

Is your name “Canadian” enough?

During the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017, Canadians were waving the flag high to celebrate the values and the identity that Canada aims to embody. Following the election of the Liberal government in 2015, the world was reminded of Canada’s global ambition to be a bearer of peace and a haven for refugees fleeing persecution. There are, however, internal concerns that have gone unaddressed, including missing Indigenous women, lack of infrastructure investment on reserves, and income inequality. Many of these issues stem from the deeply rooted discrimination within the fabric of Canadian society. For this reason, I began my own research into the name-based discrimination that occurs during job recruitment. Studies indicate high rates of discrimination against minority applicants.

NAME-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN JOB RECRUITMENT

While there is significant literature on workplace discrimination and racism, the study of name-based discrimination is still burgeoning. In a 2009 study led by Philip Oreopoulos, “thousands of resumes were sent in response to online job postings across Toronto to investigate why Canadian immigrants struggle in the labour market. The findings suggested significant discrimination by name ethnicity and city of experience” (Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2011, p. 5). The study was assessed and updated in 2011, 2012, and 2017. According to the findings, discrimination is an ongoing experience of ethnic minority applicants who bear foreign-sounding names. Name-based discrimination is a continuing reality faced by ethnic minorities in Canada, regardless of their Canadian or foreign credentials. This article provides a brief overview of the studies on this topic and offers insight on how such practices have significant implications as a result of institutional and microaggressive forms of racism. It concludes by offering recommendations on employment best practices.

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THE FINDINGS

In 2009, economist Philip Oreopoulos spearheaded a study titled “Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labor Market?” to investigate why Canadian immigrants who were given entry into Canada on the basis of skill continued to struggle in the labour market. The study sent more than a thousand resumes in response to online job postings for various types of occupations in Toronto. The resumes represented individuals from China, India, and Pakistan. The author randomized resumes on the basis of educational level, experience gained either abroad or in Toronto, and fluency in several languages. Some of the study’s main findings were that the interview request rates for English-named applicants with Canadian education and experience were three times higher than the rates for Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani applicants, and that Canadian experience was highly preferred by employers in comparison with foreign experience. Canadian applicants with English-sounding names had significantly higher callback rates

than applicants with non-English-sounding names (16 percent versus 11 percent) (Oreopoulos, 2009).

Follow-up reports in 2011, 2012, and 2017, which included data from Montreal and Vancouver, found similar results. The surprising part about these findings is that some of the applicants immigrated to Canada under the points system, which prioritizes skilled workers (Oreopoulos, 2009). Thus, these findings indicate that applicants who possess the necessary qualities, but do not have English-sounding names, suffer high rates of discrimination on the basis of their ethnic identities.

THE IMPLICATIONS

The findings of these studies have far-reaching implications. First, the findings illustrate a prevalent trend of institutional racism in the labour market.¹ Institutional racism is detrimental to societal progress because it disadvantages members of ethnic minorities rather than diversifies companies. This kind of disadvantage leads to a loss of talent based solely on one’s name and the perceived “burden” that employers must cope with, such as the “possibility of language problems and heavy accents” (Banerjee, Reitz, & Oreopoulos, 2017, p. 6). However, even if one were to consider slight language barriers or heavy accents as a “burden,” the burden is only marginal in comparison to the high degree of qualification that applicants possess.

These discriminatory employment practices damage both the applicants and the hiring companies because they reinforce white privilege based on names. It is particularly difficult “to control our institutions, which, being products of their history, cannot but perpetuate practices which advantage the typical white and handicap the typical minority person” (Better, 2008, p. 13). Evidently, the reinforcement of these societal and institutional practices is rooted in Canadian history.

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Second, these results also imply forms of microaggression² that happen before one even enters the workplace, because there is an inherent degradation in rejecting or being less likely to contact applicants with ethnic-sounding names.

URGENT STEPS

Urgent steps need to be taken to combat such discriminatory and racist practices. The first step is to reform human resources management with stronger oversight to prevent discriminatory practices. Once this step is achieved, there must be serious efforts to comply with the requirements of the *Employment Equity Act*. Since most employers have voluntarily adopted the tenets of this Act, there must be a regulatory body to ensure that its provisions are properly enforced—for both large and small employers. By making these necessary changes, we will be one step closer to a more inclusive and equal Canadian society. 🍁

NOTES

1. Institutional racism can be defined as “those patterns, procedures, practices and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-white/racial ethnic groups” (Better, 2008, p. 11).

2. Microaggression can be defined as “everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership (people of color, women, or LGBTs)” (Sue, 2010, p. 24).

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