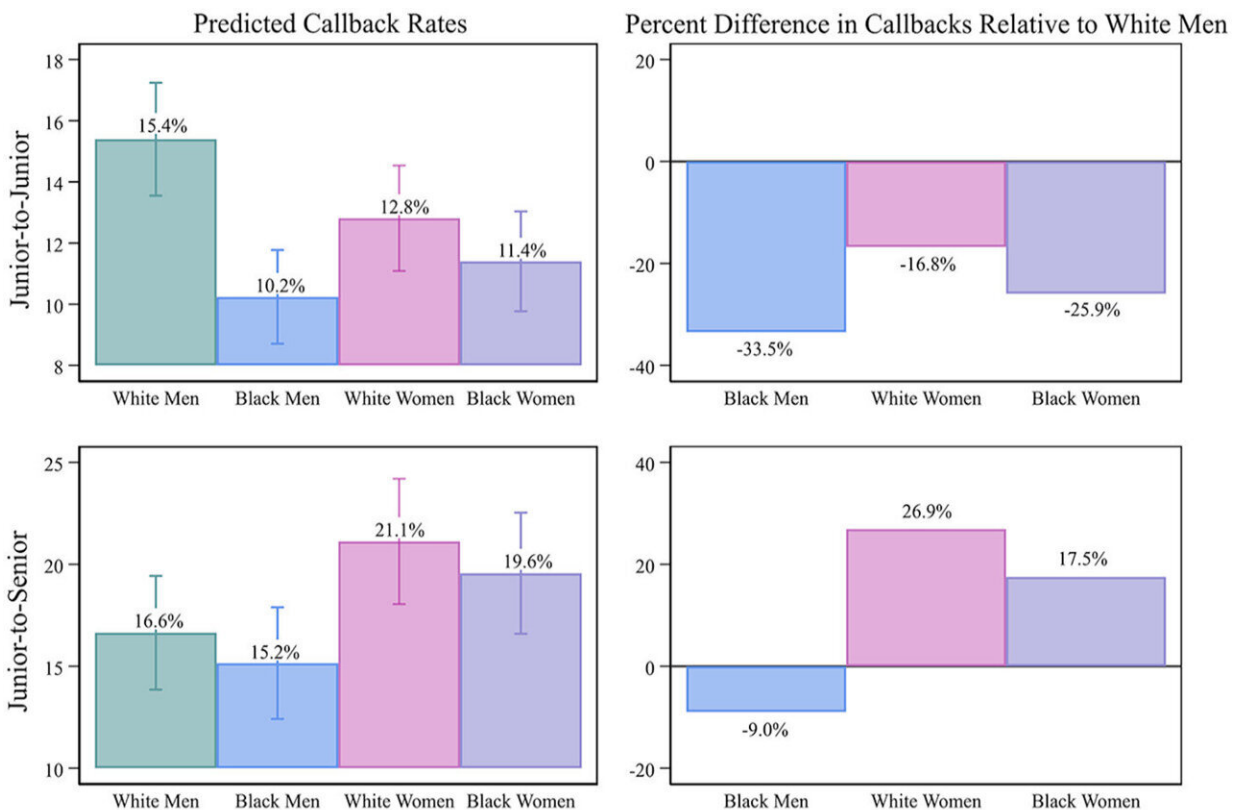# Hiring pressures to diversify are influencing patterns of discrimination in unexpected ways

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Predicted callback rates across applicant gender/race and percent difference in callback rates relative to white men, within applicant–job trajectory. Credit: *American Sociological Review* (2024). DOI: 10.1177/00031224241245706

In 2004, a pair of economists published a [landmark study](#) to measure discrimination in the labor market. In the study, the researchers applied to real job openings with fictitious applicants but changed the applicant names to reflect a different gender or race.

They found clear evidence of [discrimination](#): White men and women received 50% more callbacks than Black men and women. More recently, Berkeley researchers [used the same methodology](#) to compare racial and [gender discrimination](#) across large U.S. employers.

