

Behavioural responses to employment discrimination: a study of Hong Kong workers

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Abstract This study examines the behavioural responses of Hong Kong workers to employment discrimination. Based on the exit-voice framework proposed by Hirschman, five possible responses (i.e. neglect, quit, internal voice, external voice and litigation) are identified. The effects of certain personal attributes and work-related factors on these responses are evaluated. Two different data sets, focusing on gender discrimination and family status discrimination, are analysed. The results of logistic regression indicate that workers with higher levels of education and sensitivity to discrimination are more likely to complain and less likely to neglect their work or resign. Additionally, men and women respond differently to sex-based discrimination. Work-related factors such as employment sector, job tenure and employer size are also found to exert significant effects. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords Employment discrimination; behavioural responses; exit-voice framework; Hong Kong employees; personal characteristics; work-related factors.

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of employment discrimination has attracted much public attention. It has also become an important area of HRM research (e.g. Ensher *et al.*, 2001; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990; Hultin and Szulkin, 1999; Perry *et al.*, 2000). Discrimination is said to occur when employment decisions, such as selection, evaluation, promotion or reward allocation, are based on a worker's ascribed characteristics, such as sex, age or race, rather than on qualifications or job performance (Gutek *et al.*, 1996). Previous studies have shown that employment discrimination brings about many negative consequences for workers and organizations (Ensher *et al.*, 2001; Gutek *et al.*, 1996; Perry *et al.*, 2000). A substantial amount of research has focused on its nature, sources and remedies (Hultin and Szulkin, 1999; Powell, 1999; Stone and Colella, 1996). However, little research has examined how employees respond to discrimination, which may have many important implications for the management of labour relations in such areas as grievance handling and staff turnover. Hirschman (1970) provides a theoretical framework to analyse this issue. The purpose of this study is to apply his framework to examine the behavioural responses of workers to employment discrimination in Hong Kong. Five possible categories of responses are identified, namely: neglect, exit, internal voice, external voice and litigation. The effects of certain personal attributes and work-related factors on these responses are then

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