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UCT study reveals hidden hiring bias locking black graduates out of jobs

In corporate graduate recruitment worldwide, candidates are often assessed not only on competence but also on their relatability.

A University of Cape Town (UCT) co-led [study](#) theorises relatability as a racialised cultural–affective filter that covertly sustains inequality. The study has been conducted in conjunction with researchers from the Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University in Turkey and Brunel University London.

Titled "Relatability as a racialised construct in corporate graduate recruitment: Revealing a hidden mechanism of labour market exclusion for black African youth in South Africa", the study was published in the [British Journal of Sociology](#).

"Our research shows that graduate recruitment is not always driven purely by competence or qualifications. Employers often make decisions based on who feels familiar, relatable or 'safe', and these subjective judgements can unintentionally reproduce longstanding racial and class inequalities in the labour market," said Professor Kurt April, Allan Gray Chair and director of the [Allan Gray Centre for Values-Based Leadership](#) at UCT's Graduate School of Business (GSB).

"What makes this study significant is that it shifts attention from blaming unemployed youth for lacking skills to examining how organisational hiring practices themselves can become barriers to inclusion. If we want meaningful transformation, we need to rethink the hidden cultural assumptions and embedded homosocial reproduction that shape who is seen as employable."

Drawing on qualitative interviews, the authors identified five interlinked processes of self-presentation, confidence, bias, choice and affinity, through which whiteness operates as a normative anchor in hiring.

"We extend theories of social closure into aesthetic and affective domains, conceptualising relatability as a meso-level mechanism linking micro- interactional judgements to macro-level racial hierarchies," reads the paper.

This framework offers a transferable analytic lens for understanding how cultural capital is operationalised in exclusionary ways across contexts, even in formally and supposedly deracialised systems.

The findings call for demand-side reforms that reconfigure organisational norms, broaden definitions of professionalism, and reduce reliance on cultural familiarity as a proxy for merit.

Relatability operates as an institutionalised mechanism through which classed and racialised dispositions are recognised and reproduced, even within racially diverse hiring structures.

Within South Africa's labour market, such affinity-based evaluations do not simply shape interpersonal impressions but can harden into structural filters that determine access to employment. Employment crises are hardly confined to the Global South, yet the magnitude and tenacity of youth unemployment in post-apartheid South Africa remain distinctive. According to Statistics South Africa's 2025 report, labour-force statistics recorded an overall jobless rate of 32.9% in the first quarter of 2025.

The findings offer an analytic narrative of employer reasoning. The focus rests on the patterned routines through which everyday hiring talk hardens into systematic exclusion. Rather than being determined solely by formal criteria such as qualifications or experience, participants' narratives revealed how perceptions of interpersonal ease, organisational fit and reputational safety shaped evaluations long before competency metrics were formally applied.

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