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The Manifestation of Affinity Bias in Recruitment and Selection Processes of Dutch Public Organizations: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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The Manifestation of Affinity Bias in Recruitment and Selection Processes of Dutch Public Organizations: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the problem of Affinity Bias in recruitment processes, particularly in Dutch public organizations. Affinity Bias refers to the tendency for recruiters to favor candidates with similar backgrounds or characteristics, resulting in hiring decisions based on personal preferences rather than qualifications, skills, and experience. This bias can have a detrimental effect on diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace. The thesis aims to identify Affinity Bias's manifestation in recruitment and selection processes and its impact on Dutch Public Organizations. The theoretical model proposed in this paper builds on existing literature on Diversity and Inclusion, Recruitment and Selection Processes, Social Identity Theory, and Affinity Bias. The inductive research design applies interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how public sector recruiters make sense of their experiences through Semi-Structured Interviews. This thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature on Affinity Bias and its interrelation with the Social Identity Theory, as well as provide empirical evidence on the presence of affinity bias in Dutch public organizations, extending existing knowledge by exploring a model in a new context and a different population, and providing practical implications for public organizations in the Netherlands and beyond.

Keywords: Affinity Bias, Dutch Public Organizations, Diversity, Inclusion, Recruitment, Selection, Social Identity

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Problem Definition.....	3
Research Question.....	4
Research Design Summary	4
Academic and Societal Relevance.....	4
Research Overview	6
Diversity and Inclusion	7
Recruitment and Selection Process	8
Social Identity Theory	10
Affinity Bias	12
The Dutch Public Sector	13
Methodology	15
Semi-Structured Interviews	15
Semi-Structured Interview Guide.....	16
Sample Selection	17
Sample Feedback	20
Operationalization of SSI Questions	22
Reliability and Validity of SSI	24
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	25
Sequence of Analysis	26
Reliability and Validity of Research Method	33
Findings	35
Analysis	39
Discussion	49
Limitations	53
Conclusion	54
Appendix	57
References	59

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Research Overview	6
Table 1: Initial Noting	28
Table 2: Emergent Themes.....	29
Table 3: Abstraction	30
Table 4: Numeration C3.....	28
Table 5: Creating Higher-Orders	31
Table 6: Higher-Orders and their Frequency	33
Table 7: Master Table for themes for the group	35

Introduction

This chapter introduces the problem of affinity bias and its impact on recruitment processes, particularly in Dutch public organizations

In the twenty-first century, the workplace has increasingly recognized the importance of diversity and inclusion due to the growing number of female employees, the presence of individuals from diverse backgrounds, and the emergence of generational differences. (Garg, 2021). Since yesterday's injustices and exclusionary management practices no longer make sense commercially, it has become clear that diversity and inclusion efforts are no longer an option but an important organizational priority (Rankin, 2011).

The first challenge to studying such a vast field of academic study is to define diversity and inclusion, especially in the national context of the Netherlands, and in relation to Human Resource Management practices which encompasses “talent management, recruitment and selection policies, performance management, and flexible working practices” (Farndale, 2015). According to the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, a broad definition of diversity is needed “covering not only characteristics that tend to be visible (e.g., gender, cultural background) but also characteristics which may be either less visible or invisible (e.g., disability, psychological illness, chronic illness, sexual preference, socio-economic background, beliefs, religion, talents, working style, education, experience” (MoECS, 2020). The ministry also defines inclusion by being a “safe learning and working environment where everyone feels at home and can flourish, and where a broad range of perspectives are considered and brought into play” (MoECS, 2020).

Organizations need effective strategies, programs, and policies to embrace diversity and inclusion. These efforts should focus on recruiting, selecting, managing, and retaining employees from diverse backgrounds (Waxin, 2023). The recruitment and selection process is crucial in an organization's human resource management strategy. It helps attract and identify suitable candidates for available positions and is considered a core function of HRM, also known as staffing (Chungyalpa, 2016). Recruitment builds a pool of capable individuals interested in working for the organization, while selection involves choosing the most qualified candidate (Karim, 2016).

In the context of recruitment and selection, this thesis considers the issue of unconscious biases. Unconscious biases can significantly impact recruitment and selection processes, excluding qualified candidates and compromising diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace. Cox and Blake (1991) note that unconscious bias can affect every stage of the recruitment process, from advertising job openings to making job offers. Accordingly, it can also influence the interview questions and how interviewees are evaluated. As a result, candidates who do not fit the stereotypical mold of the "ideal" candidate may be overlooked, even if they possess the necessary skills and qualifications (Cox & Blake, 1991). Several theories and studies have explored the origins and consequences of bias. Social Identity Theory suggests that people tend to categorize themselves and others into groups based on shared characteristics and use these categories to form attitudes and behaviors (Scheepers, 2019). Additionally, research has found that bias is often based on implicit associations reinforced by societal norms and values (Devine, 1989). Despite the growing awareness of the impact of unconscious bias on recruitment and selection processes, it continues to be a pervasive problem in public organizations in the Netherlands (MoECS, 2020).

Among these biases, Affinity Bias is particularly relevant in Dutch public organizations, where discrimination in employment recruitment still appears considerably (Quillian, 2019). It is referred to as the tendency for recruiters to favor candidates with similar characteristics or backgrounds (Vanderpal, 2022). It can manifest in different ways during recruitment: resume screening, interview selection, and job offers. This bias can lead to hiring decisions based on personal preferences rather than qualifications, skills, and experience, resulting in missed opportunities to attract diverse talent (Scheepers, 2019).

Problem Definition

To contextualize the problem, it is essential to understand where and when it arises, whom it affects, and what attempts have been made to solve it. Affinity Bias is a well-documented phenomenon that can occur in various settings, including the workplace. It refers to the tendency of individuals to prefer others who share their characteristics, such as race, culture, gender, or education, and occurs unconsciously (Cox & Blake, 1991). The problem of Affinity Bias can undermine diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace. Despite efforts to address unconscious biases, including diversity training and awareness campaigns, there has been little progress in mitigating Affinity Bias in public organizations in the Netherlands (Kruiter, 2018). The problem of Affinity Bias matters because of its potential impact on diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace. Research has shown that diverse teams are more innovative, better able to solve complex problems, and perform better overall (Tadmor, 2012). Therefore, excluding qualified candidates based on personal preferences rather than qualifications can lead to missed opportunities to attract diverse talent and negatively impact team performance. Additionally, the consequences of Affinity Bias extend beyond the workplace, affecting

individuals' opportunities to succeed and contributing to broader societal inequalities (Devine, 1989).

Examining the extent and consequences of this bias and exploring effective interventions to mitigate it is critical. Thus, this thesis aims to investigate the manifestation of Affinity Bias in Dutch public organizations' recruitment and selection processes. The thesis also seeks to expand the reader's understanding of the interplay between Affinity Bias and the Social Identity Theory (SIT). Accordingly, the insights provided by the thesis are expected to contribute to studying the role, nature, and consequences of unconscious/affinity biases in recruitment and selection processes, in turn affecting diversity and inclusion.

How Does Affinity Bias Impact Dutch Public Organizations?

Research Design Summary

The research design of this thesis is based on an inductive element. The thesis utilized semi-structured interviews with four Dutch Public Organizations' recruiters as its data collection method and the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore/analyze their subjective experiences and perceptions regarding the recruitment and selection process. IPA was essential in identifying the most potent emergent themes through Abstraction and Numeration methods.

Academic and Societal Relevance

Academically, the research thesis contributed to the existing body of knowledge on diversity, inclusion, and bias. It provided empirical evidence on the prevalence of affinity bias in

recruitment and selection processes and its impact on public organizations in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the thesis identified the different types of challenges, including but not limited to biases, and how they manifested in the recruitment and selection process. This informed the development of interventions and policies to mitigate the impact of affinity bias and improve diversity and inclusion in public organizations.

Societally, the thesis had great importance to public organizations, policymakers, and society at large. Public organizations are responsible for serving the entire population and should reflect the diversity of their communities (Visser & Felten, 2018). The thesis provides public organizations with ways to address and mitigate the impact of affinity bias in their recruitment and selection process. This could lead to more equitable and diverse public organizations, which has positive societal outcomes, such as increased trust and confidence in public organizations and more representative decision-making.

The study's findings were particularly relevant to policymakers, HR professionals, and recruiters interested in improving workplace diversity and inclusion in the Netherlands. The thesis aimed to inform policy and practice to promote more inclusive recruitment and selection processes within Dutch public organizations by providing insights into the mechanisms underpinning Affinity Bias and its consequences for both the recruitment process and candidates.

Moreover, the study's contribution to the literature on Affinity Bias and recruitment processes was significant, as it provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of the nature and extent of this bias. The study's empirical evidence and theoretical insights added to our understanding of the complexities of diversity and inclusivity. They could help inform future research and

interventions to reduce Affinity Bias and promote greater diversity and inclusivity in the workplace.

Research Overview

“Social identity theory is a powerful tool for understanding the role that group membership plays in shaping our attitudes and behaviors.”

This chapter proposes a research overview that builds upon the existing literature on Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), Recruitment and Selection Process, Social Identity Theory, and Affinity Bias. In this framework, each variable is nested within a larger construct, with D&I as the overarching concept encompassing all other variables. This approach highlights the relationships between the variables and how they build upon each other. It provides a roadmap for addressing the impact of Affinity Bias on Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace. Below you can see the model that assists in visualizing the research overview.

