



## Exploring Lived Experiences of Fairness and Transparency in Algorithmic Hiring

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### ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence is transforming recruitment, with algorithmic hiring systems now central to organizational decision-making. While fairness and transparency are widely debated, existing studies emphasize technical performance rather than lived human experiences. This study addresses this gap by exploring how candidates and recruiters perceive and interpret fairness and transparency in algorithmic hiring, and how these perceptions influence trust. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants experienced in algorithmic hiring. Analysis revealed four themes: algorithmic opacity, contested fairness, ambivalent trust, and emotional strain. These findings show that fairness in algorithmic hiring is not merely a technical construct but a lived, interpretive phenomenon shaped by emotion and context. The study's novelty lies in reframing algorithmic fairness through the lens of human experience, emphasizing the need for human-centered AI design and transparent communication to enhance trust and dignity in recruitment.



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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into organizational processes has transformed the way decisions are made in professional and social domains. Among these developments, algorithmic hiring has emerged as one of the most significant applications of AI, offering employers a means of managing large volumes of applications with efficiency and consistency (Grabowska et al., 2025). This phenomenon reflects broader social and technological shifts in which human judgment is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems, reshaping not only recruitment practices but also the lived experiences of individuals seeking employment.

The relevance of this transformation extends beyond technical efficiency, as it profoundly intersects with questions of fairness, trust, and human dignity (Kourogrou, 2025). For job candidates, the hiring process is not merely a procedural step toward employment but a deeply personal and meaningful experience, carrying emotional, psychological, and social implications (Mukhlis, 2025a). For recruiters, reliance on algorithmic systems introduces both opportunities and dilemmas, as they balance efficiency with responsibility for equitable outcomes. Within this context, perceptions of fairness and transparency become central, shaping not only acceptance of these technologies but also broader trust in organizational practices and social institutions.

These developments highlight a pressing need to explore the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals directly affected by algorithmic decision-making. While technical studies have examined performance metrics, bias mitigation, and system accuracy, less attention has been given to how people experience, interpret, and internalize the outcomes of algorithmic processes (Amazige, 2025). A phenomenological approach is therefore warranted, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experience, uncovering the meanings and emotional realities that cannot be fully

captured through quantitative assessments alone (Mukhlis, 2025b). Such inquiry provides valuable insights into the human dimension of technological change, ensuring that innovation remains aligned with the social values and lived realities of those it seeks to serve.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within algorithmic hiring has increasingly become a significant area of inquiry (Wight et al., 2025). As algorithmic decision-making reshapes recruitment practices, understanding how candidates and recruiters perceive fairness, transparency, and trust has emerged as a central concern for both scholars and practitioners (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The subjective dimension of these experiences highlights the importance of moving beyond technical evaluations of algorithmic accuracy toward a more holistic understanding of how individuals make sense of and respond to algorithmic outcomes.

Yet, methodological challenges persist in capturing these experiential dimensions. Much of the existing literature has relied on quantitative frameworks that prioritize measurement of algorithmic performance or statistical fairness metrics (Rodgers et al., 2025). While valuable, such approaches often overlook the deeper psychological, emotional, and interpretive meanings embedded in candidates' and recruiters' encounters with algorithmic (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Quantitative measures, by design, tend to abstract and generalize, making them ill-suited to reveal the nuanced, personal narratives that shape human engagement with technology.

These limitations render many previous research methods insufficient for grasping the full essence of the phenomenon. Without attention to the lived experiences of those directly affected, the complexity of fairness and transparency in algorithmic hiring remains only partially understood (Ma & Saadati, 2025). A phenomenological approach offers a way to address this gap, enabling a focus on the subjective accounts of participants and revealing the meanings that underlie their interactions with algorithmic decision-making systems (Abdul Rahman et al., 2025). By centering on participants' voices, this approach provides a pathway to uncovering the experiential truths that cannot be accessed through technical analysis alone.

Existing approaches to addressing fairness and transparency in algorithmic hiring have largely relied on practical solutions such as the development of technical fairness metrics, bias mitigation strategies, and regulatory guidelines (Sattar & Yusoff, 2025). While these methods are valuable for improving system performance and compliance, they remain limited in their ability to capture the deeper experiential dimensions of how individuals encounter and interpret algorithmic decision-making (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Such solutions primarily operate at the surface level of outcomes, emphasizing measurable indicators without attending to the subjective meanings and lived realities of those affected.

This reliance on technical frameworks has resulted in a partial understanding of the phenomenon, one that overlooks the psychological, emotional, and interpretive aspects of candidates' and recruiters' experiences. As (Rakha & Woudsma, 2025)observed, research that does not engage with participants' personal narratives risks producing knowledge that is descriptively accurate but experientially shallow (Haxhija & Geliş, 2025). Without attending to these lived dimensions, the phenomenon of algorithmic hiring cannot be fully understood in its social and human complexity.

