CAN THE TRAILING SPOUSE PHENOMENON BE EXPLAINED BY EMPLOYER DISCRIMINATION?

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BACKGROUND

Decades family migration research has led to the conclusion that couples tend to move to accommodate men’s, rather than women’s, career and economic advancement (Cooke 2008). Whereas the man in the couple tends to be the ‘lead migrant’, the woman often ends up as the ‘trailing spouse’ or a ‘tied mover’, not moving for the sake of her own career, but for that of her partner. This, in turn, makes men more likely to be employed after a move, as well as to gain economically from it (cf. Shihadeh 1991; Smits 2001; Cooke 2003; Cooke et al. 2009).

Most, if not all, of the studies in this stream of research use data with individual- or couple-level information such as sex, civil status, education, occupation, income etc. As a consequence, we know a great deal about the relationship between supply side factors – i.e., the man, the woman and the couple - and consequences from family migration. Absent from this research is, however, the demand side in the form of employers. Consequently, we know next to nothing about whether employer choices might contribute to these patterns, by providing different possibilities for women and men to become the family’s lead migrant, through different employment opportunities outside their region of residence. The importance of the employer indeed has been suggested to be important for understanding women’s disadvantaged position in family migration (see e.g. Boyle et al 1999), but has up until now been neglected empirically.

We attempt to fill this void in research by assessing whether employers systematically treat women and men differently depending on whether they live close to the location of the job they apply for. We utilize a field experiment design, where fictitious job applications are sent to employers to directly investigate whether employers treat applications written by men and women differently, and whether there are any gender specific differences depending on the distance between the home of the applicant and the job applied for. We are particularly interested in how these discriminatory practices differ by the civil- and parental status of the applicant, as well as by perceived bargaining position in the household. By this novel approach, we are able to scrutinize if, and how, discriminatory practices of employers matter for women’s reduced likelihood to become the lead migrant in family migration.

WHY EMPLOYERS MATTER

Employers may matter for family migration outcomes through a number of channels. It has been suggested that employers may react to women’s migration histories, and adapt their investments in her according to this. If a woman has moved multiple times, this may signal non-commitment to the employer, who will then be reluctant to invest in her, for instance in terms of on-the-job training, as there is a risk that she will soon move again (Morrison and Lichter, 1988). This may result in slower wage trajectories and less possibilities for advancement for movers than for stayers, and particularly so for tied movers. Empirical results support this assumption, indicating that gender differences in labor market outcomes are exaggerated for women with multiple migration spells. These women have a significantly lower likelihood to be employed than
women with no previous migration spell, or who have migrated back to the region of origin (Bailey and Cooke, 1998).

We argue that employers do not only react to a woman’s individual migration history, but that they apply statistical discriminatory practices when faced with the decision to hire a woman from out-of-town. It has previously been suggested that an employer may be reluctant to invest in a woman’s human capital if the employer believes she will soon leave her current region of residence and her current job (Sandell 1977). It has also been argued that these kinds of expectations are affected by the fact that women are known to be more likely to follow their partners in family migration (Boyle et al. 1999:123), making the pay-off from the employer’s investments uncertain. This reinforces gender differences in human capital, which in turn would make it more likely for the woman to become the tied mover. Tied moving hence fosters tied moving, on both individual- and macro-level. Not only may employers avoid to invest in female employees but they may also avoid hiring out-of-town-women altogether. If an employer believes that family (migration) decisions are often taken with the man’s career in mind, s/he may be hesitant to invest in employing a woman from another area.

With this in mind, a given employer may assume that a callback to an out-of-town woman versus an out-of-town man will be associated with different levels of perceived utility and risk. The man may be considered to be less restricted geographically, as families more often adapt geographically to the man, and as men more often commute to work than women (Sandow 2008). A man may be perceived as less constrained by family commitments, and may hence also be expected to experience less work-family-conflict from accepting an employment in another region. Relatedly, large gender differences in job search have been found. Men search in around twice as many cities, and are willing to accept jobs which are located around 50 percent farther away from their present home (Eriksson and Lagerström 2012).

