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Screening Names Instead of Qualifications: Testing with Emailed Resumes Reveals Racial Preferences

Siri Thanasombat and John Trasviña

Abstract

In today's California, Asian Americans and Arab Americans have diminished employment opportunities because employment agencies focus on their names, not qualifications. The Discrimination Research Center has documented the response rates to resumes submitted on behalf of men and women who have equal qualifications and ethnically identifiable names of Asian American, Arab American, Latino, African American and white backgrounds. Although potentially illegal and certainly unacceptable, results that showed that individuals with Arab or South Asian names, especially men, received the lowest response rates to their resumes were not particularly surprising in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and subsequent changes in world affairs. Local animosity and antagonism ranging from discrimination to violence in response to events in the Middle East are well known and fit a historic pattern. Other statistically significant results showing Asian Americans receiving far fewer responses than white women applicants despite their comparable resumes suggest the persistence of long-held perceptions of Asian Americans as "foreigners", not capable of "fitting in", and reluctant to complain when wronged. Asian American community organizations and leaders may wish to replicate DRC testing in other parts of the United States or utilize these research results as a basis for workplace advocacy and litigation.

Introduction

This article examines the use and results of testing for potential discrimination against applicants based on surnames on emailed resumes. Despite decades of civil rights laws and anti-discrimi-

nation policies, racial discrimination in employment and hiring continues to persist. Other studies have documented discriminatory practices that occur during face-to-face interviews and glass ceilings, but unlawful practices exist even at earlier stages, shutting the door for job-seekers trying to get pass the initial screening. This includes the screening of resumes. Several studies have examined the impact names the general public associates with ethnic or minority groups have on hiring practices and have found both race and gender discrimination. In a field experiment conducted from 2001 to 2002, researchers sent nearly 5,000 resumes in response to help-wanted ads in Chicago and Boston newspapers and measured whether employers called back the fictitious applicants for interviews. The study found large racial differences in callback rates: employers were 50 percent more likely to call back for interviews resumes with white names than resumes with African American names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

This study¹ focuses on the temporary employment industry because it has become an increasingly important sector of the economy. According to the most recent national data, approximately 7,000 temporary employment agencies operate about 20,000 offices with over 2.25 million individuals working in temporary or contract positions on any day (American Staffing Association 2004). For an entire year, staffing agencies hire 10.7 million people and serve 90 to 95 percent of America's businesses. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) predicts that more jobs will be created in personnel supply services than in any other industry in this decade, and that it will be the fifth fastest-growing industry through 2012 (2004). Moreover, women and minorities are over-represented in this industry (Hipple 2001), and temporary employment can be the gateway to permanent, stable and well-paying positions (Autor and Houseman 2002).

The importance of temporary employment agencies, specifically for minority and disadvantaged workers, makes discrimination in this industry especially important to address. Previous studies have found that racial preferences are pervasive in this sector, creating barriers for minority applicants (Nunes and Seligman 1999; Bussey and Trasvina 2003). These studies used telephone contacts, postal mail, and face-to-face interactions. They found that white applicants were offered a more highly-paid or longer-duration position more quickly than African American applicants;

some white applicants were offered a position without a personal interview or typing test; and some white applicants were coached on how to present themselves or improve their resume, opportunities not afforded to African American applicants. This study adds to the literature on hiring practices in the temporary employment industry by examining outcomes for applicants with Asian, Arab or South Asian surnames, along with applicants with surnames frequently associated with Latinos, African Americans, and whites. The study also contributes to the literature by conducting the test through the Internet via email.

Using ethnically identifiable names on comparable resumes, this analysis produces two major findings: 1) Arab Americans/South Asians received the lowest rate of responses from temporary employment agencies throughout almost all of California, and 2) Asian Americans received the second lowest response rate, significantly lower than the rate for white women. By examining employer response to ethnically identifiable names at the first stage of the job search, the study sheds light on a fundamental source of inequality in employment opportunities.