A more holistic approach is therefore needed one that moves beyond surface-level evaluation to examine the essence of experience as it unfolds in participants' own terms (Zhang & Wu, 2025). Phenomenology offers this alternative, enabling an exploration of the meanings individuals assign to fairness, transparency, and trust when interacting with algorithmic hiring systems (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). By prioritizing subjective accounts and interpretive depth, this approach addresses the existing gap in knowledge and contributes to a more comprehensive and human-centered understanding of algorithmic decision-making.

Previous studies have examined algorithmic hiring from the perspectives of fairness metrics, transparency challenges, and social implications (Dinika, 2025). Research has shown that while algorithms can reduce human bias, they may also reinforce hidden inequalities and create new barriers for candidates (Bonello et al., 2025). Some scholars have explored candidates' perceptions, but these studies often remained descriptive and lacked interpretative depth (Jones et al., 2025). The literature

therefore highlights the importance of understanding how individuals experience algorithmic hiring as a personal and social phenomenon (Vellinga-Dings et al., 2025). This study builds on these insights by focusing on lived experiences rather than technical outcomes.

To address this gap, this study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach. This method was chosen to capture the meanings that candidates and recruiters assign to fairness, transparency, and trust in algorithmic hiring systems (Crockett et al., 2025). The interpretative orientation enables the exploration of participants' narratives in ways that go beyond surface descriptions (Briggs et al., 2025). By applying this approach, the study responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier, which emphasized the lack of experiential depth in existing research (Mukhlis et al., 2024). The findings are intended to provide a richer and more human-centered understanding of algorithmic decision-making.

The article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the background, research gap, and objectives of the study (Warmoth et al., 2025). The methods section explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures (Hansen, 2025). The results section presents the themes that emerged from the data, supported by direct quotations (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Sarma & Hu, 2025). Finally, the conclusion highlights the contributions, limitations, and implications for future research and practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of candidates and recruiters engaging with algorithmic hiring systems. Phenomenology was chosen as the design due to its capacity to capture the subjective essence of human experiences, enabling an in-depth examination of how individuals perceive fairness and transparency in algorithmic decision-making. The interpretative orientation, informed by Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy, emphasized not only the description of experiences but also the interpretation of their underlying meanings within a broader social and organizational context. This design was deemed appropriate to address the research question, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of how algorithmic processes are internalized and experienced by those directly affected.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of both job candidates who had undergone algorithmic hiring processes and recruiters who utilized such systems in organizational contexts. Selection was guided by purposive sampling to ensure that individuals had direct and meaningful engagement with the phenomenon. Inclusion criteria required candidates to have applied for positions within the last two years where algorithmic tools were used for screening or assessment, and recruiters to have experience in employing algorithmic hiring platforms as part of their recruitment practice. Exclusion criteria applied to individuals without direct interaction with algorithmic hiring systems.

The final sample comprised twelve participants: seven job candidates (four female and three male, aged between 24 and 36 years) and five recruiters (three female and two male, aged between 29 and 42 years). This distribution ensured the diversity of perspectives while maintaining a focused exploration of the phenomenon. All participants had relevant backgrounds in sectors where algorithmic recruitment tools were actively implemented, including technology, finance, and human resources.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich narratives about participants' experiences. An interview guide was employed, structured around key themes such as perceptions of fairness, trust, emotional responses, and experiences of transparency. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participant preference, with each session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure a comfortable and open environment, interviews were conducted in private settings where confidentiality could be maintained. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues relevant to the interpretation of the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic multi-stage process. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and familiarity. Second, meaning units were identified and coded to capture significant statements reflecting participants' lived experiences. Third, codes were clustered into emergent themes that represented shared patterns across participants. Fourth, themes were refined through iterative comparison and reduction to ensure that only the essential aspects of experience were retained.

The process was supported by qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated the organization and retrieval of codes but did not replace the interpretative work central to phenomenological inquiry. The final themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative that captured both the commonalities and divergences in participants' experiences, reflecting the essence of how fairness and transparency were perceived in algorithmic hiring.

## **RESULTS**

### **Experiencing Opacity in Algorithmic Decisions**

Participants consistently expressed a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity regarding how algorithmic hiring systems evaluate their applications. Many described the process as a "black box" in which they had little to no visibility over how decisions were made.

As one participant vividly explained, "It feels like I'm trying to communicate with a machine that refuses to answer. You just send your data, and then—nothing. You're left guessing what went wrong."

One participant reflected:

"I submitted my application and got an immediate rejection. I kept wondering was it my skills, my resume format, or something else the algorithm didn't like? I felt like I wasn't given a fair chance to show my potential."