However, a key question remains. Corporations today are under pressure to increase [diversity](#) in professions that have historically been filled by white men. Are companies still discriminating against women and underrepresented minorities when making hiring decisions, even under such pressure to diversify?

A [new study](#), "Hiring Discrimination Under Pressures to Diversify: Gender, Race, and Diversity Commodification across Job Transitions in Software Engineering," published in the *American Sociological Review*, sheds light on this question by examining hiring discrimination in [software engineering](#), a profession that has been under intense pressure to increase the representation of women and underrepresented racial groups. Such calls to increase diversity are rooted in reality.

At Meta, for instance, women make up less than 26% of the technical workforce. At Google, it's less than 28% and at Apple, less than 25%. Black workers are even more underrepresented—they do not break 6% across all three companies. Women and Black workers tend to become even more scarce as seniority increases.

This new study finds that pressures to diversify are influencing patterns of discrimination, but in unexpected ways. Employers still discriminate in favor of white men when hiring for early-career positions, despite pressures to diversify software engineering. However, when workers apply to more senior positions, Black men and Black women face no discrimination compared to white men. White women are even preferred.

Kate Weisshaar, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is one of the lead authors of the study. She noted that the research team entered the study anticipating that Black women, Black men, and white women would face discrimination at the point of hire especially when trying to move to a higher-level position, since gender and racial stereotypes are widespread in the software engineering setting.

But what they found was different: discrimination decreases as job level increases.

"There are so few women and racial minorities in software engineering, but especially as job level increases," said Weisshaar. "This means that those who do apply are valuable to employers for their contribution to diversity—and face less discrimination as a result. Additionally, decision-makers are eager to hire 'diverse' applicants for more visible, senior-level positions, because it benefits the company's image."

Weisshaar and her co-authors Koji Chavez and Tania Hutt call this process diversity commodification because tech decision-makers treat diversity as if it was a valued commodity and engage in a competitive market for diverse job applicants.

How they measured hiring discrimination

Weisshaar, Chavez, and Hutt sent more than 11,000 resumes of fictitious

job applicants to publicly posted software engineering job postings in the 40 most populated U.S. metro areas. Some of the applications were early-career software engineers applying laterally to early-career positions, while others were early-career or senior software engineers applying to senior software engineering positions. Names were randomly assigned to signal both gender (women and men) and race (Black and white applicants).

Who received more callbacks?

For junior jobs, the research team found evidence that white men were preferred, and that Black men, Black women, and white women face discrimination in callbacks compared to white men. (Black men receive 33.5% fewer callbacks than white men; Black women 25.9% fewer, and white women 16.8% fewer.)

But for senior positions, the researchers found no evidence of an advantage for white men compared to other applicants. They did find that white women were advantaged over other groups—including white men—when applying to senior positions, whereas Black men's and Black women's callbacks were comparable to white men.

To understand why, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with over 60 recruiters and other employees with experience in these types of hiring screening decisions. The interviewees described how applicants' gender and race factored into their hiring decisions.

Koji Chavez, a sociologist in the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University Bloomington and co-lead author of the study, noted those interviews were revealing.

"Decision-makers were clearly valuing women and people of color for their contribution to diversity, and incorporating that value into their

screening decisions," explained Chavez. "But women and workers of color were more valuable as the level of position increased because the demand for diversity was greater and the supply was more limited."

But why were white women most preferred in senior positions? Chavez said that "in a profession that is dominated by white and Asian men, any diversity is an improvement. Since white women, Black men, and Black women all contributed to diversity, corporations can get their diversity from white women who, from their point of view, come with fewer disruptions and risks to the organization."

The researchers argue that the way we think about gender and racial discrimination in hiring may need to be updated, particularly in contexts where there are strong pressures to diversify. "A recruiter can see a resume from a woman applicant and think two things at the same time: that she might not have strong technical skills, but that she contributes to diversity," said Weisshaar. "And under pressures to diversify, we have to understand both factors to understand patterns of discrimination."

The research team is hopeful that researchers and organizational leaders alike will investigate how such an instrumental approach to increasing diversity may affect, for better or for worse, the work lives of women and workers of color.