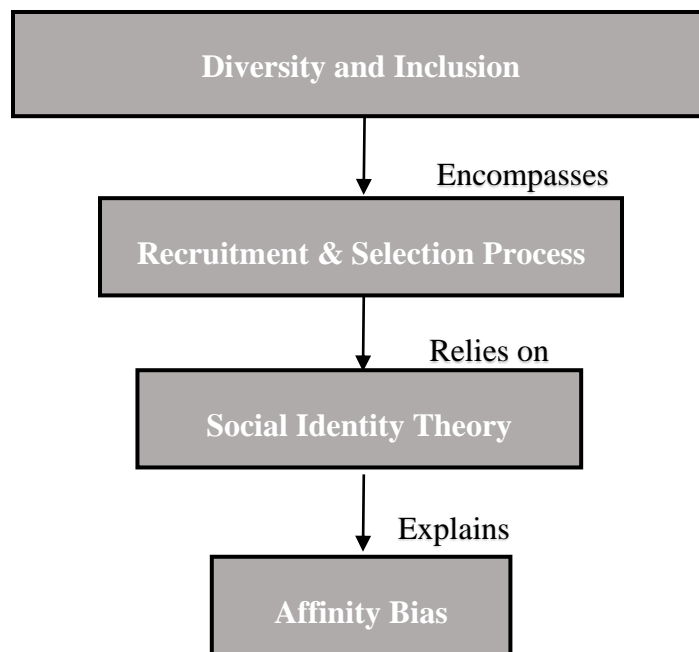


Figure 1: Research Overview

At the highest level, diversity and inclusion is the overarching construct encompassing all other variables. It refers to creating a work environment that values and respects individual differences, including race, culture, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, and more (O'Donovan, 2018). The recruitment and selection process is a specific component of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, which focuses on the hiring process and the strategies used to attract and select candidates from diverse backgrounds (Waxin, 2023). Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a theoretical framework that helps to explain how social identities shapes individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is a theoretical foundation that underpins the recruitment process by guiding the selection criteria and informing hiring decisions. Affinity Bias is a specific manifestation of social identity effects. In the recruitment and selection process, it can be seen as the tendency to favor candidates similar to oneself regarding social identity (Scheepers, 2019).

Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion have become increasingly important issues for modern organizations. As Mor Barak (2005) notes, promoting diversity goes beyond simply recognizing visible differences such as race, culture, gender, and age and must also consider less visible aspects such as socio-economic background, educational level, and cultural values (Mor Barak, 2005). Moreover, as Ozbilgin, Tatli, and Jonsen (2017) argue, organizations that adopt a global diversity management approach can benefit from a broader range of perspectives and expertise that can lead to increased creativity and innovation (Ozbilgin, 2017). Similarly, Golembiewski (1995) contends that managing diversity in organizations can improve problem-solving and decision-making by bringing together individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Golembiewski, 1995).

However, simply having a diverse workforce is not enough. Organizations must promote inclusivity by creating policies and practices that value and recognize diverse identities. This can include actively recruiting and retaining individuals from underrepresented groups, providing opportunities for individuals to connect with others who share their identity, and creating a culture that supports and celebrates diversity (Mor Barak, 2005).

Additionally, highlighting the positive contributions of individuals from underrepresented groups and recognizing their achievements can help promote a more positive view of these groups and reduce biases and stereotypes (Ozbilgin, 2017). Ultimately, a diverse and inclusive workplace can lead to increased employee satisfaction, better performance, and improved outcomes for the organization (Golembiewski, 1995).

Diversity and inclusion are critical issues that organizations must address to remain competitive and thrive in a global marketplace. By promoting diversity and inclusivity, organizations can benefit from the wide range of perspectives and expertise that a diverse workforce brings, which can lead to increased creativity, improved problem-solving, and better outcomes overall.

Research has shown that diverse and inclusive organizations can promote fairness and equity in hiring practices. Specifically, organizations that value diversity and inclusion may be more likely to prioritize objective qualifications and experiences in the recruitment process rather than subjective factors such as shared interests or background with the recruiter. Furthermore, diverse and inclusive organizations may also provide a more supportive and welcoming environment for individuals from underrepresented groups, which can increase their likelihood of being hired and retained (Pitts, 2010).

Recruitment & Selection Process

Indeed building effective Recruitment and Selection Processes (RSPs) is vital in cultivating an inclusive and diverse organization. Organizations must establish strategies, programs, and policies that welcome diversity to manage diversity and inclusion successfully. These initiatives should center on recruiting and selecting employees from various backgrounds, especially since RSPs facilitate an organization's diversity and inclusion strategy (Waxin, 2023) and enable the organization to attract, identify, and select the most suitable candidates for available positions.

Recruitment refers to all the activities and actions made inside an organization that impacts the number and sorts of people that apply for or accept a particular job position. It is a critical process since administrative procedures and public service delivery depend on the talents, skills, and motivation of the individuals participating. Furthermore, recruiting allows organizations to extend their pool of diverse candidates, which is vital to accomplishing public objectives. On the other hand, selection is the process of measuring differences between these candidates to find the person with the profile that best matches the specifications indicated by the job profile or description (Newell, 2005). Selection is directly tied to the role's needs, which is done through "sifting application; interviewing; testing; assessing candidates; assessment centers; offering employment; obtaining references; preparing contracts of employment" (Armstrong, 2006). The capacity of public organizations to recruit, select, and hire qualified employees is critical to their efficacy and success (Sievert et al., 2022).

Recruitment and Selection in the Public Sector

Competent civil servants are essential to the government's ability to provide effective and efficient services. To accomplish good human resource management, the public sector must have sufficient recruiting and selection procedures in place (Leisink & Steijn, 2008), and

increasing diversity inside the organization is critical. One way of doing so is having a proper strategy to hire people from diverse backgrounds, such as women, minorities, and people from different nationalities (Pless & Maak, 2004). Similarly, communicating organizational values and hiring individuals who align with the organization's culture can create a shared sense of purpose among employees. However, unconscious biases towards certain social groups can negatively affect recruitment and selection processes, resulting in the unintentional favoritism of candidates with similar characteristics and a similar social identity to that of the recruiter rather than selecting the most qualified candidate (Cox & Blake, 1991).

Social Identity Theory

In light of the above, we present the Social Identity Theory (SIT). In 1979, Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed SIT as a comprehensive framework for understanding intergroup conflict. According to SIT, individuals derive their sense of self and identity from their membership in social groups, which strongly influences their behavior and attitudes toward others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory highlights that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, such as ethnicity, religion, or gender. This leads to in-group and out-group distinctions that can result in intergroup conflict (Nelson, 2015).

SIT emphasizes the importance of social comparison in forming group identity, where individuals often compare their group to other groups to gain social identity and self-esteem. This comparison can lead to biased judgments and discriminatory behavior towards out-group members. SIT has significant implications for understanding intergroup conflict, prejudice, and discrimination and has influenced research in social psychology and related fields (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory also describes how identity motives can form the basis of in-group favoritism (Scheepers, 2019). Moreover, while most studies focus on the effect of social identity theory from the applicant's perspective regarding what attracts them to an organization and why they withdraw from an organization's recruitment process, some studies investigate the effect of in-group favoritism from the recruiter's perspective. In line with their findings, some studies do showcase evidence of favorable treatment of candidates that fit with the recruiter's social identity, especially in the selection stage of the recruitment process. For example, in Asanov and Mavlikeeva's study "Can group identity explain the gender gap in the recruitment process," their findings showcase that a recruiter's gender can affect the recruitment and selection of applicants, where employers can be more inclined to callback/invite applicants from the same gender to the interviews and stipulate favorable treatment to those of the same gender in the selection stage (Asanov & Mavlikeeva, 2013). Another example is "the role of employer perceptions in immigrant recruitment decision making," conducted in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. This study highlights that selection decisions are affected by individuals' personal attributes, cultural backgrounds, and social backgrounds. As such, the decision maker's background and exposure to cultural diversity play a crucial part in how professionals are evaluated (Almeida et al., 2015). While organizations can use SIT to promote diversity and inclusion by recognizing how individuals derive their identity and self from group memberships (Postmes, 2001), this act of individuals categorizing themselves into groups is an innate drive for most people (Ben-Ner et al., 2009). It is enough to trigger discrimination among various members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), such as in the cases described above. SIT can play an important role in explaining how

biases can then emerge in the recruitment and selection process and how it can result in a lack of diversity in the workplace (Nalty, 2016).

Affinity Bias: *Birds of a feather flock together*

One of these biases is affinity bias, a human behavioral phenomenon in which people prefer interacting with others who share similar perspectives (Huang et al., 2019;). This bias may arise in recruitment and selection processes due to factors such as inherent preference, difficulty in evaluating those with different perspectives, or a preference for teams with fewer disagreements or those whose aggregate view is closer to their own (Heidari, 2023). Affinity bias is based on the human tendency to favor those who share similar characteristics or backgrounds, including race, culture, gender, ethnicity, and education (Fuller & Murphy, 2023; Cox & Blake, 1991). This bias affects recruitment and selection processes in public organizations worldwide, leading to the exclusion of diverse candidates when people gravitate towards and share opportunities with those who are similar to themselves (Heidari, 2023). It can influence recruiters to favor candidates with similar demographics, interests, and backgrounds, leading to a lack of diversity in the workplace. For example, a recruiter who identifies strongly with a particular university or alma mater may be more likely to favor candidates who also attended that same organization, regardless of their qualifications (Heidari, 2023).

