

Hiring study: Resumes with black, white, Hispanic names treated same

By Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz, Chicago Tribune on 05.08.16

Word Count **929**



A student holds his resume as he looks for a job during a job fair at a university in Shanghai, China, Dec. 10, 2010. REUTERS/Carlos Barria

CHICAGO — New research on hiring bias found that resumes bearing names traditionally held by blacks and Hispanics are just as likely to lead to callbacks and job interviews as those bearing white-sounding names.

The findings, announced last week by the University of Missouri, diverge from the results of a famous study from more than a decade ago that found Lakishas and Jamals were far less likely to get job interviews than Emilys and Gregs.

But study co-author Cory Koedel, an associate professor of economics and public policy at the University of Missouri, cautions that it would “be crazy” to interpret the results to suggest that hiring discrimination is a problem of the past.

“People should not overreact to this study, but I think it is a data point to be considered when thinking about discrimination in the labor market today,” Koedel said.

The study is the first to apply the resume test to Hispanic applicants, Koedel said, but most of the attention it is getting is fixated on the black-white test.

The new study, which is forthcoming in the journal *Applied Economics Letters*, has important differences from the research published in 2004 by University of Chicago professor Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, then at MIT and now at Harvard.

Namely, they used different names.

In the original study, Bertrand and Mullainathan sent nearly 5,000 resumes to 1,300 job ads they found in newspapers in Boston and Chicago from fictional applicants with “very white-sounding names” like Emily Walsh and Greg Baker and “very African-American sounding names” like Lakisha Washington and Jamal Jones. The names were randomly assigned to higher-quality and lower-quality resumes and submitted for administrative support, clerical, customer service and sales openings.

The white names got 50 percent more callbacks than the black names, regardless of the industry or occupation.

One of the criticisms of that study was that Lakisha and Jamal can denote socioeconomic status, and that employers may have made assumptions about education and income rather than race.

Hoping to capture the effect of race alone, Koedel and his co-author, Rajeev Darolia, conducted their experiment using surnames that the U.S. Census shows overwhelmingly belong to whites, blacks and Hispanics, while using first names to signify gender.

In the new experiment, the researchers sent nearly 9,000 resumes to online job postings in seven cities for positions in sales, administrative assistance, customer service, information technology, medical assistance and medical office/billing. The resumes from the fictional black applicants bore the last names Washington and Jefferson, while those from white candidates bore Anderson and Thompson, and those from Hispanic candidates bore Hernandez and Garcia.

On average, 11.4 percent of resumes received a response from an employer, and there were no statistically significant differences across race, ethnic or gender groups.

The study, which measured only the very first step in the hiring process, could suggest that racial discrimination is less prevalent than it was a dozen years ago, the researchers say in a policy paper.

But it also could indicate that last names are a weak signal of race.

Though 90 percent of people with the last name Washington are black and 75 percent of those named Jefferson are black, “there is the fair criticism that maybe no one knows that,” Koedel said.

The first names likely didn’t help strengthen the connection. Megan and Brian were used for the white candidates, and Chloe and Ryan for the black candidates.

“If I got a resume in the mail for Chloe Washington or Ryan Jefferson it would be hard for me to imagine that I would have interpreted that differently from Megan Anderson or Bryan Thompson,” said Northwestern University professor David Figlio, director of the school’s Institute for Policy Research, who was not involved in the study.

Doing a search on a database he has of 2 million names of kids born in Florida between 1994 and 2002, Figlio found that 90 percent of Ryans and 89 percent of Chloes are white.

“This new study is interesting and worthwhile but I don’t think it changes my view in how important race is in subconscious decision-making,” Figlio said. He points to a 2010 study by Stanford University researchers, titled “The Visible Hand,” that showed racial bias without the complications of names and other indicators that could influence people’s decisions.

That experiment found that an iPod being sold online got 13 percent fewer responses and 17 percent fewer offers if it was shown held by a black hand than by a white hand, “strong evidence that race really makes a difference when people are talking about trustworthiness,” Figlio said.

“Am I willing to buy an iPod from somebody — that’s exactly the same thing employers are thinking when deciding to hire someone,” Figlio said.

To Figlio, the most valuable findings from the Missouri resume study relate to the Hispanic names, which to his knowledge have not been put to such a test before.

The researchers paired the first names Isabella and Carlos with the last names Garcia and Hernandez, all strong indicators of Hispanic origin. So a finding that employers didn’t treat those resumes any differently is significant, he said, “and a bit reassuring.”

Careem Gladney, who works in a supply-chain job at Cargill Industries and is black, said he doesn’t know if he was ever passed up for a job because of his first name. But he believes hiring managers are conscious of it, which isn’t always a bad thing. It can help a candidate’s prospects if the company values diversity.

“I believe people are conscious of it, and they definitely make a decision,” Gladney said.