

PERCEIVED WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION BY SOUTH AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS IN CHILE: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY IN A LARGE SAMPLE

Discriminação percebida no local de trabalho por imigrantes sul-americanos no Chile: um estudo quantitativo em uma grande amostra

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Abstract

South American immigrants in Chile constantly suffer workplace discrimination, which is usually related to different variables that are inherent to their immigration process. The objective of this article was to evaluate perceived workplace discrimination by South American immigrants in Chile. A cross-sectional design with a descriptive scope was used, where the final sample was made up of 612 South American immigrants of legal age who have been living in the country for more than a year. The results indicate that immigrants who perceive more discrimination in the workplace are those who mainly interact with foreigners from a third nationality. Finally, the discussion is presented, contrasting the results with the theoretical framework, weaknesses and strengths of the study are analyzed, and future lines of research are suggested.

Keywords: contact theory; perceived discrimination; south-south migration.

Resumo

Os imigrantes sul-americanos no Chile sofrem constantemente discriminação no local de trabalho, que geralmente está relacionada a diferentes variáveis inerentes ao seu processo de imigração. O objetivo deste artigo foi avaliar a discriminação percebida no local de trabalho por imigrantes sul-americanos no Chile. Utilizamos um desenho transversal com escopo descritivo, em que a amostra final foi composta por 612 imigrantes sul-americanos maiores de idade que residiam no país há mais de um ano. Os resultados indicam que os imigrantes que percebem mais discriminação no local de trabalho são aqueles que interagem principalmente com estrangeiros de uma terceira nacionalidade. Por fim, apresenta-se uma discussão, contrastando os resultados com o referencial teórico, analisando os pontos fracos e fortes do estudo, e sugerindo futuras linhas de investigação.

Palavras-chave: teoria do contato; discriminação percebida; migração sul-sul.

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Introduction¹

Chile transformed in the last ten years as a recipient country with a high immigrant population (Roessler *et al.*, 2022). Most of these people come from other South American countries and hope to find a job that will improve their quality of life (Gissi, Andrade, 2022).

According to the latest official government estimate, there were a total of 1,482,390 immigrants residing in Chile as of December 2021, a figure that implies an increase of 12.34% compared to December 2018 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas [INE], Servicio Nacional de Migraciones [SERMIG], 2022). These migrants, who are predominantly South American, are concentrated in the Metropolitan Region, and their national origin is mainly Venezuelan (30%), Peruvian (16.6%), and Colombian (11.7%) (INE, SERMIG, 2022).

The increase in immigration has generated different negative manifestations among the national population, with discrimination being the most prominent expression of Chileans towards foreigners in Chile (Centro Nacional de Estudios Migratorios [CENEM], 2019). According to Mera-Lemp *et al.* (2020), this type of negative behavior is a risk for immigrants to meet their goals and develop their skills, especially when discriminatory actions make it difficult for them to access minimum living conditions and to exercise their rights. Discrimination against foreigners in Chile tends to focus on certain nationalities but always with an emphasis on South American immigrants (Tijoux, 2019).

Various studies have explained why the national population discriminates against immigrants, concluding that this is mainly based on immigrants perceived as competition in the employment market (Carmona-Halty *et al.*, 2018; Mera *et al.*, 2017). This belief, generalized in Chilean society, makes it easier for South American immigrants to suffer discrimination at work (Berríos-Riquelme, 2021).

Several reports evidenced that immigrants recognize that their workplace is the primary place where they suffer discrimination (CENEM, 2019; World Bank [WB], SERMIG, Centro UC, 2022). The immigrant population explains these negative attitudes as valid discrimination, arguing that they occupy jobs that belong to Chileans (Berríos-Riquelme, 2021; Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes [SJM], 2022).

