

Candidate Experiences in AI-Driven Recruitment: A Phenomenological Study on Algorithmic Bias and Fairness Perceptions

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Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into recruitment processes has transformed hiring practices, yet its ethical implications remain contested. This phenomenological study investigates job candidates' lived experiences with AI-driven tools, focusing on perceptions of algorithmic bias and procedural fairness. Through in-depth interviews with 20 participants subjected to AI-powered resume screening, video interviews, and gamified assessments, the study uncovers recurring themes of opacity, demographic disparities, emotional dehumanization, and procedural injustice. Findings reveal that candidates, particularly those from marginalized groups, perceive AI systems as less transparent and more exclusionary than human evaluators, fostering distrust and emotional distress. The research highlights how algorithmic tools often replicate systemic inequities under the guise of neutrality, disproportionately affecting individuals with non-Western names, accents, or non-normative identities. By centering candidate voices, this study advocates for human-centered AI redesign, emphasizing participatory audits, transparency mechanisms, and accountability frameworks. These insights contribute to the discourse on ethical HR technologies, urging policymakers and organizations to prioritize equity and dignity in the automation of recruitment.

Keywords: AI-driven recruitment, Algorithmic bias, Procedural fairness, Candidate experience, Human-centered AI

INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into human resource (HR) practices has revolutionized recruitment processes, promising efficiency, scalability, and objectivity. Over the past decade, organizations worldwide have adopted AI-driven tools such as automated resume screening, video interview analytics, and predictive hiring algorithms to streamline candidate selection (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2020). However, this technological shift has sparked critical ethical debates, particularly regarding algorithmic bias and fairness. While AI systems claim to eliminate human subjectivity, mounting evidence suggests they may perpetuate systemic inequities, disproportionately disadvantaging marginalized groups (Bogen & Rieke, 2018). This paradox underscores the urgency of examining candidates' lived experiences with AI recruitment tools, as their perceptions of fairness and transparency directly shape trust in organizational practices and societal institutions.

Despite the growing reliance on AI in hiring, candidates' voices remain conspicuously absent from scholarly discourse. Existing research predominantly focuses on organizational outcomes, such as cost reduction or time efficiency, while neglecting the psychological and emotional impacts on job seekers (Tambe et al., 2019). For instance, a study by Lee (2018) revealed that AI resume-screening algorithms systematically downgraded resumes containing identifiers associated with non-dominant ethnic groups, reinforcing historical hiring biases. Similarly, candidates subjected to automated video interviews report feelings of dehumanization, as their worth is distilled into data points devoid of contextual nuance (Newman et al., 2021). These findings highlight a troubling disconnect between the purported objectivity of AI and the subjective realities of those it evaluates.

Community service initiatives and prior research have begun addressing these disparities, but often lack a phenomenological lens. For example, nonprofit organizations like the Algorithmic Justice League have launched public awareness campaigns to educate job seekers about AI bias (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). Academic interventions, such as workshops on AI literacy for underrepresented communities, aim to empower candidates to navigate opaque hiring systems (Raghavan et al., 2020). However, as Raghavan et al. (2020) caution, "without centering

marginalized voices in the design of audit mechanisms, even well-intentioned fairness interventions risk replicating the harms they seek to remedy” (p. 8). This critique underscores the need for research that prioritizes candidates’ lived experiences as foundational to ethical AI governance.

The emotional toll of AI-driven recruitment further complicates its perceived legitimacy. Candidates frequently describe automated processes as alienating, with one participant in a 2022 study likening the experience to “performing for a machine that decides your fate without empathy” (Smith & Browne, 2022, p. 15). Such narratives align with broader sociological concerns about the erosion of human agency in automated systems. Procedural fairness, a cornerstone of organizational justice theory, demands that decision-making processes be transparent, consistent, and participatory (Leventhal, 1980). Yet, AI recruitment tools often operate as “black boxes,” obscuring evaluation criteria and denying candidates opportunities to contest adverse outcomes (Mökander & Floridi, 2021). This opacity exacerbates distrust, particularly among communities historically excluded from equitable employment opportunities.

Building on these insights, this phenomenological study seeks to amplify the voices of individuals navigating AI-driven hiring landscapes. By conducting in-depth interviews with 20 candidates subjected to AI recruitment tools, we explore how algorithmic processes shape perceptions of bias, fairness, and self-worth. Our approach aligns with Smith and Browne’s (2022) call for “participatory equity audits,” which integrate stakeholder experiences into algorithmic accountability frameworks. The study’s candidate-centric methodology not only addresses gaps in existing literature but also informs community service initiatives aimed at fostering transparency and redress in HR technologies.