Furthermore, affinity bias can unconsciously influence how we make decisions within recruitment and selection processes. Specifically, it prompts the way we develop trust in relationships so that we can perpetuate the familiar and the comfortable. It can induce positive discrimination for what is familiar/similar/comfortable. However, unfamiliarity and difference can equally contribute to unconscious biases and discrimination. Individuals in

social categorization classify themselves and others based on their characteristics into two social groups: in-groups (to which they belong) and out-groups (individuals who are not in their in-group). Out-group members are then perceived as being more different and less favorable than ones in-group members due to these psycho-social classifications. These biases can occur in resumé screening, for example, when recruiters select applicant resúmes of the same gender or ethnicity (Trainer et al., 2020).

Kathleen Nalty referred to this phenomenon as a "mirrortocracy" rather than a meritocracy, indicating that affinity bias leads people to build more robust, professional, and trusting relationships with those who share their identities, interests, and backgrounds. For instance, in law, predominantly white and male, female, LGBTQ, disabled, and racially and ethnically diverse attorneys are often excluded when people gravitate toward and share opportunities with those similar to themselves (Nalty, 2016).

The Dutch Public Sector

In the Netherlands, public organizations are required by law to promote diversity and prevent discrimination in their recruitment processes (Dutch Social & Economic Council, 2020). The Dutch Equal Treatment Act, commonly known as the General Equal Treatment Act, is a legislative framework that ensures equal treatment of persons regardless of religion, belief, political stance, ethnicity, sex, nationality, heterosexual or homosexual orientation, or marital status. It defines and bans both direct and indirect discrimination and includes procedures for equitable treatment. It also forbids discrimination in job offers, job placement, the establishment and termination of employment relationships, promotion, and working conditions. Overall, the Dutch Equal Treatment Act establishes a legal framework for promoting equal treatment and combating discrimination in various societal areas, including

employment, education, and providing products and services (General Equal Treatment Act, 2023).

Despite this legal obligation, bias still exists in Dutch public organizations' recruitment and selection processes (Nalty, 2016). For example, immigrants of Arab descent are recognized as the most non-western group. Research that analyzed bias against Arabs in recruitment and selection processes revealed that the probability of rejection was four times greater for applications with Arab names than for those with stereotypical Dutch names when other job credentials are identical. These findings gave validity to the idea that having certain traits (like an Arab-sounding name) can be enough for an individual to be considered a member of a social (ethnic) group and to encounter discrimination in R&S (Derous et al., 2012) mainly when confined data is readily accessible about this applicant (Crocker et al., 1998). It also demonstrated that the intersection of applicant, job, and recruiter characteristics influences discriminatory screening. For instance, decision-makers (recruiters or hiring managers) tend to examine each case through a specific context. Thus, it was discovered that the higher the role's level, the greater the segregation. Female Arabs, for example, face more discrimination than male Arabs and female/male Dutch in high-status occupations than in low-status jobs (Derous et al., 2012).

Furthermore, according to studies undertaken by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), employment agencies engage in discriminatory practices depending on ethnic background. Applicants of Turkish, Surinamese, and Antillean descent are less likely to get a job offer than native job seekers with comparable curriculum vitae (Andriessen et al., 2012). Additionally, research in the public sector shows that candidates beyond the age of 60 had a 41% lower chance of being hired than those under the age of 35 (Fouarge & Montizaan, 2015).

Also, Individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses, for example, encounter discriminatory behaviors during recruitment and selection (Andriessen et al., 2014).

These findings highlight that even though the Netherlands should celebrate its culture of inclusivity and fairness, there are persistent challenges to achieving equal treatment, diversity, and inclusion in Dutch public organizations, primarily through recruitment and selection practices.

Methodology

This chapter presents and explains the research methodology employed in this paper, including the research design, data collection method, and data analysis techniques.

Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs)

Semi-structured interviews are a research approach that includes conversing with participants to acquire information. Semi-structured interviews, as opposed to structured interviews, which follow a planned list of questions in a precise sequence, and unstructured interviews, which have no predetermined order or limits, allow a flexible approach while yet preserving some amount of structure (Fylan, 2005).

This study was based on conducting semi-structured interviews with a list of questions and a basic notion of the themes they intended to cover. The dialogue occasionally differed amongst participants, allowing for examining various viewpoints and experiences. The degree of structure in these interviews ranged from simple and strictly adhered-to questions to more open-ended inquiries that allowed the dialogue to flow, which fits into the SSIs method (Fylan, 2005).

This thesis used semi-structured interviews mainly due to the research subject at hand. Especially that SSIs are most suited to addressing "why" queries rather than ones about numbers or measures. They allowed the freedom to address individual motives and acquire a better insight when the goal was to understand the reasons behind specific behaviors or attitudes.

The adaptability of semi-structured interviews also allowed this thesis to investigate discrepancies in participants' narratives. Notably, SSI made it easy to dive into the complexity and specifics of the study by carefully interrogating participants about them (Fylan, 2005). SSI is consistent with the social constructionist viewpoint, according to which participants' attitudes and viewpoints evolve throughout the interview process rather than being fixed and predefined, which fits into the goals of this thesis as nothing is set in stone (Fylan, 2005). This allowed direct communication with participants, to debrief them, answer their questions, interrupt the interview if required, and assure their emotional well-being throughout the process.

To summarize, semi-structured interviews provided a flexible yet organized method for gathering qualitative data. They aided with delving into "why" inquiries, comprehending individual views, overcoming paradoxes, and debating delicate themes while putting participants' emotional well-being first (Fylan, 2005).

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

This semi-structured interview guide was designed to help with data collecting for this thesis. The interview guide helped shape and center the natural flow of discourse throughout each interview session while still giving freedom to explore participants' unique viewpoints. The semi-structured interview guide included a mix of open-ended questions and follow-ups. The

open-ended questions laid the groundwork for delving into the core themes and issues of interest, while the follow-up probes allowed for a more in-depth examination of participants' replies and clarification of significant points. This method allowed for the collection of rich qualitative data, allowing for a complete comprehension of the study topic.

The guide was not followed rigorously and religiously in a defined order for each interview. Instead, it helped as a second while keeping the engagement informal. This method allowed participants to openly communicate their opinions and feelings while ensuring the study objectives were met.

Please refer to Appendix B for the complete interview guide, which includes the specific questions and prompts used during the interviews.

Sample Selection

It was critical to carefully analyze the selection of a research sample when carrying out this thesis, which required identifying the specific group that would be included in the study. Since the study aim provides a broad focus, the sample selection method necessitated the representation of persons with considerable expertise in the subject while striving to include varied views.

Several considerations were measured for determining the study sample, especially since the availability of public sector personnel was deemed a barrier. This limitation significantly impacted the scope and extent of the sample selection. However, this research navigated practical considerations while ensuring the sample adequately reflects the research objectives. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, it was beneficial to include individuals who possess substantial knowledge and expertise in the subject matter.

Public sector recruiters are a particularly relevant sample for this study for several reasons. First, public sector organizations must promote diversity and inclusion. These organizations are often held to a higher standard for promoting diversity than private sector organizations. Given the diverse communities that Dutch public sector organizations serve, they must have a workforce that reflects that diversity (Dutch et al., 2020). Thus, understanding how affinity bias may impact the recruitment processes in public sector organizations is crucial to ensuring that these organizations meet their obligations to promote diversity and inclusion. Second, public sector recruiters will likely encounter various challenges when recruiting a diverse pool of candidates. For example, they may have to contend with systemic barriers that limit the representation of certain groups in specific fields. Public sector recruiters may also have to navigate legal and regulatory frameworks that constrain their ability to implement certain recruitment practices (Wijbenga, 2019). Thus, understanding how public sector recruiters navigate these challenges is essential to identifying potential solutions to address affinity bias in recruitment processes. Third, studying public sector recruiters can provide valuable insights into the complexities of recruitment in public sector organizations and the potential solutions that can be implemented to promote diversity and inclusion.

As the front liners in the recruitment process, they are responsible for sourcing, screening, and selecting candidates who contribute to the company's culture and success. By prioritizing diversity and inclusion in their hiring practices, recruiters can ensure that the company's workforce reflects the diversity of its customers, communities, and stakeholders (Tipper, 2004).

The study's sample was selected using a systematic approach that searched for relevant keywords related to public sector recruitment on LinkedIn. The aim was to identify individuals

who work in the public sector and have recruitment responsibilities. LinkedIn's advanced search feature was utilized to identify individuals with specific job titles or keywords in their job descriptions. In total, 100 individuals were identified and invited to participate in the study, with an explanation of the study's purpose and a request for their participation. Participants were assured of their confidentiality and allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

Using LinkedIn to identify potential participants has several benefits, including identifying individuals with relevant knowledge and experience in public sector recruitment and providing a diverse sample from different regions and levels of government. The method also reduced recruitment costs and time.

However, there are limitations to using LinkedIn as a recruitment method, such as the potential lack of representation of all public sector recruiters, particularly those without LinkedIn profiles. Additionally, the sample may be inclined toward individuals who are more active on LinkedIn or more likely to respond to research study invitations.

Despite the limitations, using LinkedIn as a recruitment method was sufficient for this study. The sample size was eventually sufficient for identifying themes and patterns in the data; it provided insights into different aspects of public sector recruitment. The approach was practical enough to identify potential participants from different organizations and gather data for the study (Unkelos-Shpigel et al., 2015)

Participants sometimes provided contact information on their LinkedIn profiles, such as email addresses or phone numbers. This information was utilized to contact the participants directly, which was deemed a more direct and efficient recruitment method. Direct contact has several benefits, including more personalized communication, a backup option if some participants

did not respond to the initial invitation, and the ability to ensure that participants met the study's inclusion criteria before inviting them to participate.