The literature in Chile on perceived discrimination by immigrants in their jobs is currently scarce, especially considering the exponential increase in migration in the country during the last ten years. The relevance of addressing this issue arises from the fact that South American immigration is a migratory flow that has remained constant in the last ten years, and official estimates indicate that it will continue in this line (INE, SERMIG, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to know which are the main groups affected by discrimination in the workplace to promote plans that allow the labor integration of these groups. Consequently, this article aims to evaluate perceived workplace discrimination by South American immigrants in Chile.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section reviews the literature on labor discrimination perceived by South American immigrants in Chile, analyzing the sociodemographic variables that have been most studied in the country. The second section describes the methodology and reports the results. The findings are discussed in the third section, and suggestions for future research are presented.

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Perceived workplace discrimination by South American immigrants in Chile

Perceived discrimination is understood as the immigrants' ability to recognize aggressive behavior and unfair treatment due to belonging to a specific group (Berríos-Riquelme *et al.*, 2022). The perceived employment discrimination will be understood on this basis as the derogatory, offensive, denigrating, and abusive treatment that an immigrant perceives in their workplace. Workplace discrimination against immigrants is considered dangerous because these experiences negatively impact well-being, insertion, and adaptation in their insertion process (Urzúa *et al.*, 2018; Urzúa *et al.*, 2019).

In Chile, workplace discrimination towards South American immigrants is conditioned by the infringement of labor rights by employers (Salgado *et al.*, 2018) and by the existing social construction of the immigrant as a precarious labor force that must endure inhumane treatment and a lower salary than the equivalent of the work they perform to maintain their residence permits (Ambiado *et al.*, 2022). In this context, South American immigrants arriving in the country are often perceived as a labor force inserted in a secondary and precarious labor market (Stefoni *et al.*, 2017) and, for this reason, are victims of labor exploitation and discrimination (Berríos-Riquelme, 2021).

Studies of perceived discrimination have shown that it varies according to the immigrants' origin (WB, SERMIG, Centro UC, 2022). Qualitative studies reveal the type of labor discrimination perceived by the main nationalities of South American immigrants in Chile; for example, Rico and Leiva-Gómez (2021) found that immigrants from Bolivia suffer discrimination, especially from their employers who mistreat them and do not respect their working hours. Meanwhile, Berríos-Riquelme (2021) and Salgado *et al.* (2018) evidenced that immigrants from Venezuela perceive that their employers and clients discriminate against them. Similarly, Mora and Undurraga (2013) found that immigrants from Peru are discriminated against because they are considered phenotypically different; because of this, they are poorly treated and have various problems accessing labor mobility. Regarding Colombian immigrants, Silva *et al.* (2018) stated they suffer from labor abuse, where they receive less salary than established in workdays that exceed the maximum legal allowed and are forced to accept the situation, given that they need to send remittances to their relatives who are in their country of origin. When considering the different negative labor experiences of South American immigrants in their jobs, it is possible to hypothesize that there will be differences in perceived labor discrimination according to the immigrants' nationality.

Furthermore, it is also possible to find evidence of perceived discrimination according to the sex of immigrants, where women who work in the area of commerce and services often suffer discrimination from their coworkers and clients (León, 2014). It has also been found that the female population is frequently discriminated against by their female employers when performing caregiving labor, where mistreatment would be explained by the intersectionality of class, gender, and ethnicity (Garcés-Estrada *et al.*, 2022). Guizardi and Garcés (2012) explain this by pointing out that in Chile, migrant women are thought to be suitable only for domestic or caregiving tasks, which makes it easier for them to be victims of discrimination by the national population. For these reasons, the evidence points out that migrant women perceived more discrimination than men in all social spheres (Berríos-Riquelme *et al.*, 2023; SJM, 2022). Considering these data, it is hypothesized that women will perceive higher employment discrimination than men.