This layering of confusion and frustration underscores how opacity disrupted participants' sense of control and fairness. Recruiters, too, echoed this tension, acknowledging that "the system decides faster than we can explain it," revealing their limited capacity to justify algorithmic outcomes to candidates.

### **Perceptions of Fairness and Unfair Advantage**

A central theme across participants' accounts was the perception of fairness. Candidates often felt that the algorithm privileged certain profiles, while disadvantaging others in ways that were not always visible.

One candidate remarked:

"I had the impression that the system preferred very standardized CVs. If you don't fit the mold, you're automatically filtered out. It feels like the algorithm already decided who is 'worthy' before a human ever looked at my experience."

This perception of structural unfairness was reinforced by others who described feeling "invisible to the system," suggesting that fairness was not only about equal treatment but also about being seen and recognized.

Recruiters confirmed this concern, noting that while algorithmic tools were designed to reduce bias, in practice they sometimes amplified pre-existing inequalities. As one recruiter stated:

“We rely on the algorithm to speed things up, but I can see how it might overlook unconventional but highly capable candidates. In that sense, fairness becomes a tricky issue.”

Together, these reflections reveal a shared anxiety that fairness in algorithmic hiring is contingent, negotiated, and often undermined by the opacity of machine judgment.

### Negotiating Trust in Technology

Trust emerged as a significant factor shaping participants’ experiences. For some candidates, the use of AI in hiring created skepticism and reduced their trust in the fairness of the process. Others, however, saw the system as a safeguard against human subjectivity.

One participant explained:

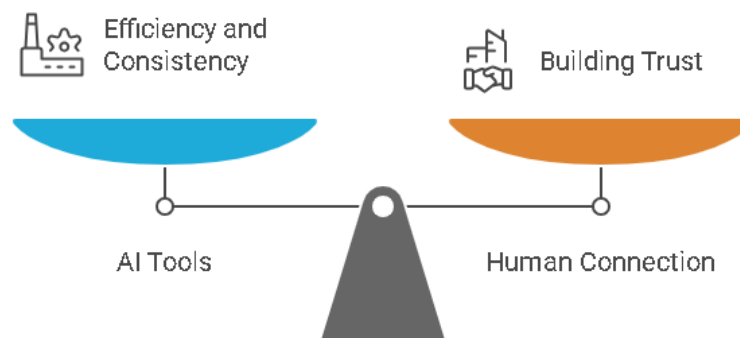
“At least with the algorithm, I thought maybe there would be less favoritism or nepotism. But when I realized I couldn’t understand the logic behind the decision, my trust decreased.”

Another candidate added, “It’s strange—I trust technology in many areas of my life, but not when it’s deciding my career. There’s no empathy in the process.”

Recruiters echoed similar ambivalence. While they valued the efficiency and consistency of AI tools, they also recognized the difficulty of building trust with candidates who felt excluded by opaque decision-making processes.

As one recruiter expressed, “We want to appear innovative, but when candidates question the system, we struggle to give answers that sound human.” This highlights a paradox between technological credibility and human connection in trust formation.

### Balancing AI Efficiency with Human Trust in Recruitment



### Emotional Burden of Algorithmic Evaluation

Candidates described strong emotional reactions to being assessed by an algorithm rather than a human. Feelings of depersonalization, frustration, and even helplessness were frequently reported.

As one participant noted:

“It was demoralizing. I felt like a number, not a person. The rejection felt harsher because there was no human feedback just silence from the system.”

Another participant captured this sentiment poignantly, saying, “The algorithm doesn’t just reject you; it erases you. There’s no space for explanation or redemption.”

Recruiters also observed the emotional toll on candidates and expressed concerns about how algorithmic decisions affected candidates’ perceptions of the organization.

One recruiter admitted, “We notice candidates withdrawing emotionally after automated rejections. It impacts how they see our company—as cold, distant, and mechanical.”

These narratives demonstrate that emotional labor is an overlooked dimension of algorithmic hiring, where both candidates and recruiters grapple with the human cost of efficiency.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study revealed that participants' experiences with algorithmic hiring are shaped by feelings of opacity, contested perceptions of fairness, ambivalence toward trust, and the emotional burden of being evaluated by an algorithm (Hanshaw, 2025). These findings respond directly to the central research question by uncovering how candidates and recruiters interpret and give meaning to the processes of fairness and transparency in algorithmic decision-making.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The findings demonstrate that perceptions of algorithmic hiring extend far beyond technical performance and accuracy; they are deeply rooted in participants' lived experiences of fairness, trust, and identity (Ilako et al., 2025). Candidates' narratives emphasized the uncertainty of being assessed by opaque systems, where their value was reduced to data points rather than holistic representations of their capabilities. Recruiters acknowledged these tensions, highlighting the paradox of using AI for efficiency while struggling to ensure equitable outcomes (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). These insights provide a nuanced answer to the research question by showing that fairness and transparency are not only technical constructs but also existential experiences that influence candidates' trust in organizations and recruiters' professional integrity (Almeida et al., 2025). The contribution of this study lies in its ability to reframe algorithmic fairness as a lived phenomenon, offering a perspective that is often overlooked in technical and policy-oriented debates.