Not all participants provided their contact information on their LinkedIn profiles, and email and phone communication for recruitment purposes may be subject to different ethical considerations than recruitment through LinkedIn. Therefore, all communication with potential participants was respectful and transparent, and participants were allowed to opt out of the study at any time.

Overall, the combined approach of using LinkedIn as a recruitment method proved challenging for identifying potential participants for this study. However, it led to the identification of four public sector recruiters from four different Dutch public organizations. This fits under IPA, especially since IPA requires a high level of engagement and interpretation, moving beyond simple descriptions. The sample provided and gathered valuable insights into the practices and challenges of recruitment in the public sector.

Please refer to Appendix A for the message sent to all potential participants

Sample Feedback

Out of the 100 random candidates, 51% of respondents were successfully contacted. In contrast, 36% of the connection attempts remain pending, and 13% of the candidates declined the connection request, which limits our ability to invite them to participate.

Out of the 51 candidates who were contacted, 14% indicated they were uninterested, while 8% expressed their interest. Interestingly, most of the contacted candidates (78%) have not responded to the contact made.

The candidates that were not interested had differing reasons, such as:

- *“Hi. Sorry for my late response. Very recently, another student from Leiden University interviewed me. So I will pass; unfortunately, my time is very limited. Good luck with your thesis!”*
- *“No sorry, very busy”*
- *“I am not interested.”*
- *“Unfortunately, I have to withdraw due to deadlines. Wished I could help you. Good luck with your thesis!”*
- *“I just discussed it with my boss; unfortunately, she's uncomfortable with me interviewing about this subject. I wish you good luck with your research and hope you find enough participants! Kind regards”*
- *“Beste, Bedankt voor uw bericht, maar ik heb geen interesse.”: “Dear, Thank you for your message, but I am uninterested.”*
- *Stopped Answering*

The public organizations (PI) from which the 100 candidates were randomly selected are:

- Autoriteit Consument & Markt (ACM)
- Belastingdienst
- BMC
- Defense Material Organization (DMO)
- DICTU/Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate
- Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs (DUO)
- Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (MANFQ)
- Ministry of Defense (MoD)
- Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (MoECS)
- Ministry of Finance (MoF)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)
- Ministry of Health, Wellbeing, and Sports (MoHWS)
- Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management (MoIWM)
- Ministry of Justice and Security (MoJS)
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (MoSAE)

- Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations (MoIKR)
- National Institute for Health and Environment (NIHE)
- National Office for Identity Data (NOID)
- National Organization for Development, Digitalization, and Innovation (NODDI)
- Openbaar Ministerie
- Shared Service Center (SSC-ICT)
- SSO-Noord
- Tax and Customs Administration Center (TCAC)

The organizations above were used in the filtering process of LinkedIn's search method.

Moreover, the four interested candidates are a part of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Finance, the Openbaar Ministry, and the National Institute for Health and Environment.

The Operationalization of the Semi-Structured Interview Questions

This section provides insights into the procedure of transforming research objectives into tailored interview questions that incorporate multiple elements relating to our research overview to investigate the possible presence of affinity bias in the recruitment and selection processes of Dutch public organizations. It is consistent with the overall format of our research overview, allowing the reader to be aware of what to expect.

The questions in the interview guide focus on several themes in terms of general information about the R&S process, the Recruiter's role, what they look for in candidates, and their organization's diversity and inclusion efforts.

Let us expand on each question and discuss its significance (keep in mind that these questions reflect the candidate's own experiences, and their answers are limited to their organization):

"Can you walk me through the steps of your recruitment process from start to finish?"

This question helps us to acquire a thorough insight into the recruiting process inside their organization and identify any potential stages where affinity bias may appear.

"What qualities or characteristics do you typically look for in a candidate?"

This question helps us examine the potential involvement of affinity bias in the recruiter's preference for particular qualities by investigating the criteria employed by these recruiters.

"How do you ensure that your recruitment process is fair?"

This question allows us to evaluate the actions taken by their organization to promote fairness and equal opportunities.

"Can you provide an example of a time when you strongly connected with a candidate during recruitment?"

This question helps us explore recruiters' personal connections with candidates, which may inspect instances where affinity bias might be evident.

"How do you ensure all candidates are given an equal opportunity to succeed during recruitment?"

This question helps us to determine if their organization has taken measures to develop an inclusive interview process that gives equal opportunity to all candidates.

"How do you ensure that the interview process and assessments are inclusive and promote fairness?"

This question allows the researcher to examine how the candidate actively promotes inclusion and fairness in their interview process by evaluating their organization's policies and tactics while considering the possible effect of affinity bias.

"How does your organization ensure that the recruitment process is blind to personal characteristics such as race, gender, or age?"

This question helps us understand their organization's actions to avoid biases connected to individual characteristics and guarantee that the recruiting process stays unbiased.

"How does your organization foster a workplace culture of inclusivity and respect?"

This question helps us understand what strategies are in place to minimize biases, including affinity bias, in the recruiting and selection processes by assessing their organization's attempts to develop an inclusive and respectful workplace culture.

The follow-up questions provide additional depth and specific examples of the discussed topics, allowing us to gather more nuanced information about experiences, decision-making, and training initiatives. (They are not limited to the ones in Appendix B, especially since the questions are open-ended, and every participant can have different experiences to share).

By analyzing the responses to these questions, the researcher aimed to identify patterns, themes, and potential instances of affinity bias and the presence or absence of D&I practices in the recruitment and selection processes of the different organizations.

Reliability and Validity of SSI

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the semi-structured interviews involved several considerations.

First, to ensure reliability, the questions underwent pilot testing with a small sample of participants. This helped identify any ambiguities, allowed for revisions and ensured a final version of clear and appropriate questions. Second, the researcher focused on standardizing the procedure for conducting the interviews to maintain reliability, focusing on the same communications pre-interview, and following the structure of the interview guide (going back to the pre-set questions, once participants deviate from them). This standardized procedure aided in minimizing any potential variations to the data collection process. Third, the researcher remained neutral and objective throughout the interviews to avoid leading the participants with biased questions or influencing their responses.

To ensure validity, the researcher recorded the interviews (with the consent of the participants) to acquire accurate and detailed data. This was supported by note-taking during and after post-

interviews collecting key contextual information, non-verbal clues, and observations that may impact the interpretation of the findings. The researcher also ensured to reflect on their own perspective to avoid influencing the data, minimize potential biases, and enhance objectivity.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative research method that aims to reveal how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences. By exploring recruiters' subjective experiences, IPA can provide a nuanced understanding of how affinity bias shapes decision-making processes and impacts recruitment and selection outcomes beyond quantitative measures of bias and discrimination (Smith et al., 2009). The thesis recognized the potential value of IPA in identifying the manifestation of affinity bias in recruitment processes in Dutch public organizations and how it can contribute to efforts to promote workplace diversity and inclusion. Therefore, the study adopted a research design that combined theoretical and empirical elements to provide insights into recruiters' subjective experiences and perceptions and the potential implications of these experiences for the recruitment and selection process.

IPA is a qualitative research methodology exploring how people make sense of their personal and social world. It was first developed by Jonathan Smith, a British psychologist, in the 1990s and has since become a popular approach to conducting qualitative research. Qualitative research is an umbrella term for research that seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the people experiencing them. Qualitative researchers often use methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to collect data that is rich in detail and context. The focus is on exploring the complexity and depth of human experiences and meanings rather than quantifying them (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is a specific type of qualitative research exploring how people understand their experiences. It is based on the principles of phenomenology, the study of subjective experience. IPA involves a detailed analysis of interview transcripts to identify the themes, patterns, and meanings that emerge from participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2009), which is why this thesis utilized Semi-Structured Interviews. In IPA, the researcher interprets the participant's interpretation of their experience. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the meaning-making processes that underpin the participants' experiences. It focused on each participant's experience, which is treated as a unique and worthy exploration in its own right. It is beneficial for exploring complex, sensitive, or stigmatized topics (Eatough & Smith, 2017). It provided rich and nuanced insights into participants' subjective experiences.

Sequence of Analysis

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading

First, the IPA analysis required immersing oneself in the original data, such as the written transcripts and voice recordings, and actively engaging with them. This entailed reading and re-reading the data rather than rushing into hasty reduction and synopsis; it was critical to slow down and record personal recollections of the interview experience or initial observations in a notebook, reducing noise and allowing the focus to remain on the data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This thesis has been developed through repeated reading, allowing a proper understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of an interview together and an appreciation of how rapport and trust can develop.

Step 2: Initial Noting

This was the most in-depth and time-consuming process of the analysis. At this level of analysis, the thesis investigated semantic content and language use on an experimental basis, noting anything of interest in the transcript. It is a free textual analysis without restrictions. It is at the heart of a descriptive core of comments with a phenomenological focus on the participant's explicit messages (Smith et al., 2009).

In this thesis, and in association with IPA, this analytical step is divided into two distinct sub-steps:

- a. **Descriptive Comments:** A fundamental element of exploratory commenting. It involved analyzing the transcript to highlight keywords, phrases, and emotional responses that matter to the participant. This process included structuring the thoughts and experiences of participants to develop richer accounts of the meaning behind them (Smith et al., 2009). This can be seen in Table 1 in the Exploratory Comment for Candidate 3 (C3) as the unmarked sections.
- b. **Conceptual Comments:** This element involved interpretative coding of transcript data at a conceptual level, focusing on the participant's overarching understanding of the matters discussed. This is mainly based on personal reflections and knowledge (Smith et al., 2009). The personal reflections were based on what the data signifies/indicates/highlights... This can be seen in Table 1 as the underlined sections of the Exploratory Comments for Candidate 3 (C3).