Regarding the administrative situation of immigrants, there is little evidence of the reality of those in an irregular situation in Chile. Regarding this issue, *Ambiado et al.* (2022) state that although being in a regular administrative situation would allow for better working conditions, this will not guarantee better treatment before the organization or with the employer itself. Nevertheless, international evidence suggests that immigrants in an irregular administrative situation will perceive a higher level of discrimination in their jobs, which will be determined by the working conditions they must accept and which leave them in a vulnerable condition (*Purkayastha et al.*, 2023). Thus, it is hypothesized that immigrants in an irregular administrative situation will perceive higher occupational discrimination than immigrants in a regular administrative situation.

The contractual status of immigrants has been one of the least studied variables in Chile's workplace discrimination field. The importance of exploring these possible differences rests on the fact that the type of contract held by immigrants is an indicator of the differences in the health status of this population (*Sousa et al.*, 2010). In Chile, there are two types of contracts: a) indefinite, a document that establishes the contractual relationship without a termination date, and b) fixed-term, a document that establishes the contractual relationship for a specific period with specific functions. In this sense, the type of contract the immigrant has could influence how they are treated, considering that this is a fundamental requirement to maintain the residence permit (*Ambiado et al.*, 2022; *Stefoni et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the contractual relationship of immigrants without a labor contract is related to employers saving the payment of social security, and it is known that, faced with the need for dismissal, the employer will not have more significant economic or social costs (*Stefoni et al.*, 2017). Thus, it is hypothesized that immigrants with a working relationship not regulated by a labor contract will perceive higher employment discrimination than those under a contractual type of employment.

The contact between immigrants and the local population is a variable that has gained importance in studies on discrimination, considering that the type of sustained intergroup relationship is a factor that would explain the perception of negative or positive experiences (*Pettigrew et al.*, 2011). According to contact theory, negative attitudes towards immigrants will decrease the greater the closeness between immigrants and nationals (*Pettigrew, Tropp*, 2008). This fact is explained because, under certain conditions, contact would improve the perception of the immigrant community, decreasing the indices of negative attitudes of the national population towards immigrants (*Pettigrew, Tropp*, 2006). The experiences of discrimination in this sense will be more challenging for those immigrants who do not have friends from the larger group (*Herda*, 2018). Regardless of the previously mentioned, the reality of intergroup contact is that it is usually negative due to exclusion processes, as is the discrimination perceived by immigrants in their work environment. Thus, it is possible to hypothesize that individuals who have Chilean friends will perceive less labor discrimination.

The current study

This study evaluated perceived labor discrimination by South American immigrants in Chile. The importance of this study lies in knowing which groups are most affected by this phenomenon. Consequently, the main variables present in the literature (nationality, sex, administrative situation, type of contract, and contact) were considered but have been scarcely studied from a quantitative approach to date. The present research aims to fill this gap in the literature through the following hypotheses:

- There will be differences in perceived employment discrimination according to the nationality of the immigrants.
- Women will perceive higher employment discrimination than men.
- Immigrants in an irregular administrative situation will perceive higher employment discrimination than immigrants in a regulated administrative situation.
- Immigrants who have a contractual arrangement that is not regulated by an employment contract will perceive higher employment discrimination than immigrants who do have a regular employment contract.
- People who have a closer relationship with Chileans will perceive less employment discrimination.

Methodology

Through a non-experimental design, cross-sectional research was carried out with a descriptive approach and a non-probabilistic sample (Frías-Navarro, Pascual-Soler, 2022). The fieldwork was conducted between the second semester of 2017 in the Tarapacá region and the first months of 2018 in the Metropolitan region. Through incidental sampling, the surveys in the Tarapacá region were obtained on beaches, recreational spaces, fairs, and waiting rooms of public services; meanwhile, the surveys in the Metropolitan Region were applied in an NGO that works with the migrant population. The inclusion criteria were the following: a) Immigrant of South American origin, b) Have been living in Chile for more than one year, and c) Being of legal age.

