

Stereotyped ethnic names as a barrier to workplace entry

By Ingrid Piller



Photos and names of the fictitious candidates used in the study by Weichselbaumer (2016)

Who of the three women in this image do you think German employers are most likely to consider as a potential employee and call for a job interview? Obviously, the woman in the three pictures is always the same – the first image is associated with a German name (“Sandra Bauer”), the second with a Turkish name (“Meryem Öztürk”) and the third with the same Turkish name but the woman in the picture is additionally wearing a headscarf as a signal of Muslim identity.

You probably don’t need to know much about ethnic discrimination in the labor market or German society to guess the order of employer preference correctly.

In [a year-long field experiment](#) a total of 1,474 identical application letters that only varied in name and photo were sent in response to job ads for admin assistants. “Sandra Bauer” was invited for interview in response to 18.8% of her applications. For “Meryem Öztürk” (without headscarf) that figure was 13.5% and for “Meryem Öztürk” (with headscarf) such positive feedback was as low as 4.2%.

These results are neither new nor surprising: that ethnic names serve as signals of ethnic identity and may attract discrimination in the job market if the ethnicity in question is negatively stereotyped has been

demonstrated in similar field experiments in a range of national and historical contexts and for a variety of ethnic names (for an overview, see Chapter 4 of [Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice](#)).

What the study by Doris Weichselbaumer does show is that adding an additional stigma – the headscarf as a signal of Muslim identity in this case – results in stronger discrimination and further disadvantages the bearer. So, stigmatized identities obviously intersect to create multiple and complex barriers; but how can these barriers be lifted?

In the field experiment, “Meryem Öztürk” (with headscarf) received the highest call-back rate from employers whose job ad had explicitly stated that they were an intercultural team or that the company valued diversity. The effect was statistically very small but still seems to suggest that experience with ethnic diversity helps to reduce barriers. This is similar to the experience of women in the workplace: while the barriers for the first women to seeking paid employment, to entering a particular industry, or gaining work at a particular level or to being accepted in a particular workplace are high, they are lowered for other women who follow in their steps.

In order to succeed and overcome gender discrimination, pioneering women in the workplace (be it in paid employment generally, in a particular industry, at a particular level or in a particular company) have had to be “better” – more qualified, more experienced, more talented, more connected – than their male counterparts. In fact, that this has not changed even today is most clearly evident from the current US presidential election where a highly qualified, experienced and accomplished female politician competes against a male candidate who has neither relevant qualifications nor experience.

Even in 2016, women’s equality in the workplace has not been achieved anywhere in the world – one indicator is the persistent gender pay gap, which stands at [15.46% on the OECD average](#). Nevertheless, women have made their way into the workforce and have overcome incredible obstacles to do so in little over a century. For many individual women, overcoming gender discrimination as an entry barrier has meant that they had to be better qualified and more experienced than their male competitors in order to get a chance.

Does this “strategy” also work with ethnic discrimination? Does being better qualified and having more experience mean that an applicant with a stigmatized ethnic name receives a positive response as often as a less-qualified applicant with a “native” name?

[Another recent field experiment study in Sweden](#) was designed to find out exactly that. The researchers, Mahmood Arai, Moa Bursell, and Lena Nekby, also used the CVs and application letters of fictitious applicants to respond to job ads for computer specialists, drivers, accountants, high school teachers, and assistant nurses. In the first stage of the experiment, they compared call-back rates for fictitious applicants with an Arabic and a Swedish name – with the same result as the German-Turkish study above (and many, many others): “Fatima Ahmed” and “Abdallah Hossein” were invited for interview significantly less than “Karolina Svensson” and “Jonas Söderström.”

In a second stage of the experiment, the researchers then systematically enhanced the profile of the

applicant with the Arabic name so that he or she was more qualified than their counterpart with the Swedish name.

What do you guess happened? Are you betting on employer rationality where the merits of an individual overcome the negative group stereotype or are you a cynic who thinks that bigotry is relatively immune to factual evidence?

Well, neither view would be quite right – as always, the results turned out to be more complex: enhanced qualifications did nothing for male applicants with an Arabic name and their Swedish-named counterparts still had better call-back rates despite being now less qualified. For drivers, a “male” job with the highest callback rates for all applicants, higher qualifications actually reduced an applicant’s chances of being invited for interview. For female applicants, however, their enhanced qualifications “cancelled” the stigma of having an Arabic name: in the second scenario they were invited for interview as often as their (now less-qualified) counterparts with a Swedish name.

How can these conflicting results be explained? The researchers posit that cultural stereotypes are typically associated with the men of a group and are stronger for men. In other words, negative stereotypes about Middle Eastern men are so strong that superior individual merit does not help to overcome the stigma signaled by an Arabic-sounding name. By contrast, cultural stereotypes associated with women are generally weaker because they are not seen as default representatives of the group in the way men are. Furthermore, cultural stereotypes associated with women are often quite different from the stereotype of men of the same group. Therefore, superior individual merit may be cancelling out the group stigma in the case of female applicants with an Arabic name.

In many countries, there are significant gaps in the employment outcomes of migrants and the native-born. The two studies reviewed here both provide evidence that, at least with regard to Muslims, this difference is partly a result of discrimination at the entry stage. The Swedish study also shows that cultural stereotypes affect men and women differently. As a method, field experiments deliver telling results but the intersections between gender, ethnicity and occupation uncovered by Arai, Bursell and Nekby also remind us of the importance of ethnographic research in workplace contexts to understand how the “native” vs. “migrant” divide continues to be produced and reproduced.

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References



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