Original Transcript (Candidate 3)	Exploratory Comments
<p>Q: Are there certain policies or regulations that you put on the recruitment process? (So the process is consistent, it is the same questions all the time...)</p> <p>A: Yeah, we should have that.</p> <p>That's another example of something that we need to like upgrade our professionalism in the recruitment process because we do not have that.</p> <p>Like in "Candidate 3 previous organization", we did have that, that was very professional. That was a really big recruitment department, so over here it's really small, and it's not as professional as it should be yet.</p>	<p>The candidate's acknowledgment of the organization's lack of specific policies or regulations for the recruitment process <u>underscores the need to enhance professionalism and upgrade the process to ensure fairness, consistency, and alignment with industry best practices</u>, as exemplified by their previous organization's larger and more professional recruitment department.</p>

Table 1: Initial Noting

Step 3: Develop emergent themes

Following initial notation, this thesis concentrated on developing emergent themes. This entailed dissecting the interview flow to analyze chunks of the transcript, post initial noting, and producing concise and brief statements that captured the psychological essence of the participant's responses. These themes are a reflection of the words of the participants as well as personal interpretations. This step concentrated on reducing data volume while preserving complexities, interrelationships, connections, and patterns. As mentioned, it is based primarily on initial notes rather than transcripts and reflects the collaborative efforts of the participants and the researcher. (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This is showcased in Table 2 under "Emergent Themes" for Candidate 3 (C3).

Emergent Themes	Exploratory Comments
<p>Enhancing Professionalism Need for improvement</p>	<p>The candidate's acknowledgment of the organization's lack of specific policies or regulations for the recruitment process <u>underscores the need to enhance professionalism and upgrade the process to ensure fairness, consistency, and alignment with industry best practices</u>, as exemplified by their previous organization's larger and more professional recruitment department.</p>

Table 2: Emergent Themes

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

This step involved organizing the themes identified in Step 3 to see how they fit together. The goal was to identify clusters of related themes. It was important to keep an open mind during this analysis stage and to re-evaluate the importance of some themes in light of subsequent work done on different transcripts. There are several approaches to be used; in this thesis, the focus was on two different techniques of looking for patterns and connections between the emergent themes of the transcripts data.

The first technic is a “basic form of identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a sense of what can be called a ‘super-ordinate’ theme” (Smith et al., 2009). Known as ‘Abstraction’ under IPA, this technic involved putting “like with like,” for example, in Candidate 4’s transcript data, three different themes appear, those being “Open-mindedness and Avoiding Assumptions,” “Importance of Diversity and Inclusion,” “Need to be more visible and active in communities with diverse backgrounds,” and “Inclusion of People with Disabilities.” These were grouped together under the super-ordinate theme title “Diversity

and Inclusion Efforts.” The superordinate theme emerges at a higher level due to putting the themes together – see Table 3.

Candidate 4 (C4): Diversity and Inclusion Efforts
Open-Mindedness and Avoiding Assumptions
Importance of Diversity and Inclusion
Inclusion of People with Disabilities
Need to be more visible and active in communities with diverse backgrounds

Table 3: Abstraction leading to the development of a super-ordinate theme

The second technic is based on “taking account of the frequency with which a theme is supported” (Smith et al., 2009). This technique, known as 'Numeration' in the IPA, indicated the relative prominence of emergent themes. It assisted in determining how frequently each emergent theme appeared throughout the transcript. Given the open-ended nature of the interview, it seemed logical to consider the frequency with which each emerging topic arises as an indication (though not the only one) of its relative importance and relevance to the participant (Smith et al., 2009). See Table 4 for an example of Numeration for C3.

Emergent Themes	Numeration (Frequency of theme)
Organizational Change	5
Inconsistent Candidate Experience	2
Risk of Bias	4
AI in R&S	1
Collaborative Approach	4
Emphasis on Technical Skills	3
D&I Efforts	10
Creating a Positive and Safe Workplace Culture	1
Need for Continuous Improvement	10
Disagreement with organization strategy and values	2
Openness for improvement	2
Lack of efforts	1

Table 4: Numeration (C3)

Step 5: Doing it all again with another transcript

After each transcript/case, this thesis ensured that it moved on to the next one by treating each as a separate entity and avoiding inter-case influences. This enabled new themes to emerge. This is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment, which values the uniqueness of individual experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

This step involved looking for patterns across cases. This is done by laying out tables and figures for each case and examining them together. This step focused on looking for differences and connections between cases (Smith et al., 2009). The first stage to doing so was to gather all themes from all different cases and reconfigure/relabel them. As additional data was processed and linkages between codes and themes became obvious, reconfiguring/relabeling themes allowed for a more accurate and complete data representation. Moreover, as IPA aims to reflect participants' subjective experiences, this process ensures that the themes align closely with participants' own descriptions and perspectives.

After reconfiguring/relabeling the emergent themes across cases, it was vital to group the related super-ordinate themes into a higher order (An Abstraction of the Abstraction). This created a more organized and structured presentation of the findings. See the example below in Table 5.

Challenges to Recruitment and Selection
Lack of diversity
Lack of efforts

Limited Roles
Inconsistent candidate experience
Impact of COVID
External Factors and Lack of Control in Decision-Making
Disagreements with organizational strategy
Difficulty in Attracting Candidates from Different Backgrounds
Differences in values and priorities
Concerns about Fair and Equal Selection
Barriers to effective recruitment practices
Anticipated Job Market Changes
Absence of Assessments or Tests
Challenges in achieving a more diverse group
Cultural Differences as a contributor to the underrepresentation of specific backgrounds

Table 5: Creating Higher Orders

All the super-ordinate themes that were identified through the 4 cases (mentioned above in Table 5) were grouped under a higher order, “Challenges to Recruitment and Selection.”

It was also vital to recognize the frequency of each super-ordinate theme in order to grasp the importance of each higher-order across cases. This is where “Numeration” came in handy to calculate these frequencies. Ultimately nine higher orders were recognized as the most potent. See below in Table 6.

Higher Orders	Frequency across cases
Need and Openness for Improvement	31
Challenges to Recruitment and Selection	26
Recruitment and Selection Strategies	25
Diversity and Inclusion Efforts	24
Explored Potential Bias	14
Organizational Change and Growth	13
Collaboration	9
Emphasis on technical skills	5

Table 6: Higher Orders and their Frequencies

The final results of this step are presented in the findings section below, where each higher order is presented with one or several super-ordinate themes with direct quotes from different cases to showcase connections for the group of participants as a whole. See Table 7 for the findings that illustrate the higher orders, themes, and examples.

Reliability and Validity of the Research Method

According to Lucy Yardley, there are four broad principles to assess the validity and reliability of this qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009).

1- Sensitivity to the context

This thesis attempts to demonstrate sensitivity to the context by providing a detailed background to the research problem and the different concepts employed, to showcase their importance, and in turn, enhance the validity of the thesis.

To properly conduct the analysis and ensure reliability, the process required immersive and disciplined attention and proper care and sensitivity to the collected data from the

participants. This is why the results section will include direct quotes enabling the reader to check the interpretations being made.

These interpretations were written carefully with claims appropriate to the sample that has been analyzed.

2- Commitment and Rigor

In terms of validity, this thesis aimed to commit to an engagement with the participants' experiences continuously. That is why IPA was employed, seeing that it requires an in-depth exploration of the different perspectives employed by the participants.

Regarding reliability, the thesis aimed to be rigorous with its data collection and analysis process. The steps mentioned above highlight the attempts to ensure the reliability of the employed research method. The consistency through the analysis process of all four participants aimed to enhance the reliability of the research.

3- Transparency and Coherence

The validity of this research was achieved by demonstrating, transparently, the stages of the research process, just as described in the write-up of the "Sequence of Analysis." Including examples of coding schemes, thematic patterns, and supporting visuals of the analysis process can help the reader hopefully recognize the validity and reliability of the research.

Coherence is crucial to ensure reliability (Smith et al., 2009). In order to ensure reliability, this thesis attempted to present a logical flow of findings that fits into its research overview.

4- Impact and Importance

In order to establish the validity of the research, it was essential to demonstrate the impact and importance of our findings. This was done by showcasing the academic and societal relevance of the research, how future researchers can benefit from it, and how the Dutch public sector could use it to enhance its recruitment and selection processes.

Findings

This chapter presents the “Master Table of themes for the group,” which falls under Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. It showcases the patterns of super-ordinate themes across cases, along with examples to support their presence.

