *experience-based reasoning*.

We therefore suggest that experiences matter more when stereotypes are weaker. As a recent review makes clear ‘... our species might aptly be described as Homo Stereotypus – an animal predisposed to prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, but one that also possesses the capacity to overcome these biases if motivated to do so’ (Plous 2015: 25). We suggest that stereotypes are more difficult to overcome when they are strongly embedded and taken-for-granted. Vice versa, it is less difficult to overcome stereotypes when they are weaker. Further, we suggest that in situations where employers have *no* experiences with workers from specific groups, they are likely to rely on general beliefs about group characteristics, derived from media or other sources. To exemplify these dynamics, we report findings from a qualitative interview-based study on the hiring decisions of Norwegian employers.

Immigration in a Scandinavian context

Norway is among the countries with the highest number of immigrants per 1000 inhabitants of all European countries.³ 10 out of the 15 largest immigrant groups have non-European origin,⁴ of which the largest groups originate from Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia. The largest European

³EuroStat - read 22.12.2016 ([http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Immigrants,_2014_\(per_1_000_inhabitants\)_YB16.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Immigrants,_2014_(per_1_000_inhabitants)_YB16.png))

⁴<https://www.ssb.no/innvandring-og-innvandrere/faktaside/innvandring> (read 18.12.2018).

group is from Poland. Employment rates of migrants from the new EU countries in Eastern Europe are comparable to the overall population rate, whereas employment rates of Somalis, Iraqis and Afghans are low (Olsen 2011).⁵ Norway ranks third out of twenty European countries in the proportion of respondents who think that their country is made a better place to live as a result of migration (Heath and Richards 2016). However, negative attitudes also exist, in particular against immigrants living on welfare benefits (Hagelund and Brochmann 2011).⁶ Immigrants might also be associated with cultural practices that are challenging societal norms on gender equality (Aalberg *et al.* 2011). Norway ranks fourth on the European Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), but are in the mid categories of countries when we look at general anti-discrimination laws.⁷ Experimental studies have documented hiring discrimination of second-generation minorities with typical Pakistani names (Midtbøen 2014; Birkelund *et al.* 2014). The level of hiring discrimination seems to be on par with other European countries (Larsen and DiStasio *forthcoming*), and among the group of countries with moderate levels of discrimination (Quillian *et al.* 2019).

Methods and materials

We recruited 58 employers from a pool of 892 employers who were exposed to three randomized field experiments on ethnic discrimination in the labor market (Birkelund *et al.* 2014). Thus, we have a response rate of 6.5 percent. Two experiments (phase 1 and 3) took place in Oslo, and one (phase 2) in Bergen, Stavanger, Trondheim. In all experiments, we sent two identical applications to publicly announced job vacancies, with qualifications matching the job announcement. The treatment variable was the name of the applicants; one had a typical Norwegian name, the other a typical Muslim-Pakistani name. The discrimination rates in these experiments, favoring applicants with native names, was 1.3 in Oslo, 1.2 in the other cities, and 1.6 in the last experiment (where also we added long-lasting unemployment in the CVs). Approximately two months after the employers had, unknowingly, participated in the experiments, we sent them a letter, informing them about the research

⁵Traditional gender roles might prescribe large gender gaps in employment rates. Pakistani men are twice as likely to be employed as Pakistani women: 61 vs 31 percent (Olsen 2011).

⁶Employers might hire immigrants over native-born workers if they believe immigrants bring other skills to the market. There is nothing in our data suggesting this to be the case.

⁷<http://www.mipex.eu/anti-discrimination>, 2014 figures.

project, and asking if they were willing to be interviewed about their hiring decisions.⁸ Initially, we thought that only those who had not discriminated would be willing to be interviewed. However, some employers did not remember which position we had applied for, or their decisions on our applications, or both, and many were eager to know how they stood compared to other firms in the same industry. Nevertheless, compared with all employers included in the experiments, the discrimination rate of these employers were 1.14, implying they were less likely to discriminate against immigrant applicants.