Participants

A total of 818 surveys were administered. Participants with missing values were deleted from the total number of participants, and those who were not working at the time of answering the document were also eliminated. Thus, the sample was composed of 612 South American immigrants residing in Chile, where the main nationalities were Peruvian (29.9%), Colombian (25.3%), Bolivian (22.4%), and Venezuelan (22.4%). Table 1 presents the primary sociodemographic data of the sample.

Table 1 - Sample characterization by sociodemographic variables

Variable	PN		BN		CN		VN		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Region										
Tarapacá	91	14,8	116	18,9	65	10,6	35	5,7	307	50,1
Metropolitana	92	15	21	3,4	90	14,7	102	16,6	305	48,8
Sex										
Women	88	14,3	82	13,3	57	9,3	65	10,6	292	47,7
Men	95	15,5	55	8,9	98	16	72	11,7	320	52,2
Administrative Situation										
Regularized	127	20,7	81	13,2	107	16	121	19,7	436	71,2
Not regularized	56	9,1	56	9,1	48	7,8	16	2,6	176	28,7

Contract											
Indefinite	55	8,9	27	4,4	44	7,1	79	12,9	205	33,4	
Fixed-term	63	10,2	50	8,1	51	8,3	31	5	195	31,8	
No contract	65	10,6	60	9,8	60	9,8	27	4,4	212	34,6	
Main contact											
Chileans	18	9,8	20	14,6	12	7,7	21	15,3	71	11,6	
Foreigners from their country	93	50,8	68	49,6	85	54,8	64	46,7	310	50,7	
Foreigners from other countries	72	39,3	49	35,8	58	37,4	52	38	231	37,7	

Source: Author's elaboration. PN: Peruvian nationality; BN: Bolivian nationality; CN: Colombian nationality; VN: Venezuelan nationality.

Instruments

The general questionnaire was developed in the context of a project on migration in Chile. For the present article and considering its general objective, a battery of sociodemographic questions was selected to characterize the participants (nationality, sex, administrative status, type of contract, and contact) and the subscale of perceived workplace discrimination of the Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire - Community Version (Brondolo *et al.*, 2005). The subscale is Likert-type with four items: Have other employees treated you unfairly at work? Have people thought you could not do things or perform your job? Have you been treated unfairly by your co-workers? Has your supervisor or employer been unfair to you? All items are in the same direction and have values fluctuating between Never (1), Sometimes (2), and Always (3). Considering the value of the items, the range of scores can vary from 4 to 12 points, where a higher score implies more significant perceived job discrimination. The internal consistency of the scale used is acceptable according to the values of Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = .763$) and McDonald's Omega ($\omega = .774$).

Procedure

The Ethics Committee of the principal investigator's institution approved the current study. The voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality and use of the data were explained at the time of the invitation to answer the questionnaire to comply with all national regulations related to protecting the integrity of the participants. Subsequently, the informed consent form was given for reading, approval, and signature. The questionnaires were answered autonomously in paper and pencil format by the participants, but with a team member present in case there were any doubts.

The information from the questionnaires was transferred to a database developed in the Jamovi software (The Jamovi project, 2021). First, the sociodemographic data were analyzed considering the relevant statistics for the research; then, to identify possible statistically significant differences between groups, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were performed. The one-way ANOVA was complemented with Tukey's post-hoc test to identify statistically significant differences between groups.

Results

The first variable analyzed was nationality, showing no statistically significant differences in perceived discrimination at work according to the country of origin of the migrants $F(3, 604) = 2.51, p = .058$. Nevertheless, it is possible to report that the immigrants who perceive more discrimination at work are those from Venezuela ($M = 5.96, SD = 1.61$), followed by those from Peru ($M = 5.87, SD = 1.75$), Bolivia ($M = 5.54, SD = 1.93$) and Colombia ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.50$). Thus, the hypothesis that there will be differences in perceived employment discrimination according to the nationality of the immigrants is rejected.