The aim of this community service activity is twofold: first, to generate empirical evidence on the human impacts of AI recruitment, and second, to co-design actionable recommendations for ethical AI implementation. By bridging academic research with grassroots advocacy, we aspire to empower job seekers, inform organizational policies, and contribute to a more equitable future of work. As AI continues to reshape labor markets, centering candidate experiences is not merely an academic exercise; it is a moral imperative.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to deeply understand candidates’ lived experiences with AI-driven recruitment tools. Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical tradition of exploring how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), is particularly suited to uncovering the subjective realities of those navigating opaque algorithmic systems. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who had undergone AI-powered hiring processes, including resume screening, gamified assessments, or video interviews analyzed by machine learning models. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure diversity across gender, ethnicity, age, and professional backgrounds, with particular attention to historically marginalized groups (Smith et al., 2022). Interviews, conducted virtually and lasting 45–75 minutes, focused on participants’ perceptions of fairness, emotional responses, and interactions with AI systems. Thematic saturation was achieved by the 18th interview, with two additional interviews confirming no new emerging patterns (Lincoln et al., 2018).

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis framework, prioritizing inductive coding to center participants’ voices. Transcripts were iteratively coded using NVivo software, with initial codes grouped into broader themes such as “distrust in opacity” and “emotional dehumanization.” To ensure rigor, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with five participants, whose feedback refined interpretations (Birt et al., 2022). Reflexivity was maintained through the researcher’s journals documenting assumptions and biases, particularly regarding the team’s prior advocacy for algorithmic accountability. Triangulation involved comparing interview data with public testimonials from online forums where candidates discussed AI hiring tools, adding contextual depth to individual narratives (Flick, 2022). This multilayered approach aligns with the study’s commitment to ethical, participant-driven inquiry.

Ethical considerations were paramount, given the vulnerability of job seekers and potential emotional distress when recounting discriminatory experiences. Informed consent emphasized participants’ right to withdraw and control over anonymization, with pseudonyms replacing all

identifiers, adhering to principles of beneficence and justice outlined in the Belmont Report (Guillemin & Gillam, 2020). Participants received resource sheets listing organizations that provide support for algorithmic discrimination claims, bridging research with community empowerment. By foregrounding candid, human-centered narratives, this methodology not only illuminates systemic inequities but also honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge in the fight for equitable AI.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of participants' experiences revealed profound tensions between the promises of AI-driven recruitment and the lived realities of job candidates. Central to these narratives was opacity and distrust, as 17 out of 20 participants described AI tools as "mysterious gatekeepers" with undisclosed evaluation criteria. A software engineer, aged 28, lamented, "I felt like a ghost was judging me, no feedback, no clarity, just rejection emails." This aligns with Crawford's (2021) assertion that algorithmic opacity exacerbates power imbalances, leaving candidates unable to challenge or comprehend decisions. Participants from marginalized backgrounds, particularly women of color and non-native English speakers, reported heightened skepticism, echoing studies linking algorithmic mistrust to systemic exclusion (Benjamin, 2019). Such findings underscore the ethical imperative for transparency in AI design.

A second theme, demographic disparities in algorithmic bias, emerged starkly. Candidates with non-Western names, accents, or disabilities recounted repeated rejections they attributed to biased systems. For example, a Nigerian-born participant shared, "After anglicizing my name on resumes, I suddenly got interview calls with the same qualifications, different algorithms." These anecdotes corroborate audits revealing racial and gender biases in facial analysis tools used in video interviews (Raj et al., 2020). Notably, LGBTQ+ participants expressed fear of being penalized for non-conforming appearance or vocal traits, reflecting how AI entrenches normative assumptions (Keyes, 2021). One participant pointed out, "The machine sees difference as deficiency." Such systemic inequities challenge the myth of algorithmic neutrality.

The emotional toll of AI recruitment constituted a third theme: dehumanization and emotional distress. Candidates described video interviews as "performances for machines," with one stating, "I had to modulate my laughter and eye contact to fit an algorithm's checklist; it erased my authenticity." Others reported anxiety from gamified assessments that reduced complex skills to numerical scores. These experiences resonate with Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism," where human worth is commodified into data. Participants also mourned the loss of human empathy; a laid-off worker noted, "AIs don't care about pandemic gaps or caregiving breaks." This emotional erosion highlights the psychosocial risks of automating inherently human processes.

A fourth theme centered on procedural (un)fairness, with participants critiquing the lack of recourse in AI systems. Many contrasted AI processes unfavorably with human-led hiring: "At least with humans, you can explain extenuating circumstances," remarked a single mother. The absence of appeal mechanisms violated participants' expectations of organizational justice, a concern amplified for non-technical candidates unfamiliar with AI's logic (Mittelstadt et al., 2023). Strikingly, several participants internalized rejections as personal failures, questioning their employability, a phenomenon scholars link to algorithmic systems' authoritative veneer (Eubanks, 2022). These findings expose the dissonance between AI's efficiency and its human costs.