The interviews took place between 17.02.2012 and 12.06.2013. The employers worked in finance and insurance companies ($n = 5$), health-care and social services ($n = 19$), information and communication firms ($n = 5$), non-profit organizations ($n = 4$), public administration ($n = 6$), recruitment agencies ($n = 8$), teaching ($n = 8$), transport and storage work ($n = 3$). All had majority background and 38 of them were women.

We interviewed employers at their workplace, using one to three interviewers. The combination of randomized field experiments and subsequent employer interviews created a special frame for these interviews. We could talk about a specific hiring process where the outcome was known, and we probed employers to reflect on their decisions. We began each interview by informing about our project on discrimination of ethnic minorities in the labor market, before explaining that we wanted to learn about how they reasoned in hiring processes. An obvious challenge with our approach is social desirability bias (Moss and Tilly 2006). Employers knew they were talking about a politically thorny issue and might have worried that admitting to discriminatory behavior could have legal implications. However, we informed them of their right to anonymity and to withdraw from the interview at any time without having to explain why. We were also careful not to express any attitudes during the interviews (see Interview Guide in supplementary information). Although not eradicating all problems associated with social desirability bias, we hope these measures reduced them, and we note that many informants shared stories with us that one might consider less than 'politically correct' (see below). The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

⁸Ethical research guidelines emphasize the principle of voluntary participation in research: <https://www.etikkom.no/en/ethical-guidelines-for-research/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences--humanities-law-and-theology/>

Reasoning from experience

In analyzing our data, we noted, first, that employers categorized individuals as either members of specific immigrant groups or as native Norwegians. This categorization seemed instant and beyond discussion, in line with expectations from cognitive psychology (Fiske 2000). They classified immigrants by their country of origin, and talked about Pakistanis, Serbs, and Swedes. Second, when discussing their hiring decisions, employers often referred to their own experiences with individual members of immigrant groups. They talked about negative and positive experiences – from their workplace, from their everyday life, and from previous hiring processes – and they did so based on what was often a very small number of individuals.

Employers did not want to be associated with people they regarded as prejudiced against minorities, and they often suspected allegedly morally inferior colleagues would reject workers due to ‘mere’ stereotypes. In contrast, they presented inferences based on their own experiences as a legitimate way of differentiating candidates. The certainty with which the employers relied on these inferences varied. Some used their experience as evidence of how some people of a given group behave, while most made inferences about the group as a whole. Some denied drawing any such inferences at all, saying, for example, ‘an idiot is an idiot, regardless of skin color’ (Phase 2, interview 11, callback to both applicants). Irrespective of whether we should take such statements at face value, however, they were rare in our sample. Experience-based statements, such as the following made by an employer in the teaching sector, were much more common:

- A: Generally speaking, you know, or for us, I think I can say we have more experience of culture with regard to some nationalities. I mean nationalities, you know, we see the differences, in a way, what are *these* like as workers and how are *those* like as workers?
- I: Do you have any examples?
- A: Yes, well ... ((laughs)). Take Pakistanis for a start, you have to treat them like ... Not really sure whether it’s a good idea to talk about that in particular, you know, but [I: please do!]. But I see that ... as far as it goes, they’re hard working. They’re diligent. But uh ... sort of, what we’ve experienced here at least, is that they know how to make use of their rights. That group, I mean. It’s *that* group. And then you’ve got other nationalities, like ... Who don’t do that. Like ... But then you’ve got others again, nationalities you know, they’re a bit special, we’ve got people from Ethiopia and Eritrea and thereabouts. Very concerned about all that, they’re easily offended, those with [that background] ...

[It] offends their sense of honor, you know, in one way or another. (Phase 3, interview 8; call-back first to Norwegian-named applicant, then to Pakistani-named applicant)

The excerpt illustrates how the employer draws on direct experiences with particular employees to make in- and out-group categorizations (*these* as compared to *those* workers). He also drew generic inferences about particular immigrant groups: Pakistanis ‘know how to make use of their rights’, whereas ‘people from Ethiopia and Eritrea’ are ‘easily offended’. In the following, we will look more specific into the content and structure of employers’ accounts of their direct experiences with immigrant workers. We examine the role of (1) negative and (2) positive experiences with minorities, as well as (3) absence of such experience.