Regarding differences by gender, it was found that women ($M = 5.84, SD = 1.87$) perceive higher levels of work discrimination than men ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.55$); however, these differences were not statistically significant ($t(606) = -1.40, p = .161$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is maintained regarding this variable.

When analyzing employment discrimination perceived by the administrative situation of the participants, it was found that immigrants in a non-regularized situation perceive higher employment discrimination ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.84$) than immigrants in a regular situation ($M = 5.73, SD = 1.66$). These differences were not statistically significant ($t(606) = -.08, p = .935$). Consequently, the hypothesis that immigrants in an irregular administrative situation will perceive higher employment discrimination than immigrants in a regular administrative situation is rejected.

Statistically significant differences were observed when analyzing the perceived employment discrimination according to the type of contract held by the immigrants $F(2, 605) = 7.05, p < .001$. Tukey's post-hoc test was used to determine the differences between groups. Those who perceive higher discrimination are those who have an employment status regulated by a permanent contract ($M = 5.92, SD = 1.90$), statistically significantly different from those who work with a fixed-term contract ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.48, p = .003$), but not statistically significantly different from those who work without a contract ($M = 5.90, SD = 1.90, p = .990$). Likewise, it was observed that there were statistically significant differences between people who had an employment relationship with a fixed-term contract and those who worked without a contract ($p = .004$). Therefore, the hypothesis that immigrants holding a non-regulated working arrangement will perceive higher employment discrimination than immigrants holding some regulated employment is partially accepted.

Statistically significant differences were found regarding perceived job discrimination according to the nationality of the people with whom the immigrant relates $F(2, 605) = 18.6, p < .001$. Applying Tukey's post-hoc test, it was found that immigrants who relate mainly with foreigners of a third nationality are those who perceive more significant discrimination at work ($M = 6.25, SD = 1.71$), differing statistically significantly from immigrants who relate mainly with Chileans ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.78, p = .017$) and with those who relate mainly with their nationals ($M = 5.37, SD = 1.57, p < .001$). Finally, there were no statistically significant differences between people who interacted mainly with Chileans and people who interacted mainly with immigrants from their country of origin ($p = .454$). According to these results, it is possible to partially accept the hypothesis that people with a closer relationship with Chileans will perceive a lesser degree of discrimination in the workplace.

Discussion

This study assessed perceived labor discrimination by South American immigrants in Chile. The results will allow us to answer the research hypotheses to describe which groups of South American immigrants perceive higher levels of workplace discrimination.

Statistically significant differences were found in perceived workplace discrimination according to the type of contract, where the immigrants who perceive more discrimination are those who work under a permanent contract, followed by those who work without a contract, and in last place, those immigrants who work under a fixed-term contract. It is plausible that immigrants who work under a permanent contract must endure humiliating treatment because they need this contractual relationship, which Chile requires as a condition for obtaining and maintaining a residence permit (Ambiado *et al.*, 2022). Regarding people who work without a contract, it could be explained because they perform their labor in the informal market and, thus, must endure long working hours where they receive vexatious treatment and exploitation (Garcés-Estrada *et al.*, 2022; Stefoni *et al.*, 2017). Concerning the results of immigrants working on a fixed-term agreement, a tentative explanation would be that they have been in the host society longer and would no longer need a contract to maintain their residence permit. Another explanation might be that they work with their compatriots or in an ethnic enclave. In this context, the contact with the domestic population is sporadic, and as a result, they perceive less employment discrimination. Both hypotheses are put forward so that they can be complemented from a qualitative perspective.

Regarding the contact variable, those who perceive higher discrimination are immigrants who associate primarily with other foreigners, followed by those who maintain contact mainly with Chileans, and finally, immigrants who interact with individuals from their country of origin. According to the literature, those with little contact with Chilean people and those from their country are at serious risk of being marginalized in the host society (Koops *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is understandable that this group is the one that perceives the highest labor discrimination. Subsequently, immigrants with significantly more contact with Chileans were placed on perceived employment discrimination; this is consistent with the literature, given that intergroup friendships with nationals would be a critical factor in reducing the perception of negative attitudes (Herda, 2018). In third place are positioned immigrants who maintain contact with peers of the same nationality, which would indicate that this is a strategy that protects them from discriminatory attitudes of the host society; however, this population is at risk of suffering separation from the receiving community.