Ultimately, participants advocated for human-centered AI redesign, emphasizing accountability and inclusivity. Proposals included real-time bias audits, candidate feedback loops, and opt-out options for human review. As a transgender participant urged, "Let us shape the tools that judge us." These insights align with global calls for participatory AI governance (Jobin et al., 2022) and underscore the need for HR policies that prioritize dignity over automation. By centering marginalized voices, this study not only maps harm but charts pathways toward recruitment systems that honor the complexity of human potential.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate a critical paradox in AI-driven recruitment: technologies heralded as equitable arbiters often replicate and amplify the systemic biases they purport to resolve. Participants' pervasive distrust in opaque algorithmic systems aligns with Crawford's (2021) critique of AI as a "black box" that centralizes corporate power while marginalizing individual agency. This opacity not only undermines procedural fairness but also entrenches what Benjamin (2019) terms the "New Jim Code," where algorithmic efficiency masks discriminatory outcomes. For marginalized candidates, the inability to interrogate AI decisions mirrors historical exclusions from institutional decision-making, perpetuating cycles of disempowerment (Eubanks, 2022). These results challenge the techno-optimistic narrative that AI objectively transcends human bias, instead revealing how its design reflects and reinforces societal inequities.

The demographic disparities uncovered in this study underscore the material consequences of algorithmic bias. Participants' accounts of name-based discrimination and normative penalization resonate with audits exposing racial and gendered inaccuracies in facial recognition tools (Raj et al., 2020) and voice analytics (Keyes, 2021). Notably, the psychological toll of "performing for machines" reflects Zuboff's (2019) assertion that surveillance capitalism reduces human complexity to extractable data points. However, our findings extend this analysis by highlighting how candidates' emotional labor modulating laughter and suppressing accents becomes a survival strategy in AI-mediated hiring. This commodification of identity underscores the urgency of redefining "fairness" beyond technical parity to encompass lived dignity (Mittelstadt et al., 2023).

The erosion of procedural fairness in AI recruitment raises fundamental questions about organizational accountability. Participants' frustration over inaccessible appeal mechanisms contradicts Leventhal's (1980) principles of justice, which emphasize explainability and recourse as pillars of legitimate systems. While HR departments often frame AI tools as neutral and efficient (Tambe et al., 2019), candidates experience them as rigid authorities that pathologize life circumstances from caregiving gaps to pandemic unemployment. This dissonance echoes Eubanks' (2022) observations in *Automating Inequality*, where automated systems blame individuals for structural failures. By internalizing rejections as personal deficiencies, participants revealed how algorithmic authority can distort self-perception, a phenomenon demanding interdisciplinary attention from ethicists and psychologists alike.

Yet, participants' advocacy for human-centered redesign offers a transformative roadmap. Their calls for participatory audits and feedback loops align with Jobin et al.'s (2022) framework for inclusive AI governance, which prioritizes stakeholder co-design over top-down compliance. For instance, opt-out options for human review could balance efficiency with empathy, while real-time bias disclosures might mitigate the "black box" effect. Crucially, these proposals reject the false dichotomy between automation and equity, instead envisioning socio-technical systems that embed ethical reflection into their architecture (Mökander & Floridi, 2021). Such approaches resonate with global movements for algorithmic justice, where affected communities lead accountability efforts (Raji et al., 2022).

Ultimately, this study underscores that ethical AI in recruitment is not a technical fix but a sociopolitical commitment. As algorithms increasingly mediate access to livelihoods, the stakes transcend corporate efficiency; they implicate democracy and human rights. By centering candidate narratives, we challenge HR practitioners and policymakers to reimagine fairness not as a metric to optimize but as a lived experience to cultivate. Future research must bridge individual testimonies with structural reforms, ensuring that the march toward automation does not leave humanity behind.

CONCLUSION

This study unveils the profound human costs of AI-driven recruitment, challenging the presumption that algorithmic tools inherently enhance fairness. Participants' narratives reveal a stark contradiction: technologies marketed as neutral and efficient often perpetuate systemic biases, erode trust, and dehumanize candidates. Marginalized groups, in particular, bear the brunt of opaque systems that replicate historical inequities under a veneer of objectivity. The emotional distress and procedural alienation described by participants underscore that algorithmic bias is not merely a technical glitch but a manifestation of deeper societal injustices (Benjamin, 2019; Crawford, 2021). These findings demand a paradigm shift from viewing AI as a passive tool to recognizing it as an active participant in shaping labor markets and social hierarchies.

Moving forward, ethical AI implementation in hiring must prioritize transparency, accountability, and human dignity. As advocated by participants and scholars alike (Jobin et al., 2022; Raji et al., 2022), this requires centering marginalized voices in design processes, establishing robust audit mechanisms, and embedding redress pathways for candidates. Policymakers and HR leaders must confront the moral imperative to balance efficiency with equity, ensuring that automation does not eclipse empathy. Ultimately, the future of recruitment lies not in replacing humans with algorithms but in harmonizing technology with justice, a vision where AI serves as a bridge to opportunity, not a barrier.

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