Methods

The data for this study are based on the responses to resumes that were emailed to temporary employment agencies with cover letters stating that the applicant was interested in an administrative office position. All resumes listed a comparable set of skills and level of experience. Each applicant had four years of administrative experience, had obtained a college degree from a state university, could type fifty-five to sixty-five words per minute, and had experience using MS Word and Excel. Each resume, describing candidates with comparable qualifications, was headed with an ethnically identifiable name representing one of the following five ethnic or cultural groups: African American, Asian American, Latino, Arab American/South Asian, or white. These first and last names were selected in consultation with community advisors. The study used only names that a substantial majority correctly identified as belonging to the designated ethnic or racial group and gender. Some names were also selected because they were used in a previous name screening study where names were chosen based on frequency data from birth certificates of all babies born in Massachusetts between 1974 and 1979. Distinctive

names were those that had the highest ratio of frequency in one racial group to frequency in the other racial group (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). The Discrimination Research Center study randomized combinations of names, resumes, and cover letters to be sent to different agencies in order to reduce the chance that a strength or weakness of a particular resume, rather than the apparent ethnicity or gender of the applicant, would drive the agency's response. Randomization gives each ethnic and gender subgroup an equal chance of receiving a response and facilitates statistical comparisons across ethnicities and genders.

To mirror the job-seeking strategies of Californian applicants looking for temporary employment, the study included a number of temporary employment agencies that are leaders in the industry, have offices throughout the state and are likely places for job applicants to go for placement. In addition, since a number of these temporary agencies have operated for decades and are Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies with hundreds or thousands of temporary employees, their influence and practices define the temporary employment industry and shape the practices of smaller companies where applicants might also apply. Thus, the sampling approach is likely to represent typical experiences of temporary employment applicants and day-to-day practices of the industry.

Resumes were sent electronically—an increasingly more common practice as a result of the growing prevalence of on-line resources and accessibility. Between August and November 2003, 6,200 resumes were transmitted to agencies in seven regions of California: the San Francisco Bay Area, the Silicon Valley, the Sacramento area, the Central Valley, the Bakersfield region, Los Angeles metropolitan region, and the San Diego metropolitan region. The number of resumes sent was equally divided between male and female applicants and among ethnic groups so that 620 resumes represented a man or woman of each ethnicity. The study successfully captured and recorded results for 5,790 resumes, or over 93 percent of the total emailed, for inclusion in this study.

The study compares the frequency of responses to resumes from individuals with the same qualifications but different ethnically identifiable names. The temporary employment agencies' responses were measured by the number of phone calls and email messages that applicants received in response to their resumes. The extent of differential treatment exhibited toward applicants of

varied ethnicity or gender was evaluated based on the disparities in response rates. “Statistical significance” means the difference has no more than a 5 percent chance of being produced through random chance, or that we are 95 percent confident that the difference is real. Unless otherwise noted, differences that are described in this report as “substantial” “considerable,” “significant” or “dramatic” indicate differences that are statistically significant.

Results

With one notable exception, we found small and statistically insignificant differences statewide among the response rates, regardless of the name on the resume. The overall average rate was 31 percent, and the average rates for Latino, white and African American applicants were above average (33 percent, 32 percent, and 31 percent, respectively). At 30 percent, the response rate for Asian American applicants was the second lowest among all ethnic groups, but the difference between the rates for Asian American and white applicants is not conclusive. Among all the ethnic groups in the study, Arab American/South Asian applicants received the lowest response rate from temporary employment agencies (27 percent), and this rate is statistically significantly different from those for white, Latino, and African American applicants.

In five regions (San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Central Valley, and Bakersfield regions), Arab American/South Asian applicants were the least likely to receive a response from a temporary employment agency (see Table 1). The regional differences in response rates are not statistically significant, due in part to the small sample size for each region, but the findings are interesting and consistent with the statewide results. In San Diego, Arab American/South Asian applicants placed fourth, above only African American applicants. Silicon Valley was the only place where Arab American/South Asian applicants received more responses (22 percent) than non-Arab American/South Asian applicants (20 percent). In Bakersfield, a geographic area where hiring is limited, only 3 percent of Arab American/South Asian applicants received responses, just one-third the rate of everyone else.

