Research
When Discrimination Meets Meritocracy
By Chana R. Schoenberger

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country contributes to the international order, Dellmuth says.

“The solution is always to talk to each other and try to understand each other,” she says. “We can’t leave this discussion to the populists who claim that international organizations undermine democracy and the will of the people.”


HUMAN RIGHTS

When Discrimination Meets Meritocracy

BY CHANA R. SCHÖNENBERGER

It’s illegal to discriminate when hiring. So why is discrimination still rampant?

A new paper from researchers at New York University’s Stern School of Business looks at the interplay between bias and perceptions of merit to understand why. People looking to hire the best candidate tend to focus on qualities they deem relevant to the job, even when those qualities may not be in the candidate’s control and may be legally protected.

“We demonstrate that discrimination is reinforced even through core philosophies of merit: People may discriminate because they think such actions are fair, rather than discriminatory,” they write.

To study how people discriminate, the researchers—Teodora K. Tomova Shakur, a PhD candidate in management, and L. Taylor Phillips, an assistant professor of management and organizations—looked at two factors that ground perceptions of merit: controllability and relevance. They theorized that when hiring managers deliberate, they sort applicants’ attributes based on whether the applicants can control the trait (their weight might be considered controllable, while their race would not be), as well as whether the trait seems to have some bearing on their ability to do the particular job or task (whether they have young children at home might be considered relevant, while their religion might not be). Of these factors, relevance might be considered the more important in a meritocratic society and thereby carry more influence, they write.

“We suggest that people may perceive relevant demographic attributes as fair to use during selection, even if they are perceived as uncontrollable, because relevance prioritizes performance costs and benefits,” the researchers write. “Following this logic, we suggest people will weigh perceived relevance more heavily than perceived controllability when judging the fairness of using demographic attributes.”

This tendency can lead to discrimination if people favor traits based on relevance that are not controllable and may be legally protected, such as age, disability, pregnancy, or caregiving commitments.

Tomova Shakur and Phillips used a series of online surveys to examine how participants weighed 15 attributes: “age, alma mater, caregiving responsibilities, disability, educational attainment, family origin (i.e., last name), gender, national origin, personal network connections, physical attractiveness, political affiliation, race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.” The experiments teased out how people confronted with hiring decisions thought about whether and why to hire, or not to hire, applicants.

“We find that principles of merit lead people to believe that even some legally protected demographic attributes are fair to use, allowing discrimination to persist,” the researchers write.

The study stems from Tomova Shakur’s interest in what she terms “network favoritism,” the tendency toward discriminatory practices like “nepotism, cronyism, and employee referrals” of prior connections. This study goes beyond these ideas of naked preference to explore what happens when people know they shouldn’t discriminate but do so anyway.

“The most important finding in the paper is rooted in the idea that people use noble principles such as meritocracy to launder potentially discriminatory decisions,” the researchers say.

Participants in the study essentially made their own rules as they deliberated about which attributes would have a bearing on the applicants’ ability to do a job and then used those to guide their thinking.

“People perceived such legally protected characteristics as highly relevant to most jobs, thus believing that discrimination based on such characteristics is fair,” she says.

Among the paper’s surprising findings: Even participants who understand discrimination law feel it’s fair to favor attributes they think are relevant, even if those attributes are beyond the candidate’s control and legally protected.

“Although one might think that experienced individuals know how to catch their biases and control them, we find that employees who make hiring decisions often justify their potentially discriminatory decisions,” she says.

The research points to a paradox: why people continue to discriminate despite believing it’s wrong to do so, says Felix Danbold, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at University College London’s School of Management. “This shows how easily people can transform ‘unfair’ into ‘fair’ in their minds and helps to explain the persistence of discrimination despite clear norms and laws against it.”

The paper adds important nuance to existing research on justice and discrimination, Danbold says: “[The researchers] reveal that the factors of relevance and controllability long understood as the foundations of fairness judgments are not merely additive and that the former may outweigh the latter with serious consequences.”


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