Negative experiences

A majority of employers reported negative experiences with immigrant workers (although varying in degree and intensity). When asked what kinds of experiences they had, they listed several factors. One major cause was *language difficulties*: employers spoke of unreadable applications, interviews where they could hardly understand the interviewee, and misunderstandings between immigrant employees and clients and colleagues. Another major cause was *religious imperatives* or *taboos*, which clashed with some aspects of the work. A third major cause was what we can loosely call *cultural incompatibilities*, such as arrogance, negative views of women, or just not getting on with Norwegian cultural codes. Illustrating the latter, an informant from an employment agency talked about his experiences with different groups:

- A: We recruited some folks from Iceland, who are very okay people to work with, because they’re very similar to us, actually, in how they think and behave. (...) But a lot of times, it’s difficult, because we’re standing between the consultant and the client. And, for instance, with [people from] Egypt, which we’ve come across, it’s a completely different culture that comes in. And if that culture doesn’t fit, there’s going to be a lot of noise between us, the client and the consultant. (Phase 2, interview 13; call-back to both applicants)

Negative experiences with immigrant workers, the employers told us, could matter for their future hiring decisions. Some said their hiring decisions were mildly influenced by earlier experiences, others said they dismissed applicants from certain groups without hesitation. For instance,

we asked a female health care employer why she thought Pakistanis in general got fewer callbacks than Norwegians in our experiment. She said her workplace had too little experience of Pakistanis for her to give an adequate answer – which is noteworthy in itself. Then she mentioned two other groups with which they had difficulties.

- A: There's one issue, although I may fall into what you might call a trap, or whatever, by filtering out ... It's sort of – this may sound nasty – but it's about, you know ... Serbs. And Bosnia-Herzegovinians.
- I: Uh-uh? Could you say more about this?
- A: Ahh, it's because. ... People individually: yes, good, yes. But as a group altogether, they've got this tendency to stick together, and not let others in. So having three like that [on a night shift], and two others from some other countries, it's ... It doesn't work. There's no cooperation. They're not cooperating. It turns out they only work with each other. And I've taken it up time and time again. So now I almost, I mean I've had to start splitting them up on the rosters. (Phase 3, interview 13; call-back first to Norwegian-named applicant, then to Pakistani-named applicant)

Her experience with Serbs, and her repeated attempts to alter their behavior, had not been successful. As she put it, 'It turns out they only work with each other'. Moreover, she added, she thought they tended to underperform because they often had another job:

- A: No, and ... But the thing that's a bit strange is that it's that [particular] group. The others don't do it [relate only to their own group].
- I: You don't have [people from other countries relating only to their own group] ... ?
- A: Nah, not from Sri Lanka, not from the Philippines, the others just don't do it, not from India, none of the others. It's just them.
- I: Aha. So in general, like, you're generally pleased with the people from other ethnic backgrounds?
- A: Sure, I am. But it's that lot, they somehow stand out. And they can often drive a taxi half the night and stuff, you know, and start the day shift, you know ... Yup. They're often involved in other things, seems like they're doing a bunch of other stuff ... Uh-hu, mmm. (Phase 3, interview 13; call-back first to Norwegian-named applicant, then to Pakistani-named applicant)

She argues that other immigrant employees cooperated well, so her negative experiences related only to the Serbs. She had been talking to colleagues who had similar experiences with Serbs, and she therefore saw no other alternative than to reject job applicants with this background. 'It's a big problem. When we were hiring recently, we thought you

know, “Okay, no Serbs.” No point. Doesn’t work.’ Note that it is not our concern to question the truthfulness of the employer’s experiences, but rather to point out how she argues that her experiences – with only a very limited number of persons – matters for her hiring decisions with future Serbian applicants.

