

How can we break the racial bias in the labour market?

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When interviewing a job candidate, people often have certain preferences that are not just based on a rational evaluation of the person's skills, but also on gut feelings. These feelings can be fed by our

biases that develop subconsciously and automatically. They become problematic when they lead to exclusion or a disadvantage for specific groups, as is currently still the case with ethnic minorities. How can we deal with racial biases and avoid discrimination in the labor market?

"In the last decades, companies have become more aware of [discrimination](#) and prejudice and are trying to do something about it," states behavioral scientist Tobi Sachs, who studies mechanisms leading to stereotyping and discriminatory behavior. "But there is still a lot of evidence for prejudice and discrimination during recruitment and job evaluations."

Sachs mentions studies in which researchers sent out letters to real job openings from fake applicants with different ethnic backgrounds. "These studies very consistently show that minorities receive fewer responses to their applications while having equal skills." And he highlights that discrimination in organizations does not just occur at this hiring stage. "Studies show that it is harder to get promoted for people with a minority background, and that people are still often stereotyped or mocked for their origin, and excluded from social networks in organizations."

What companies have been doing so far to fight discrimination is clearly not enough, or is not taking the right tack. Sachs believes we can only tackle discrimination successfully when we take into account multiple factors at the same time: individual [biases](#), the influence of [social norms](#), and structural aspects such as company policies.

Less information leads to more discrimination

Sachs combines [lab experiments](#) and field studies to investigate how and under which conditions [racial biases](#) affect decisions in organizations. Specifically, he studied how information is processed when evaluating

job applications of ethnic minorities. For example, in an experiment he asked people to evaluate applicants for a vacancy. During the assessment, participants only received snippets of information, each time learning a little bit more about the candidate.

"We found that the chances of a good evaluation for minority candidates increased when participants received more information about the individual," says Sachs about the results of this experiment. "That indicates that when people lack information, they fill this gap with assumptions about the candidate. And that's when stereotypes come into play."

Surroundings can help preventing biased decisions

Sachs also examined the influence of social norms on discriminatory hiring decisions. "There is a connection between personal biases and social norms. When participants of our study were reviewing a majority or minority job applicant, the minority applicant received particularly bad evaluations when the evaluator had cold feelings towards ethnic minorities and the organization was not diversity friendly. When only one of these was the case, minority evaluations were not that different from majority ones." This makes Sachs conclude that biases more likely lead to discrimination when the surroundings approve these biases. Or in other words, surroundings can contribute a lot to help prevent individuals from making biased decisions.

Be aware of your own biases

Sachs not only wants to understand the mechanisms leading to discrimination, but also develop interventions that can reduce biased decision making. "The first step is to acknowledge that you too are affected by biases, and that others can help spot these. For example, it

might help to rationalize your gut feeling when you're evaluating job applicants and explain your preference to others. Decisions that are prone to biases should always be made with a mixed team of people." If such basics are met, it is possible to look into more detailed explanations of undesired biases.

An intervention that Sachs has been testing is the effect of displaying diversity and inclusion as a common goal. "When everybody in an organization is aware of and supports the [common goal](#) of equal opportunities, people might start to believe that equal opportunities are actually possible, and they will be motivated to contribute to this goal. The right social norm can help to reduce discriminatory actions."

Different perspectives

We need to tackle discrimination from different perspectives at once, concludes Sachs. "You can train [decision makers](#) to control their biases, but if their colleagues are prejudiced or organizational policies are biased, the decision makers' actions will still be prone to discrimination because the social and systemic influence is too strong. If we really want change with long-lasting effects, we have to tackle individual biases, social norms and organizational structures all together."

Provided by University of Amsterdam

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