Relevant Higher Orders, Themes, and Examples	Candidate
Need and Openness for Improvement	
<i>Need for Improvement</i>	
"We are going through some phases at “THE CANDIDATE’S PUBLIC INSTITUTION” of optimizing the recruitment process..."	C1
"But it is getting better and like they're taking some initiatives, as I told you “training”, but also like we're hiring a new recruiter that is only on diversity and inclusion... And so they're definitely taking steps to improve that... Umm from my perspective, is it?... Where we want to be? No. But are we making steps? Yes."	C2

<p>"Well, right now I'm focused on getting an ATS. Yes, just so we can make the process more efficiently and also in terms of the privacy, because it's not, it's just not. I've talked to our Privacy officer and she also said like we are at risk of getting fines because this is just terrible the way it's going really terrible."</p>	<p>C3</p>
<p>"So I think they were a bit caught by surprise that we're growing and growing "Oh, we need to step up.", but they didn't do that... So that's basically what happened."</p>	<p>C3</p>
<p>"I don't see a lot of people who are physically disabled, for instance. We have one at our department, but not in the traineeship. That literally, that's what I like to see in the in the next coming years."</p>	<p>C4</p>
<p>"No, I wish we had a system. Just the form. You fill out and then. We get all the applicant forms back. "</p>	<p>C4</p>
<p>Challenges to Recruitment and Selection</p>	
<p><i>Lack of Diversity</i></p>	
<p>"For me, for instance, when you have a job ad, and you write somewhere like we are in a diverse and inclusive organization and we welcome everybody to apply for me that implies like if you have to say it, it implies that you are you are not D&I..."</p>	<p>C1</p>
<p>"Straight fact that diversity and inclusion is not their best aspect..."</p>	<p>C2</p>

"UM, honestly, I think that's something that we also need to work on within this company..."	C3
"You will see that when we take pictures of all the groups (of the traineeship)... You'll see quite a lot of typical Dutch people..."	C4
Diversity and Inclusion Efforts	
<i>D&I Efforts</i>	
"Yeah. Currently, we are spreading information within the organization about diversity and inclusion..."	C1
"also like we're hiring a new recruiter that is only on diversity and inclusion..."	C2
"we had like a pub quiz last week. The theme of the pop quiz was also diversity..."	C3
"The training is called Sourcing or recruiting and selection. It's training. I also followed that training..."	C4
Explored Potential Bias	
<i>Potential Bias</i>	
"but there was another candidate that wasn't familiar with the organization, but we hired him. He was from a different racial background... but for me it was because it was a different type... Of a candidate that we then that we normally would hire, perhaps."	C2
"But to give you an example, we had like a pop quiz last week... The theme of the pop quiz was diversity... But they when I came down there, I'm just going to be up front... Like it's everybody was white..."	C3

<p>"I just noticed about my coworker that he was having problems like seeing past that past that cultural difference, so that that that was again an eye opener like ohh they really find it difficult to like have a broader look..."</p>	<p>C3</p>
<p>"OK, what does diversity mean to you and how is it an important thing in your life? And then somebody says, well, my brother in law is from Mexico. And then I'm like, oh, my God, this is that's the level it's on right now."</p>	<p>C3</p>
<p>"they were so hung up on diversity and being inclusive and over here we say that we are, but we're not. We're definitely not, UM, and I don't. I'm not really sure because I've been here for such a short time, if that's something that people find difficult or we just we're not able to find a lot of diverse candidates..."</p>	<p>C3</p>
<p>"I'm just not sure where the problem lies, but I I find it very disturbing almost when I look around in our company, it's really white company like even in my HR team, it's it's basically all the same types and yeah, that's just not good. It's not."</p>	<p>C3</p>
<p>"You will see that when we take pictures of all the groups (of the traineeship)... You'll see quite a lot of typical Dutch people..."</p>	<p>C4</p>
<p>"You have to apply in Dutch, your letter will have to be in Dutch. Your resume has to be in Dutch."</p>	<p>C4</p>
<p>"If there isn't a personal click, I cannot predict if it's a match or not."</p>	<p>C4</p>

Table 7: Master Table for themes for the group

The table above captures the most important/relevant themes generated through the participants' data in a suitable ordering in relevance with the frequency of each and in relevance with the research question (With four out of the five most frequent higher orders being the most relevant).

Analysis

Need and Openness for Improvement. This shows recognition and acknowledgment of existing flaws, biases, and inefficiencies. It demonstrates openness to new ideas and active efforts to enhance the process, including addressing prejudices, improving diversity and inclusion, and streamlining for efficiency and effectiveness. This fits the context of the thesis in that there is a knowledge that setbacks exist and can have a detrimental impact on recruiting and selection results. Public sector recruitment is known for being sluggish, unresponsive, bureaucratic, and apathetic, often assuming candidates will naturally apply. As a result, these organizations rarely engage in proactive outreach or other methods to attract exceptional job seekers and enhance their processes. (Lavigna, 2004).

Candidate 1 stated: "We are going through some phases at 'THE CANDIDATE'S PUBLIC INSTITUTION' of optimizing the recruitment process..."

This statement emphasizes the organization's ongoing efforts to improve its recruitment process. It denotes an acceptance of the need for improvement and an openness to change. Candidate 1 highlights the organization's dedication to fixing any inadequacies and prejudices that may exist by indicating that they are in the process of improving the recruiting process.

Candidate 2 stated: "But it is getting better and like they're taking some initiatives, as I told you "training", but also like we're hiring a new recruiter that is only on diversity

and inclusion... And so they're definitely taking steps to improve that... Umm from my perspective, is it?... Where we want to be? No. But are we making steps? Yes."

The statement emphasizes the organization's efforts to improve diversity and inclusion via numerous programs. Candidate 2 claims that the organization is working to enhance the recruiting process. They specifically highlight training and hiring a new recruiter committed to diversity and inclusion. These activities show the organization's proactive approach to resolving prejudices and encouraging a more inclusive hiring process. The statement also notes that more can be done while progress is being made. Candidate 2 suggests that the company has not yet achieved its intended level of diversity and inclusion. However, the fact that they are moving in the correct direction is crucial.

Candidate 3 stated: "Well, right now I'm focused on getting an ATS. Yes, just so we can make the process more efficiently and also in terms of the privacy, because it's not, it's just not. I've talked to our Privacy officer and she also said like we are at risk of getting fines because this is just terrible the way it's going really terrible."

Candidate 3's remark sheds light on issues with the current recruiting process, particularly regarding efficiency and privacy. The statement demonstrates a desire for change and an awareness of the potential consequences of not addressing these issues. The emphasis on acquiring an Applicant Tracking System (ATS) to enhance recruitment is highlighted. Implementing an ATS aims to expedite application screening and applicant monitoring, improving efficiency (Laumer, 2015). This shows the company's recognition of the value of technology in enhancing its recruitment procedures. Moreover, Candidate 3's comment aligns with the "Need and Openness for Improvement" theme by acknowledging inefficiencies and

privacy concerns. The statement reflects an understanding of the necessary modifications to achieve a more efficient and compliant procedure.

Candidate 4 stated: "I don't see a lot of people who are physically disabled, for instance. We have one at our department, but not in the traineeship. That literally, that's what I like to see in the in the next coming years."

Candidate 4's comment demonstrates a perceived need for improvement in the recruiting and selection process regarding the representation of people with disabilities. They express their concern, particularly in the training program. This shows that the present recruiting and selection methods are not efficiently attracting or considering diverse individuals. Candidate 4 believes there is potential for improvement in encouraging diversity and inclusion within the organization by stressing the lack of diversity in the traineeship program.

Thus, the statements constantly acknowledge and accept that the existing methods are not optimum and need improvement. This pattern indicates a recognition of flaws, biases, or inefficiencies in recruiting and selection methods. The remarks also suggest an overall willingness to change, with public organizations actively seeking ways to improve their procedures.

Challenges to Recruitment and Selection. This theme showcases the various difficulties or limitations within Dutch public organizations' recruitment and selection processes. This theme is a higher order to many obstacles mentioned by all four candidates/recruiters when discussing their experiences. The theme encompasses all the sub-themes mentioned in Table

5. This aligns with global R&S challenges faced by governments. These challenges are not limited to a specific country but are prevalent worldwide (Lavigna, 2015). The most relevant sub-theme to our study is “Lack of Diversity” mentioned in all four participant interviews.

Candidate 1 stated: "For me, for instance, when you have a job ad, and you write somewhere like we are in a diverse and inclusive organization and we welcome everybody to apply for me that implies like if you have to say it, it implies that you are you are not D&I..."

Candidate 1 is wary of job postings that promote diversity and inclusion. They think that an organization's need to express these ideas clearly indicates a lack of embodiment. This suggests a possible misalignment between the organization's values and the inclusion of diverse individuals. It highlights the difficulties that Dutch government entities experience in attracting and choosing a diverse pool of applicants. Candidate 1's statement underlines the need to take concrete steps to promote diversity and inclusion in recruiting and selection. This exposes the organization's approach to diversity's misalignment between proclaimed values and real actions.

Candidate 2 stated: "Straight fact that diversity and inclusion is not their best aspect..." Candidate 2 states unequivocally that diversity and inclusiveness are not the organization's strong suits. According to this statement, the Dutch organization has difficulty effectively encouraging diversity and inclusion in its recruiting and selection processes. It suggests that the organization's attempts to foster diversity and inclusion may have flaws or limits. The statement of Candidate 2 emphasizes the need for progress in this area and suggests that the

organization may not be completely embracing or promoting diversity and inclusion as intended.

Candidate 3 stated: "UM, honestly, I think that's something that we also need to work on within this company..."

Candidate 3 recognizes that there is room for development in terms of diversity and inclusion within their public organization. The statement acknowledges current flaws or limitations in the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. The statement emphasizes the necessity of actively strengthening and expanding the organization's diversity and inclusion efforts.

Candidate 4 stated: "You will see that when we take pictures of all the groups (of the traineeship)... You'll see quite a lot of typical Dutch people..."

