

How firms structure ethnic inequality in career trajectories

Aim

This PhD project investigates how firms structure ethnic inequalities over careers. The project aims to uncover how organizational contexts shape long-term ethnic disparities in labor market outcomes and examines how differences in wages develop as workers move within and between organizations.

Theoretical background

Ethnic inequality in the labor market is often explained by discrimination at hiring or differences in skills and credentials. The current project builds on this literature by emphasizing the actual workplace, or the firm, as relational structures that shape opportunities long after initial hiring decisions (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt, 2019). Firms can affect ethnic inequality by sorting workers into organizations with different career prospects (Hermansen et al., 2025), by structuring unequal returns to mobility, and by amplifying early disadvantages across the life course. This project engages with theories of cumulative disadvantage, social closure, and employer learning. Early career disadvantages may either diminish as workers acquire more skills and employers gain information about workers' productivity or accumulate if initial sorting restricts access to resource-rich firms and influential sponsors. By explicitly incorporating formal authority trajectories alongside wages, the project extends existing research on ethnic inequality beyond pay gaps to inequalities in organizational power.

Research design

The project uses high-quality linked employer–employee register data that allows for the longitudinal study of entire working populations. The project relies on the quantitative analysis of these data, with a focus on the Netherlands and Norway. For both countries, we use the data to study long-term career trajectories, combining information on wages, job mobility, and formal authority positions. The PhD candidate will use causal inference and advanced longitudinal methods, including sequence analysis, growth curve models, and panel decomposition techniques, to distinguish between within-firm and between-firm sources of ethnic inequality. The project pays particular attention to how critical career moments, such as labor market entry and movement between firms, have long-term effects and how this might differ across ethnic groups. The project offers extensive opportunities for methodological training and international collaboration, but a solid background in quantitative data analysis is required.

Context

This PhD position is part of the ERC-funded *project FIRMS – Firms and Careers: How the Workplace Structures Career Inequality*. FIRMS investigates how workplaces shape careers. By combining a life course perspective with large-scale linked employer–employee data, the project studies how firms create and reinforce inequality across gender and ethnicity, and through which mechanisms these inequalities persist. In this project, you will work in a team together with 2 other PhDs and a postdoc, as well as other senior scholars who are yet to be determined.

Literature

- Hermansen, A. S., Penner, A., Boza, I., Elvira, M. M., Godechot, O., Hällsten, M., Henriksen, L. F., Hou, F., Lippényi, Z., & Petersen, T. (2025). Immigrant–native pay gap driven by lack of access to high-paying jobs. *Nature*, 644(8078), 969–975.
- Tomaskovic-Devey, D., & Avent-Holt, D. (2019). *Relational Inequalities*. Oxford University Press.

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