When the data are disaggregated by gender and ethnicity, the patterns are more complex (see Table 2). Because cover letters attached to the resumes indicated an interest in administrative positions, which may be considered traditionally female-domi-

Table 1: Response Rates by Region of Non-Arab American/South Asian Applicants and Arab American/South Asian Applicants

	Non-Arab American/South Asian Response Rate	Arab American/South Asian Response Rate
San Francisco Bay Area	37%	28%
Silicon Valley	20%	22%
Sacramento region	30%	22%
Central Valley region	22%	17%
Bakersfield region	9%	3%
Los Angeles region	40%	33%
San Diego region	47%	45%

nated occupations, it is not surprising that the average response rate is higher for women than men (32 percent versus 29 percent). The gender-ethnic group with the highest average response rate is white women, with Latinas following closely behind. Arab American/South Asian applicants, regardless of gender, continue to fare the worst, but the new breakdown shows that Arab American/South Asian men fared significantly worse than Arab American/South Asian women. Using the rate for white women as a new benchmark, the average Asian American rate is not only noticeably lower, but the difference is statistically significant. Asian American men fared equally poorly as Asian American women.

The analysis by gender and ethnicity/race also reveals some insight about the relative role of these two factors. The small response rate gap between men and women among African Americans and Asian Americans suggests that race is a greater factor than gender in the agencies’ consideration of these resumes. The larger—and statistically significant—gap between genders among applicants who were either white or Arab American/South Asian suggests that employers looked beyond race in deciding whether to respond to a resume.

Table 2: Response Rate by Ethnicity and Gender

Ethnicity and Gender	Response Rate
White women	35%
Latina women	35%
Latino men	31%
African American women	31%
African American men	31%
Asian American women	30%
Asian American men	30%
White men	30%
Arab American/ South Asian women	29%
Arab American/ South Asian men	24%

Discussion

Leaders of these Arab American/South Asian communities and other knowledgeable observers view the low response rate for Arab American/South Asian applicants as a partial result of 9/11. The backlash against Arab American/South Asian communities after 9/11 strengthened preexisting fears and antagonisms toward these communities and added to a history of hate crimes (Narasaki and Han 2004). The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) reported that from September 2001 to October 2002, complaints of employment discrimination poured into the ADC national office at a rate four times that of previous years. Cases of employment discrimination included hostile work environments and terminations. Claims of discrimination in the workplace came from across the United States, with the greatest numbers coming from California, Virginia, Michigan and New York (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 2003).

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has recognized post-9/11 discrimination against Arab Americans, American Muslims and South Asians as a growing problem. The EEOC reported that in the fifteen months after 9/11, individuals who were, or were perceived to be, Muslim or Arab filed 705 charges of discrimination or retaliation related to the backlash of 9/11. California, with eighty-two charges, led the nation in the number of 9/11-related filings. Texas followed closely behind with seventy-eight charges (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2002). Meanwhile, during the same period, the EEOC received 841 charges of discrimination based on the charging party's Muslim religion (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2002).² In the fifteen months prior to 9/11, the EEOC received only 391 charges alleging employment discrimination based on being Muslim. The increases are attributed both to intensified EEOC community outreach and obviously heightened tensions after 9/11. EEOC charge data and our report demonstrate that anti-Arab/South Asian sentiment continues to permeate the employment process in California three years after 9/11. Therefore, this study strongly suggests that Arab American and South Asian individuals throughout California be wary not only of hate violence in the aftermath of 9/11, and recent events in Iraq and the Middle East, they must also be cognizant of less obvious acts of discrimination in employment practices.