Candidate 4's comment highlights the absence of diversity in the organization's traineeship program. When looking at group photos of the trainees, the applicant notices that many of them appear to be of typical Dutch origin. This observation suggests that the traineeship program has a restricted representation of people from varied backgrounds. It implies that the recruiting and selection procedures may not be drawing diverse individuals from various ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

Thus, these remarks reveal a persistent pattern of difficulties associated with a lack of diversity in Dutch public organizations' recruiting and selection procedures. They recognize a need for change and a determination to address the underrepresentation of diverse applicants. This

trend emphasizes the significance of increasing diversity and inclusion initiatives within these organizations to establish a more inclusive and representative workforce.

Diversity and Inclusion Efforts. This theme emerged as an essential component of Dutch public organizations' recruiting and selection processes. It represents a trend toward recognizing the need for a diverse and inclusive workforce that matches the various society in which these organizations operate. This is consistent with our research overview, especially given that the participants acknowledge that underrepresented groups' contributions may help remove prejudices. Prioritizing diversity and inclusion in recruiting procedures can help to promote fair and equitable employment practices. Moreover, organizations must promote diversity and inclusiveness to prosper. (Ozbilgin, 2017; Pitts, 2010)

Candidate 1 stated: "Yeah. Currently, we are spreading information within the organization about diversity and inclusion..."

This statement by C1 indicates that the organization is actively involved in disseminating knowledge on diversity and inclusion inside the organization. This shows that they promote staff awareness and understanding of D&I. This shows that the organization's goal of sharing information may foster a culture that appreciates and accepts diversity, creating an inclusive atmosphere.

Candidate 2 stated: "also like we're hiring a new recruiter that is only on diversity and inclusion..."

This statement by Candidate 2 emphasizes the organization's particular action toward diversity and inclusion efforts. Hiring a new recruiter entirely committed to diversity and inclusion

suggests a purposeful and targeted effort. The organization may commit to eliminating prejudices, extending representation, and developing a more inclusive recruiting process by having a dedicated professional focused on diversity and inclusion.

Candidate 3 stated: "we had like a pop quiz last week. The theme of the pop quiz was also diversity..."

Candidate 3's answer implies that the organization actively engages employees in diversity and inclusion activities. The incorporation of diversity as subject matter demonstrates their attempts to raise workplace awareness and understanding of diversity.

Candidate 4 stated: "The training is called Sourcing or recruiting and selection. It's training. I also followed that training..."

This statement showcases that the organization is providing training opportunities to enhance the knowledge and skills of its employees in recruitment and selection processes with a focus on diversity. This demonstrates the organization's commitment to learning and implementing best practices in diversity and inclusion within the recruitment process.

Thus, these statements reveal that these different Dutch Public Organizations actively promote diversity and inclusion within their recruitment and selection processes. These actions highlight the organizations' recognition of the value of diversity and inclusion and their efforts to ensure a fair and equitable selection process considering individuals from diverse backgrounds.

They explored Potential Biases. This theme represented the identification of probable biases in the four participants' remarks. The theme suggests that the participants' replies alluded to occasions in which specific language, statements, or experiences suggest the likelihood of biases impacting selection outcomes. Based on the participants' narratives, the study deduces the presence of possible biases by analyzing the data.

Candidate 2 stated: "But there was another candidate that wasn't familiar with the organization, but we hired him. He was from a different racial background... but for me, it was because it was a different type of a candidate that we then that we normally would hire, perhaps."

The statement by C2 reveals a possible bias based on race. C2 recognizes that the hired applicant was of a different racial background. C2 suggests that the candidate's race made them a "different type" of candidate than the organization would normally hire. This suggests a possible prejudice in which the candidate's race affects the view and judgment of their credentials and fit for the post. The statement expresses concern regarding candidates' fair and unbiased treatment during the recruiting and selection process.

Candidate 3 stated: "But to give you an example, we had like a pop quiz last week... The theme of the pop quiz was diversity... But they when I came down there, I'm just going to be upfront... Like everybody was white..."

Despite the event's theme being diversity, C3 emphasizes that everyone in attendance was white. This finding shows that there is a lack of representation and inclusion of people from different backgrounds in the organization. It suggests a potential bias in the recruiting and

selection process or a failure to make serious efforts to create a diverse workforce. The statement calls into doubt the organization's commitment to encouraging diversity and inclusion, given that the event's real composition does not correspond to the theme. It emphasizes the need for organizations not merely to promote diversity symbolically but actually take tangible steps to ensure varied representation and inclusion.

Candidate 3 also stated: "I just noticed about my coworker that he was having problems like seeing past that cultural difference, so that that that was again an eye opener like ohh they really find it difficult to like have a broader look..."

C3's statement suggests the possibility of bias in the perception and comprehension of cultural differences. C3 saw that their coworker failed to look past cultural differences, implying a narrow perspective or difficulty accepting diversity. The statement emphasizes a possible bias that prevents people from recognizing and appreciating cultural differences more broadly and inclusively.

Candidate 3 also stated: "OK, what does diversity mean to you and how is it an important thing in your life? And then somebody says, well, my brother-in-law is from Mexico. And then I'm like, oh, my God, this is that's the level it's on right now."

C3's comment implies a potential bias or misunderstanding of the notion of diversity at some level of the organization. C3's reaction expresses shock or amazement when they hear someone associate diversity exclusively with having a family member from a foreign nation.

Candidate 3 also stated: "There they were so hung up on diversity and being inclusive, and over here we say that we are, but we're not. We're definitely not, UM, and I don't. I'm not really sure because I've been here for such a short time, if that's something that people find difficult or we just we're not able to find a lot of diverse candidates..."

This statement by C3 shows a possible bias in recruiting diverse talent and a disparity between the organization's declared commitment to diversity and inclusion and the actual representation of different applicants. C3 reflects a belief that the company values diversity and inclusion but falls short in practice.

Candidate 3 also stated: "I'm just not sure where the problem lies, but I I find it very disturbing almost when I look around in our company, it's really white company like even in my HR team, it's it's basically all the same types and yeah, that's just not good. It's not."

This statement by C3 demonstrates an awareness and worry about the organization's lack of diversity, particularly regarding racial representation. C3 expresses concern and depicts the organization as predominantly white, including its own HR team. The use of language like "disturbing," "all the same types," and "that's just not good" demonstrates an awareness of the company's possible bias and lack of inclusion.

Candidate 4 stated: "You will see that when we take pictures of all the groups (of the traineeship)... You'll see quite a lot of typical Dutch people..."

Candidate 4's comment suggests a possible bias in the recruitment and selection process of the traineeship group, with a focus on individuals considered "typical Dutch people." This

shows that the program lacks diversity and representation. The term "typical Dutch people" suggests a possible bias toward a specific cultural or ethnic profile, thus eliminating individuals from varied backgrounds.

Candidate 4 also stated: "If there isn't a personal click, I cannot predict if it's a match or not."

The statement of Candidate 4 implies a potential bias based on a personal connection or "click" in the decision-making process. This means that subjective criteria, rather than actual credentials and skills, may affect the evaluation of a candidate's suitability for a role.

Thus, these statements reveal a pattern of potential biases. These include biases related to racial background, cultural differences, and personal preferences. These biases may have influenced the hiring decisions in the public organizations of these different candidates while hindering the recruitment and selection processes and efforts from promoting diversity and creating inclusive environments.

Discussion

We have gained a clear relationship between the most potent emergent themes identified through the analysis and our research overview by taking this interpretative phenomenological approach to the four semi-structured interviews conducted with these public sector recruiters. When examining the patterns within the statements under "Explored Potential Biases," it becomes clear that these biases align with the characteristics of affinity bias, primarily as they reflect a tendency to select candidates that fit specific cultural or personal criteria. As already mentioned in the research overview, affinity bias is rooted in the social identity theory. The

statements not only reveal a pattern of affinity bias but can also be understood through the lens of social identity theory, especially as the biases focus on individuals in the Dutch public sector that share similar social identities regarding race, culture, and personal preferences. In the context of the statements, the biases exhibited reflect some tendency to favor candidates who fit specific cultural or personal criteria, suggesting an in-group preference based on shared social identities.

Second, building upon the insights gained from the analysis of the statements and their alignment with affinity bias and social identity theory, it is crucial to consider the implications of these biases for the recruitment and selection processes. As already showcased in the research overview, affinity bias and SIT can fall under the umbrella of recruitment and selection processes. Moreover, with the recognition of affinity bias manifesting itself in Dutch public organizations, concerns are raised about the fairness and objectivity of recruitment and selection. Biases rooted in social identity can introduce subjective criteria into decision-making, such as personal connections or perceived similarities, which may overshadow the objective evaluation of candidates' qualifications and potential contributions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This can undermine the Equal Opportunity Act and the principles that these public organizations seem to strive to uphold.

Additionally, the biases observed in the statements underscore a lack of diversity and inclusion within the Dutch public sector. As highlighted by the applicants, the uniformity represented in the workforce's composition suggests a disconnect between the organization's professed commitment to diversity and the reality of its representation. This disparity may impede not just the recruitment of diversified personnel but also the organization's capacity to recognize and meet the needs and requirements of a diverse community.

Based on the previous information, we can induce that the four most potent themes can explain how the four concepts introduced in our research overview inter-relate in Dutch public organizations (DPO) and are relevant to our research problem. In this case, we recognize several challenges to recruitment and selection processes in DPO, with affinity bias and social identity playing a role in those challenges, affecting workplace diversity and inclusion.

