SUMMARY

To what extent do descendants of immigrants experience discrimination in the access to labour market opportunities? How, when and why does the perceived ethnic background of job applicants become a matter of importance in employers’ decision-making? Decades of research in sociology, economics, and social psychology have dealt with questions of ethnic discrimination and great empirical, theoretical, and methodological progress have been achieved. Yet major uncertainties remain. Statistical analyses of large-scale data sets, surveys with employers and laboratory experiments exploring the relevance of negative attitudes and cognitive biases cannot directly measure the extent to which discrimination occurs in real life recruitment processes. Furthermore, ethnographic research on perceived discrimination in the labour market cannot determine the effects of these processes on employment opportunities.

To address some of the limitations in traditional approaches to employment discrimination, this dissertation studies discrimination processes in the Norwegian labour market by employing a multi-method research design. In the first part of the study, a large-scale field experiment, in which hundreds of fictitious, paired résumés and cover letters were sent in response to real job openings, were used to measure the extent to which children of Pakistani immigrants are discriminated at the entrance to labour market in the greater Oslo area. Because the two fictitious job candidates in each pair were equally qualified in every productivity-relevant aspect, but were randomly assigned a Norwegian or a Pakistani name, the direct effect of ethnic background on job interview offers is isolated. Hence, the experimental approach offers a direct measure of ethnic discrimination in hiring processes.

The field experiment leaves little doubt that descendants of immigrants indeed suffer from discrimination in the access to employment in Norway: For the study in total, the probability of receiving a job interview offer is reduced by 25 per cent for the minority applicant compared to the equally qualified majority applicant. However, there are important differences within these overall results. For example, the discrimination rates are larger in the private sector than in the public sector, and there are significant differences across the
occupations included in the study. These variations indicate that there are different processes of exclusion occurring at different locations in the labour market, pointing to the need for context-sensitive interpretations of the results from field experiments.

In the second part of the study, in-depth interviews with forty-two of the employers subjected to research in the experiment explores how, when and why the ethnic background of job applicants comes to matter in decision-making processes. Supplementing the field experiment with employer-interviews rests on a theoretical assumption that the field experimental literature has been too concerned with single-factor explanations at the individual level, acknowledging that although the experiment suggests a causal relationship between ethnic background and employment opportunities, there are several ways in which a discriminatory outcome may be produced.

Indeed, the interviews suggest the need for multi-level explanations. At the individual level, many employers use fixed images of the ‘immigrant’ when assessing the quality of applicants with foreign names, regardless of whether the applicants are of the first or second generation. As economic models of statistical discrimination assume that employers use accurate depictions of the average productivity among different groups when considering job applicants, and there in fact are large differences in group-productivity between the generations, the tendency to equate a foreign name with stereotypes attached to the immigrant experience support social-psychological research on stereotypes and biases in recruitment.

However, the interviews also point to the relevance of explanations at the organisational level. The qualitative ‘tracing’ of recruitment processes reveals what seems to be an interaction between the context of employment and the outcome of hiring decisions, indicating that means of bureaucratisation (e.g. formalised recruitment procedures limiting the room for employers’ discretion) may serve as a lever against discrimination in hiring. These results are in line with insights from organisational-level theories of workplace inequality, and illustrate the relevance of combining field experiments with qualitative methods to better grasp the factors shaping labour market opportunities in modern societies.

The dissertation consists of two main parts. The first part is an introductory chapter, presenting the main objective of the thesis and previous research on ethnic discrimination, as well as reflecting on the theoretical, methodological, and ethical underpinnings of the study. The second part consists of four scholarly articles. The first article reviews important methodological debates within the field experiment literature and presents the particular research design of this study. The three next articles discuss the main empirical findings and their theoretical implications.