Asian American applicants appear to face a different set of barriers. Even when Asian Americans presented identical credentials, the average response rate for Asian Americans (30 percent) was lower than that for any other group except for Arab Americans/South Asians. The response rates for the resume type that generated the most frequent responses from temporary employment agencies make clear the barriers Asian Americans face. This resume described a job applicant who had graduated from the University of Oregon in 2000 with a B.A. degree in English and who had played on the tennis team. Following graduation, the applicant worked as an administrative assistant in a college admissions office for almost one year and as a receptionist in the private industry in Oregon for more than two years. The applicant could type sixty words per minute and had various word processing, spreadsheet, and Internet skills. The applicant enjoyed tutoring elementary school students in reading. When different names were attached to the resume, the response rates ranged from as high as 46 percent when the applicant was Jose Gonzalez to as low as 30 percent when the applicant was Joyce Hsu and just 29 percent when the applicant was Timothy Wu.

Although it is difficult to determine the causes behind these disparities, the low response rates to Asian American resumes in our study may be examples of disparate treatment that go unchecked by Asian Americans' higher levels of underreporting of discriminatory incidents. According to federal civil rights law enforcement agencies, Asian Americans tend to file civil rights law enforcement complaints less often than any other racial or ethnic group. Only 2 percent of the roughly 80,000 charges received each year by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission were from Asian Pacific Americans.³ General underreporting of anti-Asian and Pacific Islander incidents was exacerbated by counter-terrorism efforts after 9/11, when the number of reported anti-Asian incidents dropped from 507 in 2001 to 275 in 2002 (National Asian American Pacific Legal Consortium 2002). With this pattern and reputation, temporary employment agencies may find it less risky to illegally disregard qualified Asian American applicants than to ignore qualified applicants from other communities.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study, along with previous ones on the temporary em-

ployment industry, documents continued patterns of differential treatment. These patterns are not necessarily or easily discernable to the individual job applicants. In previous studies, testers rarely reported any blatant examples of favoritism or overt acts of intimidation or discrimination. Moreover, individual applicants are typically not in a position to know who was selected for the job or what actually occurred behind the closed doors of the hiring process. In other words, an individual with an Arab/South Asian name who emailed his or her resume to a temporary employment office without receiving a response would not have reason to suspect that applicants of all other backgrounds received responses far more frequently. The existing discrimination tends to be subtle, but it nonetheless has a powerful impact on determining who is selected for an interview or ultimately hired. Testing, as the methodology used in this study, is especially important to uncover the resulting intergroup disparities, such as those encountered by Asian American, Arab American, and South Asian workers.

The findings on Arab Americans, South Asians and Asian Americans significantly contribute to the cumulative knowledge on the link between race and employer response. The findings also add to the current discussion on civil rights law enforcement by highlighting the critical role testing plays in identifying differential treatment. While the results of this study shed some light on the problem, it has both data and analytical limitations. The outcomes are restricted to one industry, and the sample size is too small to discern regional differences. Further research is needed not only on the extent but also on the causes of the disparities among response rates experienced by Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, South Asian, and Arab Americans. Testing needs to be complemented with other types of information that allow us to get inside the black box to better understand the practices, procedures, and attitudes that produce biased outcomes. This requires periodic audits of employer hiring practices by government, public interest groups, and hopefully, by the industry. Research, however, is not sufficient to address the troubling patterns of race-based preferences. Change will require public and community education about worker and employer rights and responsibilities. These actions are vital if the nation is going to eliminate barriers to equal employment opportunities and professional advancement.

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Notes

1. The study was conducted under the auspice of the Discrimination Research Center, a non-profit civil rights organization that combines research, testing, advocacy and education to advance social justice and combat discrimination. Dedicated to providing data that will inform the ongoing debate on equality, DRC produces and disseminates reports to policymakers, community organizations, academic researchers, industry and labor, and the general public in order to inform them of ways to eliminate and prevent discrimination, enhance thoughtful dialogue, and craft responsive public policies.
2. This figure includes some charges with alleged violation dates prior to 9/11/01. These charges are, by definition, not coded as 9/11-related charges.
3. See, for example, Elena Maria Lopez, "EEOC Finds Asian Americans Face Bias But Rarely Report It," *DiversityInc.com*, August 6, 2003; and US EEOC, "EEOC and Workplace Partners Launch New Initiative to Protect Employment Rights of Asian Americans," August 1, 2003 (press release available at <http://www.eeoc.gov/press/8-01-03.html>).

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