The employer in the previous example did not discriminate against the Pakistani-Muslim applicant in our field experiment. Others did. Some employers explained this by saying their callbacks were rather arbitrary – although they did note the difference between majority names and immigrant names. Others said their negative experiences did affect their callbacks. For instance, a social service informant said she tried to call the immigrant jobseeker in our field experiment after some of the other job-seekers had withdrawn their applications. Her reason for the delayed callback was that the applicant’s name, Khan, reminded her of a former immigrant employee who, according to her, displayed ‘communication problems’ and acted in a very aggressive manner.

I: [S]o you’ve had mixed experiences then?

A: Yeah, I have. And you can say that that was why I took my time before getting in touch with ... I think I rang Khan ... uhhh ... now I don’t know if it was you, but I think I called her and got no answer. But it was, you know, once I saw the name I thought ‘Oh right ... Probably more of those communication problems and whatnot.’ ... But when I saw that someone had pulled their application, I thought I’ll just give her a call, just to have more to go on. (Phase 2, interview 20; call-back to Norwegian-named applicant first; then call-back to the Pakistani-named applicant)

This employer related our applicant’s name directly to her experience with one individual, leading her to prioritize the majority applicant. Importantly, though, she called the immigrant applicant afterwards, as she realized she needed ‘more to go on’. Thus, lack of labor supply in this case was beneficial for the immigrant applicant. Some informants also highlighted the potentially problematic aspects of experience-based reasoning. For instance, one employer in an accountancy firm lamented the usage of this type of experience-based discrimination – and in doing so, described how experience matters:

A: We’ve hired *one person* from the east bloc – I can’t remember which [country], Lithuania, or ... ? Very nice girl, but things went *sour* with the client. There was something or other, and at some point she didn’t sort of do what she was supposed to do. And then someone made a comment, saying ‘yup, there we go’, kind of. But that was *one person*

[making the comment]. But they [management] have worked with [people from the] east bloc here before. I mean, they've been down there, so the general manager is *sceptical* from the outset. He starts out sceptical. Because he's got his own experiences, and has worked with accountancy down there and done some consulting down there many years ago. So if I say 'But we do have to be a bit open, we should hire this person', then he's a bit sceptical.

- I: But it's fascinating, because what you're saying is that your own experience living with a Muslim [which A had noted earlier], and the general manager's experience having been in Eastern Europe – our random, after all, personal encounters – can matter quite a lot to the way we organize our working lives, as professionals, later on.
- A: Yes, well, there's a reason why those who come out of [a specific business school in Norway] only hire people from [that business school]. It's familiar. So you know what you get, right? It's familiar. That's the whole point of it (Phase 1, interview 1; call-back to none of the applicants).

The employer is displaying thorough familiarity with the role of personal experience for hiring decisions. Fitting with Pager & Karafin's analysis, the employer remarks how negative experience was sometimes interpreted as confirmation of negative stereotypes (she references her colleague's comment that it was unsurprising that things would go sour with the nice girl from the east bloc). Moreover, she presents herself as a person who aims at making more balanced hiring decisions. Taken together, the excerpts above illustrate how employers can make inferences about most or all members of particular groups based on direct negative experience with only one or a few individuals.

Positive experiences

Although the employers in the previous section rely *more* on experience-based reasoning than those in Pager and Karafin's study, negative experiences seem to motivate discrimination of minorities in both cases. So far, then, our analysis aligns with findings from their paper. However, contrary to Pager and Karafin, we also find that positive experiences matter to employers' attitudes to minorities. Although more infrequent than the negative experiences, about ten cases in our data suggest that positive experiences with immigrant employees shape future hiring decisions. In just the same way as the negative experiences, some employers seem to use positive experiences by way of experience-based reasoning as a resource for making hiring decisions.

