
„Age discrimination in personnel selection: A vignette study with HR managers in Austria“

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ABSTRACT:

The paper investigates age discrimination in personnel selection across different industries and positions in Austria. A factorial survey approach (FSA), also called vignette study, is applied. This semi-experimental research method combines the advantages of both survey research and classical experiments. A vignette is a short description of a social situation or a person that consists of several characteristics (factors and their levels) which can be simultaneously manipulated. The experimental design takes on all possible combinations of factor levels across all factors. Such design allows studying the effect of each factor on the dependent variable, as well as the effects of interactions between factors on the response variable. The impact of each dimension on respondent's judgment can be estimated accurately. To make it more specific, through a vignette design it is possible to investigate the solely effect of age on selection decisions, a factor that is usually confounded with other factors in reality. Respondents in this study are HR managers from different organizations in Austria. They are confronted with scenarios of hypothetical applicants and are then asked to state the hiring desirability for the respective job seeker. The paper elaborates on the research method and presents first results.

1 PROBLEM DEFINITION

Many industrialized countries face a demographic change. Rising life expectancies together with declining birth rates constitute a great challenge for labour markets regarding the composition of the labour force. Employers are confronted with an aging workforce as well as a substantial turnover due to baby boomers' retirement (Szinovacz, 2011). The potential of older employees will be increasingly valuable for organizations in the future; however, labour market opportunities of older workers are reported to be poorer than those of younger ones (Johnson, 2008): Older job seekers need about twice as long as younger ones to reintegrate into the labour market after career breaks. If they succeed in re-entering, they find employment in a limited range of occupations and sectors, compared to younger job seekers (Bendick et.al., 1999). Labour market statistics also display lower employment rates for the age group 55-59 years (Statistik Austria, 2014). These reduced chances of older workers might be due to productivity differences, but they might also be the result of age discrimination. Age discrimination often occurs in more subtle ways and is hard to detect, which particularly applies to the process of employee selection (Büsch et.,al., 2008, Richardson et.al., 2013).

Evidence of self-reported age discrimination (Eurobarometer survey) indicates a substantial amount of subjective discrimination in Austria. More "objective" measures of age discrimination, however, are lacking. In Europe, we know very little about attitudes of employers towards older workers and the factors that affect managers' decisions to employ older workers. For German speaking countries, the topic of age discrimination has been widely neglected. This contrasts to extensive research on attitudes, stereotypes and discrimination of older workers in the Anglo-Saxon countries, dating back to the 1970s. Moreover, most research has focused on the supply side of labour markets: on the supply of older workers, their socioeconomic characteristics, on their experiences with discrimination, or on alternative work arrangements (Adler and Hilber, 2009). But less is known about the demand side of the labour market and employers ambitions to recruit older workers (van Beek et.al., 1997, Karpinska et.al, 2011).

The study aims to fill this research gap. To forecast future challenges for labour markets due to demographic change, it is important to understand the demand side of labour markets and employers judgments in personnel selection. Raising employment participation levels of older workers is at high priority among European policy makers, and this target can only be reached with the support and understanding of employers who fail employment decisions (Conen et.al., 2011). The main research question addresses the relevance of age in selection for entry-level jobs across a broad range of industrial sectors. Moreover, the project also investigates the importance of factors other than age that might have an impact on managerial decision-making, such as sex, the existence of social networks, social capital or job history. What are the characteristics that enhance or limit the hiring chances of applicants of different ages? In addition, characteristics of the organisation and of the respondents are included in the analysis.

2 THE FACTORIAL SURVEY APPROACH

A factorial survey approach (FSA), also called vignette study, is applied to study age discrimination in personnel selection. A vignette is a short description of a social situation or a person that consists of several characteristics (factors and their levels) which can be simultaneously manipulated (Jasso, 2006, Sauer, Auspurg, Hinz and Liebig, 2011, Steiner und Atzmüller, 2006). Instead of answering single items, respondents are confronted with scenarios of persons or situations and are then asked to judge the situation or person presented to them. The researcher can systematically manipulate the levels of factors in the vignettes by assigning different values to them. The experimental design takes on all possible combinations of factor levels across all factors. Such design allows to determine the influence of each single factor on the judgement task and to weight the relative importance of each factor which is often confounded in reality (Auspurg et.al., 2009, Sauer et.al., 2009). More specifically, in the “real world”, age and work experience are usually so closely related that it is difficult to disentangle their influence on selection decisions. In constructing hypothetical scenarios, however, the influence of each factor on decisions can be identified.

The method combines elements from both experiments and surveys. Vignette studies usually consist of a vignette experiment as core part and a traditional survey for the supplementary measurement of respondent-specific and organizational characteristics (Atzmüller, 2006). The semi-experimental approach of factorial surveys presents a number of advantages vis-à-vis traditional survey research which will be discussed in more detail in the poster.

Respondents in this study are 122 HR managers from different organizations and branches in Austria. They are asked to state the hiring desirability for a hypothetical job seeker. Since the data have a hierarchical structure, I apply multi-level analysis. First results will be presented during the conference.

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