



Immigrant volunteering: A way out of labour market discrimination?[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We study whether volunteering by migrants lowers hiring discrimination against them.
- Fictitious job applications are sent to real vacancies in Belgium.
- Migration background and volunteering are randomly assigned to these applications.
- Our results indicate that volunteering fosters migrants' labour market integration.
- No unequal treatment is found between volunteering natives and volunteering migrants.

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ABSTRACT

Many governments encourage migrants to participate in volunteer activities as a stepping stone to labour market integration. In the present study, we investigate whether this prosocial engagement lowers the hiring discrimination against them. To this end, we use unique data from a field experiment in which fictitious job applications are sent in response to real vacancies in Belgium. Ethnic origin and volunteer activities are randomly assigned to these applications. While non-volunteering native candidates receive more than twice as many job interview invitations as non-volunteering migrants, no unequal treatment is found between natives and migrants when they reveal volunteer activities.

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1. Introduction

The labour market integration of migrants¹ has received much attention both in policy and academic circles during the past

[☆] Ethical approval. The data-gathering process was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Ghent University at its meeting on 9 July 2013.

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¹ Throughout this manuscript, when referring to (im) migrants, we refer to (im) migrants in a broad sense, i.e. individuals with an (im) migration background. These can be first generation migrants (if the migration occurred during their own life), second generation migrants (if their parents migrated to Belgium before their birth) or even third generation migrants.

decade. A frequently reported finding in related academic work is that immigrants' socio-cultural integration is key to their labour market success (see, e.g., [Bisin et al., 2011](#); [Constant and Zimmermann, 2008](#)). Therefore, not surprisingly, countries such as Austria, Belgium,² Canada, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have encouraged the migrants they host to participate in volunteer activities in "mainstream" organisations ([European Commission, 2012](#); [Handy and Greenspan, 2009](#); [OECD, 2008](#)).³ This participation in volunteer work outside their own communities not only helps migrants to catch up with natives in terms of human and social capital ([European Commission, 2012](#)) but also signals better integration to employers ([Handy and Greenspan, 2009](#)).⁴ As a consequence, it may lower hiring and wage discrimination. On the one hand, following [Becker's \(1957\)](#) model of taste-based discrimination, employers as well as their employees and customers may have less distaste for interacting with well-integrated migrants compared with their less integrated counterparts ([Adida et al., 2014](#); [Handy and Greenspan, 2009](#)). On the other hand, following [Arrow's \(1973\)](#) model of statistical discrimination, the volunteering signal may weaken stereotypes with respect to foreign job candidates' productivity, values and motivation ([Baert and De Pauw, 2014](#); [Derous et al., 2009](#)).

This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to assess the empirical link between the volunteering undertaken by ethnic minorities and the labour market discrimination that they face. If volunteering acts as a discrimination-reducing device, this is relevant to individual migrants (when considering prosocial activities) as well as to volunteer-based organisations (when planning communication strategies to attract (immigrant) volunteers) and policy makers (when considering additional stimuli for immigrant volunteering). In addition, we investigate whether the empirical link between immigrant volunteering and discrimination is heterogeneous by gender and education level.

To this end, we analyse field experimental data gathered by correspondence testing, as introduced and refined by, amongst others, [Bertrand and Mullainathan \(2004\)](#), [Eriksson and Rooth \(2014\)](#) and [Sharma et al. \(2015\)](#). In the next section, we describe our research method, in which we sent fictitious job applications in response to real vacancies in Belgium and randomly assigned volunteering and ethnicity to these applications. In Section 3, we analyse the tested employers' reactions by the intersection of ethnicity and volunteering. Section 4 concludes the study.

2. Data

We gathered our experimental data between December 2014 and April 2015 in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. We sent one pair of fictitious job applications to genuine vacancies in this region. For each vacancy, we randomly assigned volunteering activities to one of the pair members. The migrant status of the applicants was equal at the pair level, but was randomly assigned between pairs. Thereafter, reactions from the employer side were analysed to investigate the interaction of both treatments (volunteering and migrant status) on the probability of positive call-back. In what follows, we describe our experiment in more depth.

² In some cities in Belgium, the country where we gathered our data, for instance, language courses for migrants are made conditional on a number of hours spent volunteering (source: <http://www.inburgeringantwerpen.be/participeren>).

³ [European Commission \(2012\)](#) mentions that "volunteering [...] is an essential component of what the European Commission called the Common Basic Principles of Integration".

⁴ As mentioned by [European Commission \(2012\)](#), immigrant volunteering serves both as an instrument for and as an indicator of socio-cultural integration.

We created two templates ("Type A" and "Type B") of curricula vitae and cover letters for two education levels. Middle-educated pairs held a secondary education degree in commerce, while high-educated pairs held a bachelor's degree in office management. These degrees allowed us to apply for almost all commercial and administrative positions at the upper-secondary education and first-stage tertiary education levels. Type A and Type B applications differed in inessential details and in layout but were identical in all job-relevant characteristics, conditional on education level. All the applicants were born and living in Antwerp, the largest city of Flanders. Examples of the templates used are available in the Online Appendix (see [Appendix A](#)).

We sent two applications, one of Type A and one of Type B, to each of 576 randomly selected vacancies from the database of the Public Employment Agency of Flanders: 288 vacancies targeted at our middle-educated pairs and 288 vacancies targeted at our high-educated pairs. One member of each candidate pair mentioned volunteer activities in the "Other activities" section of her/his curriculum vitae. To eliminate any application-type effects on call-backs, we alternately assigned the volunteering and non-volunteering identity to the Type A and Type B applications. The volunteering candidate mentioned volunteer activities at a life-saving food provider and/or at a cancer foundation and/or (as an equipment manager) at a sports club.

We alternated between pairs with (non-stereotypical) Flemish-sounding names and pairs with (non-stereotypical) Turkish⁵-sounding names. However, to avoid unequal treatment due to administrative reasons, all the pairs had the Belgian nationality. In addition, we alternated the gender of the pairs. The resulting combinations were sent to the employers in an alternating order, each time with approximately 24 h in between the pair members.

As a consequence of our experimental design, while the treatment of volunteering was randomly assigned within pairs of applicants, the treatment of a foreign-sounding name was randomly assigned between pairs of applicants. An alternative design would have been to send quartets of applicants to each vacancy with a random assignment of all ethnicity–volunteering combinations. This would have yielded more statistical power at the cost of a (substantially) higher risk of detection of the experiment.

The data for the pairs with a Flemish-sounding name were analysed by [Baert and Vujić \(2016\)](#) with a focus on the general premium of volunteering. We refer to their study for further details on the experimental data gathering.

3. Results

The reactions from employers were received by telephone voicemail or email. [Table 1](#) synthesises these call-backs by ethnic origin and volunteer activities. Overall, candidates with a Flemish-sounding name received a positive reaction (i.e. a job interview invitation, a question to provide more information or a proposal of an alternative position) in 19.3% of their applications. They were immediately invited to a job interview in 9.7% of the cases. The corresponding percentages for their Turkish counterparts were 15.3% and 6.4%, respectively. The positive call-back ratio is then calculated by dividing the positive call-back rates of the immigrant subsample by the corresponding positive call-back rates of the native sample. This yields positive call-back ratios of 0.793 and 0.661: immigrant candidates received about 20.7% fewer positive reactions in a broad sense and 33.9% fewer job interview invitations. These call-back ratios are significantly different from 1

⁵ The Turkish community forms the most important ethnic minority in Antwerp with a substantial representation at the tertiary education level.

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