Accounts of positive experiences were typically ones where employers were pleased with particular minorities because of their work ethics and politeness; qualities, employers argued, that Norwegian workers used to have, but were now lacking. A health care informant gave us an example:

- A: Lots of our people aren't originally Norwegian. We've seen the benefits and we're not afraid to hire anyone [because] it can affect the working environment. So I think when you get over that threshold and see [how they do the work] a few times, and it's actually done quite well, it's easier to ignore whatever prejudices you might have, or worries that it might not go that well. (Phase 2, interview 17; call-back to both applicants)

This story was typical of most informants who reported attitudinal change; they said they were able to overcome their initial reservations through repeated positive experiences. Several interviews are full of explicit and implicit references to prejudice being the norm, such as when the employer says that they have 'seen the benefits' of hiring minorities and therefore are 'not afraid to hire immigrant applicants anymore', although earlier they were afraid to do so. Likewise, another informant referred to her positive experiences as 'pleasant surprises,' indicating that minorities were initially met with low expectations. Or as one employer put it: 'We've had very, quite good experiences with the foreigners we've employed, and therefore we don't have any... reservations against doing it [hiring 'foreigners'] again' (Phase 3, interview 2).

Positive experiences could therefore influence employers' future hiring decisions, making them less uncertain or prejudiced than they originally were. An informant in a transport company described how positive experiences could be a decisive factor:

- A: There's a big difference. It depends on where the different [applicants] come from, the values they bring with them. So I have to admit, there are some countries I choose ahead of others. Not consistently, if the applications and applicants are equally good, you know, so not rigidly, but if it's a tie between two applicants, then I do look at factors like that.
- I2: What kind of country are you thinking of? Can you say something about that?
- A: Ehh. I have... but this is strictly my own experience, of people I've encountered myself... [I2: naturally] and people don't need to be as narrow-minded as people I've had dealings with [I2: just what's interesting... people's experiences]. I've taken on employees from Sri Lanka and they were fantastic, and it makes you want to hire from Sri Lanka, ahead

of perhaps some other nationality. (Phase 1, interview 21; call-back to both applicants)

Thus, if all else is equal this employer would prefer to hire workers from Sri Lanka since he has very positive experiences with them, even though he is aware that his inferences are based on small numbers. When elaborating what made their experiences positive, some employers emphasized the value of different backgrounds and perspectives. Others mentioned their positive experiences with immigrants' work ethics, and emphasized they are good for business. Consider the following account by a business consultant manager:

- A: In my professional career, I've had as many bad experiences with ethnic Norwegians as I've had with those that aren't ethnic Norwegians, right. That's ... At times, I've actually had more negative experiences with employees that are ethnic Norwegian ... that are lazier, sicker, uh ... [who] know more about their *rights* than their *duties*, sort of. So that's why, especially with a couple of countries that I've had very good experiences with, because they'll work, they work until they *drop*, kind of. So in that regard, I have no ... I mean, if it was the same situation (...), it never happens, but all else being equal, I'd go with the foreign applicant (...) (Phase 2, interview 12; call-back to both applicants).

The informant is arguing for a preference for 'a couple of [unspecified] countries', based on his experience that these immigrant groups are *less* aware of their rights and prepared to work 'until they *drop*'. As in the previous example, the employer argues that if all else is equal, the candidate associated with the group with most positive experiences tied to it, wins out.

Contrary to Pager and Karafin, then, we find evidence that employers update their attitudes to specific groups based on positive experiences with individuals belonging to the same group. Therefore, positive experiences matters for employers' future hiring decisions. We believe this difference can be attributed to the fact that people's stereotypes about the groups in question (e.g. Sri Lankans) are weaker than the stereotypes about African Americans in the US. When stereotypes are weakly embedded, discrimination based on *both* negative and positive experiences seem to share a common cognitive mechanism, whereby employers generalize to entire immigrant groups based on their own particular experiences with only a few workers.