Regarding the hypotheses for which no statistically significant evidence was found, it is possible to point out that although in Chile, migrant women perceive significantly higher discrimination than men, gender would not be a factor that would explain the differences in perceived discrimination in the work environment, nor would the administrative situation of the immigrants. The differences by nationality could be explained by the homogeneous social construction of the South American immigrants in Chile, and their nationality would not matter in the labor sphere, considering that they are seen as a labor force that comes to perform functions that Chileans reject (Veloso *et al.*, 2023).

These research findings contribute to knowing which are the variables that would explain the labor discrimination perceived by South American immigrants in Chile, providing valuable information to implement interventions addressing the reality of severely affected groups. Thus, the most essential variables to work on would be the contract status and the immigrants' associations.

Regarding the first variable, there is an immediate need for a migration policy that favors the integration of South American immigrants, given that the current policy makes their residence permit conditional on a labor contract, which facilitates discrimination towards immigrants in their jobs (Ambiado *et al.*, 2022). Regarding the second point, it is necessary to have qualitative evidence to complement the type of contact established at work, differentiating the accounts by boss, colleagues, and clients; the positive and negative experiences will vary according to the nature of the context where the interaction is established (Koops *et al.*, 2017). Collectively, these data will be valuable for technocrats in charge of elaborating migration and labor policies, considering that the most affected groups by labor discrimination have been identified. This point is essential if the aim is to stop seeing the immigrant as a labor force and to propitiate a context that favors the integration of South American immigrants in Chile.

Although the findings of this research have been valuable for the study of perceived workplace discrimination by South American immigrants, it is necessary nonetheless to point out some inherent limitations in the development of the work with this population. The first limitation is the selection of participants, which was determined by its sampling method. Therefore, the sample does not represent all South American immigrants residing in the country. Consequently, any final data generalization or interpretation should consider this point. The second limitation is the degree of contact used, given that it does not allow establishing whether the interaction is at work or in other environments; however, the findings provide the first indications for understanding the importance of this variable for studying labor discrimination among South American immigrants in Chile. Despite these weaknesses, it is essential to point out how complex it is to carry out this type of research, resulting from the difficulty of accessing the sample, the time required for fieldwork, and the number of participants that are necessary to recruit, especially considering that this is a population that is difficult to access.

Among the strengths, it is possible to assert that this is a pioneering large-scale investigation to address labor discrimination perceived by South American immigrants in Chile. The second strength is the valuable information provided on the variables that would make it possible to distinguish which groups are most affected by this reality in the country. A third strength is the large number of participants, which is very difficult to achieve in studies of this type.

The analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this research provides the basis for studying the labor discrimination perceived by South American immigrants, facilitating future initiatives that seek to generate evidence to improve the labor integration of South American immigrants in Chile.

Future research in the area could be complemented from qualitative perspectives with the findings of the present research, investigating why the type of contract and relationship are variables that explain the differences in perceived labor discrimination. Furthermore, it might be desirable that the levels of perceived workplace discrimination be analyzed in conjunction with other psychosocial variables, such as the level of integration, acculturation strategies, or the well-being of immigrants in the host society. Finally, evaluating a possible interaction with other measures that could moderate or mediate perceived job discrimination is suggested.

Acknowledging and making visible the labor discrimination of South American immigrants in Chile is of paramount importance, considering that it is a social and structural problem that requires the attention of all the sectors involved. Therefore, continuing in this line of research will allow the development of policies and programs that will favor the labor integration of South American immigrants in Chile.

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