### **Connection with Previous Literature and Theory**

The findings align with and extend previous studies that identified fairness and transparency as central concerns in algorithmic decision-making (Anderson et al., 2025). Similar to (Maldonado et al., 2025) critique of algorithmic hiring systems, this study confirmed that opacity undermines trust, particularly when explanations are absent or inaccessible. However, by focusing on lived experience, the study advances beyond descriptive accounts of bias to reveal the emotional and interpretive dimensions of participants' encounters with AI. The sense of depersonalization described by candidates resonates with broader theories of technological mediation, where human experiences are shaped and sometimes diminished by algorithmic logic. At the same time, the ambivalence expressed by recruiters complements prior findings by highlighting the dual role of technology as both a facilitator and a constraint in professional practice (Du Toit, 2025). This alignment with and extension of existing research demonstrates the importance of phenomenology for capturing the subjective realities behind algorithmic fairness debates.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry important implications for both scholarly and professional contexts. From a social perspective, the participants' experiences demonstrate that algorithmic hiring is not merely a technical innovation but a phenomenon that reshapes individuals' sense of fairness, trust, and professional identity (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The emotional burden described by candidates highlights the risk of depersonalization when human agency is replaced by algorithmic processes, raising questions about organizational accountability and ethical recruitment practices. For recruiters, the ambivalence between efficiency and fairness underscores the need for transparent design and the inclusion of human oversight to balance technological capabilities with ethical responsibility (Rodela et al., 2025). Beyond recruitment, these insights may be extended to other areas where algorithmic decision-making intersects with personal and professional lives, indicating the broader societal relevance of understanding fairness and transparency as lived experiences.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study was conducted with a relatively small group of participants, reflecting the depth-oriented nature of phenomenological inquiry but limiting the generalizability of the results to broader populations. The focus on specific sectors, such as technology and finance, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across other industries where algorithmic hiring is applied. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported narratives, while essential to phenomenological analysis, may be influenced by memory,

perception, or situational context (Addyman, 2025). These limitations do not undermine the validity of the study but suggest caution in extrapolating the findings universally. Instead, they provide a foundation for future research to test, expand, and refine the interpretations offered here.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Future research can build on these findings by exploring lived experiences of algorithmic decision-making in diverse cultural and organizational contexts (Ben-Shlomo et al., 2025). Comparative studies across industries and countries would offer valuable insights into how fairness and transparency are differently perceived depending on social norms and professional practices. Longitudinal approaches may also help reveal how trust and acceptance evolve as candidates and recruiters continue to engage with algorithmic systems over time (Cattagni et al., 2025). Additionally, integrating phenomenological perspectives with interdisciplinary approaches such as critical algorithm studies or organizational ethics would deepen the understanding of how subjective experiences connect with systemic and structural issues. Such research holds the potential to inform both the academic discourse and practical guidelines for the responsible implementation of AI in recruitment and beyond.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the lived experiences of candidates and recruiters in relation to fairness and transparency within algorithmic hiring systems. The findings revealed that participants often experienced opacity, contested perceptions of fairness, ambivalence toward trust, and emotional strain when engaging with algorithmic decision-making. These insights extend beyond technical evaluations by highlighting the social and psychological dimensions that shape acceptance or rejection of algorithmic processes. The study addresses a key gap in the literature by reframing algorithmic fairness as a lived phenomenon rather than a purely technical construct.

Practically, the findings suggest that organizations should prioritize explainability and communication in AI-driven recruitment. This includes providing candidates with clear feedback about decision criteria, enabling recruiters to interpret algorithmic outputs, and ensuring that fairness metrics align with human-centered values. Developers and HR managers are encouraged to adopt participatory design approaches, where both candidates and recruiters are involved in evaluating and refining algorithmic systems. Training programs that enhance recruiters' literacy in algorithmic decision-making can further bridge the gap between human and machine judgment.

For policymakers and regulators, the results underscore the need for transparent audit mechanisms and ethical standards that hold organizations accountable for algorithmic decisions affecting employment opportunities. In conclusion, this study contributes to a more human-centered understanding of AI in recruitment by linking fairness and transparency to emotional and interpretive experiences. It provides actionable pathways for designing ethical, transparent, and trustworthy hiring systems. Future research could expand these insights by exploring diverse cultural contexts and longitudinal perspectives to deepen the understanding of algorithmic fairness as an evolving social experience.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and the funding sponsor had no influence on the design of the study, the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, or the decision to publish the findings.

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