Absence of experience

So far, we have seen that negative and positive experiences matter. But what about situations where employers had no direct experience with members of the group in question? Although mentioned less frequently in the interviews (for obvious reasons, as the informants had less explicit anecdotes about groups with which they had no direct experience), the topic of experiential absence could be inferred when the employers emphasized the importance of just a few encounters with minority workers. Some evidence on this was given in the previous section, where informants claimed, for instance, that positive experiences ‘make it easier to ignore whatever prejudices you might have’ (phase 2, interview 17). Answers like this portray general stereotypes against minorities to be the norm, potentially overruled by positive experiences. When lacking experiences, general stereotypes are likely to matter more for employers’ hiring decisions. In line with this, several informants told that they perceived lack of experience with immigrant groups as a problem. They described immigrant groups as unfamiliar, and, as explained by a female health worker in a recruitment agency, less safe to hire:

- I: What do you think the reason could be ... that you feel safer when the applicant is Norwegian?
- A1: Obviously, the more familiar, the safer it feels.
- I: So that’s what it comes down to, basically?
- A1: Yes, I think so. And that if you don’t have experience with any others [i.e. minorities] then you’ll think that that [the Norwegian applicant] is the best candidate because they’re Norwegian. (Phase 2, interview 14; call-back to both applicants)

In the absence of experience, Norwegians seem best ‘because they’re Norwegian’. She later summarized the issue as follows: ‘If you have positive experiences, it’s easier to add more [members of the same group]; if you have a bad experience, then ... it’s difficult, and if you have no experience, it’s okay to put it on hold’.

Our data thus suggest that when employers lack experience, they are less inclined to contact and hire immigrant job seekers. To understand why, it is illuminating to scrutinize the employers’ choice of words. An employer in an NGO stated, ‘I think a lot of people need sort of a positive experience before taking *that step*.’ (Phase 2, interview 4; call-back to Pakistani-named applicant only). Another employer, discussing how he contacted an applicant from a group he lacked experience with, described his action as a ‘leap of faith.’ Hiring people from immigrant groups with

which they lack experience is seen as entailing significant risk and uncertainty. The employers depict this as crossing into unknown territory, as they have few indications as to whether the minorities have, say, the appropriate language skills or work ethics. It therefore feels safer to hire a Norwegian applicant, since this, in the employers' reasoning, means you can be more certain what you get.

Thus, employers without experience with immigrant groups seem to resort to in- and out-group reasoning, where in-group members are considered safe, trustworthy, and easy to interact with, whereas out-group members are the opposite, and risk aversion then implies they go for in-group members. Further evidence of this was given in an interview with a private kindergarten manager who reflected on her earlier hiring practices:

- A: [...] it may be that I read applications differently when I started working at the childcare center in 2009. [I mean] than [how I read them] the last time I had a job in the field. I think maybe it's changed.
- I1: How did you used to read them?
- A: Well, I was a little more critical then. Yup, I think I was a little more critical in relation to ... when you look at names, what they're called ... how [they look]
- I1, I2: ((in unison)) What did you think [back then]?
- A: I was more like ... I want Norwegians.
- I1: But why, because of the language, culture, or ... what?
- A: I hadn't had any experience to speak of ... So I had no way of ...
- I2: Had you had any bad experiences?
- A: Not bad experiences, but not much experience with foreigners.
- I1: So were you expecting any particular challenges, that might ... they might give rise to? Was that why you were skeptical?
- A: Well, it might have had something to do with attitudes, you know, what they said in the media ... [That] they're a bit too easy going, you know, I don't remember exactly what it was. Criminals, all of it together, you know. That was how I felt there and then. (Phase 1, interview 19; call-back to both applicants)

Her critical attitudes were due to her lack of experience with 'foreigners', which implied she relied on what she had read about foreigners in the press and categorized them as out-groups. In the absence of direct experience with members of specific groups, the Norwegian applicants seem to win out. It is worth noting that this reasoning can be detrimental for the life chances of immigrant jobseekers, as it carries with it a self-defeating prophecy (Merton 1968 [1948]). That is, as long as employers are reluctant to hire immigrant applicants, these applicants will remain

‘unknown territory’ and thus be categorized as out-groups associated with uncertainty and negative characteristics. On a more positive side, employers lacking experience with minority workers might nevertheless get more used to immigrants, through media reports, sports or other arenas, which might change their attitudes. This, however, remains to be seen.