Whereas discrimination in theories of statistical discrimination derives from informational bias, i.e., that employers, lacking information on individual productivity, are thought to base their decisions on information of average differences in the productivity of groups, discrimination in status-based theories derives from a cognitive bias operating over and above the actual productivity of groups (cf., Correll and Benard 2006). In this context, status characteristics involving gender and family relations may be influential. A status characteristic is activated, or becomes salient, when it differentiates actors or is assumed to be relevant in a particular context. Individuals then use the status characteristic to assign expectations – to behavior, competence, commitment, etc. – that are in accordance with their status beliefs (Wagner and Berger 2002). For instance, it is likely that the gender discriminatory practices in callbacks that are studied here are activated only for married or cohabiting women and men, or for women and men with children, as this may be when the employer believes that utility- or productivity differences between women and men will appear. Furthermore, a status-based approach suggests that discriminatory practices may be counteracted if the female applicant has a higher occupational status than her partner, as this may counteract the assumption of the woman as a secondary-earner.
HYPOTHESES

H1. Employer discrimination in job application callback, to the disadvantage of women, increases with the job applicant’s distance between home location and job location.

H2. Employer discrimination in job application callback, to the disadvantage of women, increases further for job applicants who are married or cohabiting and have children.

H3. Employer discrimination in job application callback, to the disadvantage of women, decreases if the woman’s husband/cohabitant works in an occupation with lower status than her.

H4. Employer discrimination in job application callback, to the disadvantage of women, increases if the woman’s husband/cohabitant works in an occupation with higher status than her.

DESIGN OF THE CORRESPONDENCE TEST

To evaluate whether actual employers hiring employees for real jobs discriminate by gender and geographical distance between applicant and employer, we performed a correspondence test and sent fictitious applications to real jobs in the labor market, and observed callback rates for these. Gender was randomly assigned to each application, using computer software created by Lahey and Beasley (2009). We applied for jobs in 18 occupations, merged into 14 analytical categories (accountant/auditor, assistant nurse, chef, cleaner, elementary school teacher, engineer computer science/computer specialist, engineer machine technology/industrial economics/electronics, financial assistant, high school teacher, nurse, preschool teacher, receptionist, salesperson, and store personnel/cashier), characterized by a relatively large labor market demand as well as variation in gender and immigration composition, educational level, and sector (see Ahmed, Andersson and Hammarstedt 2013; Bursell 2012).

We generated variation in the distance between the applicant’s home and the potential employer by holding the residential location of the applicant constant relatively close to the city center of Stockholm, i.e. in the municipality of Stockholm, and by applying for jobs nearby as well as jobs in the largest Swedish cities. We define a callback as a positive non-automatic response by the employer (via e-mail, text, or telephone), which may involve e.g., offering the job, asking the applicant to come to a job interview, or asking for more information. In total, 2,144 applications were sent out during the period October 2013-June 2015. We have received positive call-backs for 39 percent of these.

RESULTS

Figure 1 includes estimated callback rates by gender and location of job, controlled for occupation applied for. Our applicants have a greater likelihood to receive a callback if they apply for a job nearby. For jobs applied for located 5 to 20 kilometers away from the applicant’s place of residence, the overall callback rate is slightly lower for both genders. A gender difference, to the advantage of men, appears once we look at jobs located more than 20 kilometers away, but this difference is not statistically significant. Thus, our first hypothesis is not supported.
Our second hypothesis suggests that married and cohabiting women are particularly disfavored by employers if they apply for a job outside their home municipality, and that this negative effect should be further reinforced if the woman (i.e., the couple) has children. In Figure 2, we present the estimated callback rates by gender, civil status, and parental status. We here dichotomize distance to an indicator of more than 20 kilometer between home and workplace.

We find that married and cohabiting women and men with no children, applying for jobs nearby, seem to be preferred by employers. The callback rates drop when jobs further away from Stockholm are applied for. We concentrate, however, on the question whether this drop is larger for married and cohabiting women and, in particular, if they also have children, than for other
categories. Our data show no indication of this. The drop for married women is substantial, and statistically significant, but it is not significantly larger than the drop for single women and married and cohabiting men. Moreover, the drop for married and cohabiting women is not elevated if they have children. If anything, the job location drop is smaller for this category than for single and married and cohabiting women with no children. We also find few substantial gender differences. There is a tendency that within civil status and parenthood status categories, women are penalized more by distance. However, none of these differences are statistically significant. To conclude, hypothesis 2 is not supported by our results.

Our last hypotheses, 3 and 4, posit that women’s chance of receiving a positive employer callback for a position outside their home municipality depends on their husband’s/partner’s occupation, i.e., it is expected to increase if he has a low status job and decrease if he has a high status job. These hypotheses are yet to be tested empirically. Furthermore, in a next step of our analyses, we will elaborate on different cut-off points, and perform sensitivity checks in order to ensure the robustness of our results.

REFERENCES