The preceding sections emphasize how the analysis's emergent themes strengthen and confirm the concepts and links presented in the research overview. This demonstrates the importance of this thesis research framework in comprehending and resolving the influence of affinity bias on workplace diversity and inclusion in Dutch Public Organizations. This also demonstrates that IPA is a well-suited method for further research on the manifestation of affinity bias in Dutch public organizations, as well as future research into the impact of this bias and the issues it presents surrounding "diversity and inclusion."

What is Next?

Recruitment and selection strategies play a pivotal role in public organizations, particularly considering the challenges they face worldwide (Lavigna, 2004). In light of this thesis, it becomes crucial for the public sector and for the frontrunners of recruitment and selection processes (recruiters) to implement and execute reforms committed to enhancing diversity and inclusion in the public sector.

The most potent higher-order or emergent theme through the data was the "Need and Openness for Improvement," which effectively showcases a willingness for change and development. There is an apparent understanding that the challenges mentioned in Table 5 are inherent in Dutch public organizations' recruitment and selection processes. These challenges, however, do not reflect resilience; instead, they represent a valuable insight that

there is an eagerness for change to develop strategies, policies, and practices to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of R&S processes.

A starting point should be based on the promotion of a comprehensive understanding of diversity beyond superficial or symbolic associations, such as those seen under “Explored Potential Biases.” Efforts should concentrate on implementing fair and equitable recruitment and selection practices, fostering cultural awareness, and promoting diverse representation. Thus, overcoming biases or misconceptions and promoting efforts to foster inclusive mindsets that appreciate the diverse aspects of society.

The problem as a solution?

Understanding these challenges through the lens of affinity bias and social identity theory allows for more in-depth knowledge of the mechanisms that perpetuate affinity biases. This understanding lays the road for more egalitarian and inclusive organizations.

Organizations may use social identity theory and affinity bias to promote diversity and inclusion by acknowledging the role of social identity and affinity bias on positive discrimination (as mentioned by Trainer (2015)), prejudices, and behaviors. Actively recruiting and keeping members of underrepresented groups, enabling interactions with those who have similar identities, and enacting policies that promote diversity are all critical measures.

Given our assumptions and observations, understanding affinity bias through the lens of social identity theory can solve our research problem. Dutch public organizations can leverage these two concepts to promote diversity and inclusion. This can be done by actively recruiting and retaining members from underrepresented groups. This was mentioned by Candidate 2 under the Diversity and Inclusion Efforts higher order, stating: “*also like we're hiring a new recruiter that is only on diversity and inclusion...*”. When the recruitment team itself represents a diverse range

of backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, it can lead to more inclusive practices. More specifically, when diverse employee perspectives and approaches are incorporated into processes, it could leverage the benefits of diversity and enhance organizational performance, learning, and growth, especially since “inclusive work practices and diversity-related outcomes may be the characteristics of organizations that are diverse and inclusive” (Roberson, 2006). In summary, organizations can create a culture that values and recognizes diverse identities by actively recruiting and retaining individuals from underrepresented groups, providing opportunities for individuals to connect with others who share different identities, and creating policies and practices that promote inclusivity. Additionally, by highlighting the positive contributions of individuals from underrepresented groups and recognizing their achievements, organizations can promote a more positive view of these groups and reduce biases and stereotypes (Ivancevich & Gilbert, 2000).

Limitations

According to Jonathan A. Smith, “IPA is a creative process. It is not a matter of following a rule book... something that works for one study will be less suitable for another” (Smith et al., 2009). This highlights the fact that IPA relies heavily on the interpretation of the researcher. The emergent themes and patterns showcased in our results, analysis, and discussion are subjective and dependent on the researcher’s perspective. This may create a limitation as other researchers might interpret the data differently.

On another note, the results may be biased as the thesis focused on a sample of public sector recruiters who are accountable for fostering diversity and inclusion. These recruiters may be more conscious of diversity concerns and biases, which may not reflect all recruiters in Dutch public organizations.

As already mentioned in our research design, using LinkedIn as a recruitment method may have limitations to the thesis. These limitations can present themselves as the potential lack of representation of all public sector recruiters, particularly those without LinkedIn profiles; also, the sample may be inclined toward individuals who are more active on LinkedIn or more likely to respond to research study invitations.

Limited resources, such as little available time and a lack of budget, may have also limited/restricted the number of interviews that could have been conducted for this thesis. As a result, a smaller sample size may have reduced the representativeness of the participants, and a limited time may have limited the scope of inquiry, which means that some factors may have been overlooked that could have contributed to a more holistic view/analysis.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore the manifestation of affinity bias and understand its impact on Dutch Public Organizations through an inductive research method focused on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured interviews with recruiters from DPOs. Initially, it focused on presenting a clear explanation of the different concepts, “Diversity and Inclusion,” “Recruitment and Selection Process,” “Social Identity theory,” and Affinity Bias,” that influence the research question, thereby establishing a solid foundation for further exploration. It also presented information to further understand the relevance of the research in the Dutch public sector, while including examples of prior studies to highlight further validity.

This analysis resulted in a relationship between the research overview and the emergent themes of “Explored Potential Biases,” “Challenges to Recruitment and Selection Processes,”

“Diversity and Inclusion Efforts,” and “Need and Openness for Improvement.” It shed light on the manifestation of affinity bias in R&S and its implications for diversity and inclusion.

Our research approach focused on developing tailored interview questions to investigate the recruitment and selection processes. These questions covered various themes such as the recruitment process, the role of recruiters, criteria for candidate selection, and diversity and inclusion efforts. Each question was significant for the researcher to investigate and understand the presence of affinity bias based on the provided answers.

The research also aimed to ensure reliability and validity. In semi-structured interviews, through pilot testing, standardization of the interview procedure, the neutrality of the researcher, recording of interviews, note taking, and continuous reflection. And in the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, through the emphasis on “sensitivity to context,” “commitment and rigor,” “transparency and coherence,” and “impact and importance” (Smith et al., 2009).

The analysis found a pattern of tendencies of affinity bias, with a probable inclination to favor candidates who fit specific cultural or personal characteristics based on in-group preferences and shared social identities. These potential biases are problematic as they shed light on an impending undermining of the principles of the Dutch Equal Treatment Act.

This bias can help explain the observed highlighted lack of diversity and inclusion within the challenges mentioned by the participants. This goes against the DPOs’ commitment to diversity and hinders the recruitment of diverse individuals, which can, in turn, impede the ability to understand the needs and concerns of The Netherlands’ diverse community.

The findings of this research reinforce the connections and relationships drawn in the research overview as they showcase how affinity bias in recruitment and selection processes, through

the lens of the social identity theory, can impact diversity and inclusion in Dutch public organizations. This only shows that the thesis research design, using IPA and SSI, provided valuable insights into the manifestation of affinity bias and its impact.

Moreover, to answer our research question, the manifestation of affinity bias can only raise concerns about the fairness and objectivity of the recruitment and selection process, possibly affecting workplace diversity and inclusion and the representation of diverse personnel, and potentially decreasing employee satisfaction, and organizational performance of Dutch Public Organizations.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Future research should involve a broader sample of recruiters from diverse public organizations and employ multiple data collection methods. However, overall, this thesis contributes to identifying and understanding affinity bias and its probable impact on Dutch public organizations and provides recommendations for promoting diversity and inclusion.

Moving forward, DPOs and recruitment and selection personnel must implement reforms to enhance diversity and inclusion in the public sector. At the same time, they must ensure that a comprehensive understanding of diversity, beyond symbolism, is promoted. The interviews revealed a strong willingness for improvement, emphasizing the need for strategies, policies, and practices to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of recruitment and selection processes.

Appendix

“Dear Y,

I hope this message finds you well.

My name is Y, I am a master’s student in Public Administration (Public Management and Leadership) at Leiden University. As part of my master's thesis research, I am interviewing professionals to gain insights into the Dutch public sector recruitment process.

I would like to invite you to be a part of my research. Participants will be invited to respond to interview questions for a session of about 30 to 45 minutes in duration. Interviews can occur face-to-face or online at suitable times for the participants.

The interview period is proposed for April 20 to May 20, 2023. Please feel free to indicate an interview time and place suitable for you.

Before interviews are conducted, participants are invited to sign a consent form.

Additionally, please let me know if you are comfortable with video or voice recording the interview.

Your participation in this research would be greatly appreciated, and your insights would contribute to a scholarly understanding of the recruitment process of Dutch public organizations. Please let me know if you are interested in participating, and we can schedule a convenient time for the interview.

Thank you for considering my request.

Best regards,”

Appendix A: Message to Participants

Introduction:

- Introduce myself
- Reiterate privacy and confidentiality
- Allow questions

I. Recruitment Process:

- Can you walk me through the steps of your recruitment process from start to finish?
- What qualities or characteristics do you typically look for in a candidate?
- How do you ensure that your recruitment process is fair?

II. Interview Process:

- Can you provide an example of a time when you strongly connected with a candidate during recruitment?
- How do you ensure all candidates are given an equal opportunity to succeed during recruitment?
- How do you ensure that the interview process and assessments are inclusive and promote fairness?
- How does your organization ensure that the recruitment process is blind to personal characteristics such as race, gender, or age?

III. DEIB Training:

- How does your organization foster a workplace culture of inclusivity and respect?

Follow-ups:

- Can you give me an example of your successful hire and what made that candidate stand out?
- Have you ever hired someone because you felt you had much in common with them?
- How do you encourage diversity in hiring panels to bring different perspectives and approaches?
- Have you provided or received training to promote inclusivity and discuss biases? (Yes and no questions)

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