Summary and discussion

This study has explored how 58 Norwegian employers reason about their hiring decisions. Our results show that employers categorized job applicants into immigrant groups by their country of origin, and that they often compared these groups with each other, and with native Norwegians. Importantly, employers often relied on their own direct experiences with members of immigrant groups and made inferences about attributes of other job applicants from the same group. Employers with negative experiences were often unwilling to give other individuals from the same group an opportunity to show their potential, whereas employers with positive experiences were more willing to hire workers from the same immigrant group. The employers thus found their experiences relevant and reliable, despite the fact that they were talking about a very limited set of cases (which they often also acknowledged). Finally, employers without experiences with immigrant groups were risk-averse and relied on general stereotypes of minorities when assessing job applications. In short, experience matters.

Empirically, our results only partly match Pager & Karafin’s findings. Similar to them, we find that negative experiences can reinforce negative stereotypes. However, and contrary to their study, we also found that positive experiences seem to affect employers’ hiring decisions. The US employers included in Pager and Karafin’s study subtyped black workers that performed well as exceptions from their general negative expectations of black male workers. In contrast, the Norwegian employers included in our study seemed to rely on their earlier experiences with ethnic minority workers, both negative and positive, when making hiring decisions. Thus, the Norwegian employers seemed to update their attitudes, which implies their decision making were more in line with the Bayesian logic in the decision making model developed by Pager and Karafin. This also means that in the Norwegian context, workers who perform well could open doors for other workers from the same group, since employers seem to allow also their positive experiences to influence their later hiring decisions.

Theoretically, we attribute the difference between the two studies to differences in the degree of embeddedness of specific cultural stereotypes. In societies where stereotypes are deeply embedded, we suggest employers are likely to resort to stereotype-based reasoning. If attitudes to specific groups take on a taken-for-granted character that are simply assumed to be true, people are unlikely to update their attitudes in light of contradictory experiences (Fiske 2000). In contexts where attitudes to specific groups are not as deeply embedded, employers are more likely to make hiring decisions based on experience-based reasoning. In lieu of strong stereotypes, direct experience becomes a more relevant source of information; the performance of employee Ahmed is then treated as an adequate proxy for predicting the potential of applicant Khan.

We have described employers' hiring decisions in terms of heuristics of substitution. Heuristics are typically associated with fast and unreflective decision-making. We emphasize, however, that heuristic reasoning does not necessarily imply unreflective thinking. Heuristics are rules of thumb which may be applied more or less knowingly (Bloor 1997; Gigerenzer 2006). Indeed, our data shows how heuristic reasoning features centrally in our informants' reflexive accounts of their hiring decisions, and many of them were certainly aware they relied on experience from a limited set of encounters. At the same time, experienced-based reasoning can, and probably does, feature in fast, unreflective decision-making processes (Kahneman 2011). We cannot adjudicate the relative weight of reflexivity and unreflexivity in our informants' reasoning. For this, more research is needed.

Our study has several limitations: First, like the employers we interviewed, we have small numbers and a non-representative sample, which implies that we should be very cautious about making inferences based on what a few employers tell us in an interview setting. Second, as we interviewed hiring managers who knew that labor market discrimination is thorny and legally forbidden, we can assume they have been very conscious of their front stage performance in the interview setting, and careful in their responses to our questions. Given that the employers in our interview sample discriminate less than the other employers who were exposed to our fictitious job applications, we might expect them to report more positive experiences with immigrants and fewer negative experiences than the overall employer population. Our interview sample may therefore overestimate the extent of positive updating and underestimate the extent of negative updating due to experiences. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that employers frequently drew on experience with a highly limited

number of workers to account for their hiring practices, as this suggests that experience-based inference was considered a legitimate form of reasoning. If our argument is valid, employers' positive and negative experiences with immigrant workers can, under the right circumstances, affect their hiring decisions. This argument should be further tested with data that are more representative, across multiple contexts.

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