

Commentary: Some Thoughts on Field Experiments on Housing Discrimination From a European View

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Discrimination violates the basic human right of equal treatment, adopted, for example, in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations in 1948. Discrimination is without doubt a threat against the cohesion in a society and leads to the exclusion of people. The international human rights law also recognizes everyone's right to adequate housing and standard of living. Furthermore, having a home is a fundamental need, which is necessary to be an integrated part of society on equal terms. Housing discrimination, therefore, concurrently violates two fundamental human rights and is a severe problem for any society.

One question that naturally arises when discussing housing discrimination is, "Who has access to what housing and why?" In any country, if city maps are marked on the basis of this question, clear ethnic and racial dividing lines will soon emerge. That racial and ethnic majority and minority populations, figuratively speaking, live in different physical worlds is particularly evident in most larger cities throughout the world. Socioeconomic models and individuals' own residential choices and preferences have often been put forward as possible explanations for the ethnic and racial residential segregation. Yet, these explanations have their deficiencies and do not tell the whole story. Scholars, therefore, recognize the role of housing discrimination in generating and maintaining ethnic and racial residential segregation as central.

To combat housing discrimination, we need to have knowledge of its extent, how it manifests itself, and how it can best be countered. Researchers and various organizations in the United States have systematically accumulated such knowledge by using field experiments for several decades. The most appealing feature of these field experiments is that they provide clear and indisputable evidence of housing discrimination. The current symposium in *Cityscape* contains pertinent and updated contributions concerning field experiments on housing discrimination in the United States. The articles in the symposium provide a complete background and overview of this research, a thorough discussion of the methodological challenges and problems, and a detailed discussion of future developments and directions. In this brief commentary, I share a few thoughts related to field experiments on housing discrimination from a European perspective, inspired by the articles in this symposium.

Research involving field experiments on housing discrimination in European countries was first conducted during the 1960s and 1970s (Bovenkerk et al., 1979; Daniel, 1968; McIntosh and Smith, 1974). Since then, however, this powerful methodology has not been used to its full extent. Only recently have researchers in European countries picked up where the original studies left off. Why is it that field experiments have not been used to the same degree in European countries as they have been in the United States? Let me start by addressing this question. As Margery Austin Turner and Judson James mention in their introduction to the symposium, the two main reasons for conducting field experiments on housing discrimination in the United States are (1) to expose and document discrimination in the housing market and (2) to enforce housing discrimination laws (Turner and James, 2015). The lack of field experiments in European countries is related to these two purposes and the associated methodology.

For the purpose of exposing and documenting discrimination in the housing market, field experiments have long been considered to be unethical by many European scholars, because the methodology involves the use of deception. At most, two types of deception may occur, depending on the experimental design chosen by the researcher (Riach and Rich, 2004). The methodological differences between the various types of field experiments are discussed in the excellent review article by Sun Jung Oh and John Yinger in this symposium and, therefore, will not be repeated here.

First, deception of research subjects will always occur, regardless of the experimental design. Field experiments on housing discrimination involve introducing fictitious applicants to the housing market. Real estate agents are deceived in the sense that they are engaged with individuals who do not actually want to buy or rent. Hence, real estate agents are never given the opportunity to give their consent in these experiments on discrimination. Most researchers find this type of deception acceptable nowadays, even in European countries. As Riach and Rich (2004: 463) put it, "In summary, the justification which we offer for the deception of subjects in field experiments of labour, housing and product markets is that a lack of veracity is endemic in these markets; that great harm is done to the social fabric by discriminatory practices in such markets; that minimal inconvenience is imposed on the entrepreneurs in the experiment, and that the technique provides evidence with a degree of accuracy and transparency which is not available from any other procedure." Still, not long ago, I recall that when a colleague and I conducted the first field experiment on discrimination in the Swedish housing market and we published our preliminary results, we were bombarded with criticism, claiming we had violated the ethical code of practice for research in Sweden by using the field experimental methodology to prove discrimination (Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2008).

Second, deception of testers occurs if field experiments on housing discrimination involve personal attendance at real estate offices, and testers recruited for the experiments are unaware of the hypotheses of the studies. The idea of keeping testers ignorant of the study purpose was proposed by Heckman and Siegelman (1993) to avoid experimenter effects. Although deception of real estate agents is regarded as acceptable nowadays, deception of testers is considered unethical. For instance, Riach and Rich (2004) argued that deception of testers cannot be justified because it may do harm when testers ultimately become aware of the true purpose of their involvement in the study and because researchers have viable alternatives to this type of experimental design, such as correspondence testing experiments. This argument explains why nearly all field experiments on

housing discrimination in European countries have been correspondence tests (see, for example, Ahmed, Andersson, and Hammarstedt, 2010, 2008; Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2009, 2008; Andersson, Jakobsson, and Kotsadam, 2012; Baldini and Federici, 2011; Bosch, Carnero, and Farré, 2010).

Oh and Yinger (2015) discuss the practice of using field experiments with bogus applicants to enforce antidiscrimination laws and prepare court cases against alleged discriminators in the United States. This type of application of field experiments is controversial in many European countries (De Schutter, 2003). Court cases based on field experimental-like evidence are, however, becoming more common; for example, in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom, where evidence based on experimental tests has been used (Rorive, 2009). Many of these examples, however, involve contexts other than the housing market. According to Rorive (2009: 47), the main criticism against using field experimental-like evidence for law enforcement is that “it does not correspond to the principle of fairness of evidence; it could amount to provocation to commit a crime and it threatens the right to respect for private life.” Hence, the critics view experimental tests on discrimination as a form of entrapment.

From my point of view, several European countries should adopt the practice of using field experimental evidence in court and take advantage of the experiences of the United States. In Sweden, for example, the Discrimination Act protects people from unequal treatment, and an authority—the Equality Ombudsman—ensures the law is followed. If someone has been discriminated against, he or she can report it to the Equality Ombudsman. The problem, however, is that the Equality Ombudsman faces difficulties in proving that discrimination has occurred. According to a report from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2012), only 1 percent of all complaints to the Equality Ombudsman regarding discrimination based on ethnicity or religion results in a lawsuit in Sweden. That figure demonstrates that the Discrimination Act and the Equality Ombudsman currently are merely symbolic and that European countries need powerful tools to enforce the Discrimination Act.

The article by Fred Freiberg and Gregory D. Squires in this symposium highlights the fact that housing discrimination is changing its nature and has become subtler in recent years. In line with these changes, the authors explore how field experiments can be refined to more effectively identify housing discrimination (Freiberg and Squires, 2015). I am in total agreement with the authors in this respect, and I find the authors’ ideas for expanding the use of field experiments refreshing. In line with these ideas, I will share a Swedish example of how field experiments on discrimination can be extended to get a deeper understanding of discrimination. Although Rooth (2010) studied labor market discrimination, I believe a similar methodological approach could be applied to the housing market. Rooth (2010) examined the relationship between implicit attitudes against minorities and discriminatory behavior in a real hiring situation. He first conducted a traditional field experiment on discrimination in the Swedish labor market and then approached the responsible recruiters at each firm, asking them to participate in an implicit association test (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz, 1998). In a nutshell, this test offers the researcher a way to probe unconscious biases. Rooth (2010) found the stronger the unconscious biases recruiters had, as measured by the implicit association test, the lower the probability was that the recruiters would invite the minority

applicant for a job interview. This kind of experimental refinement may both capture subtle forms of discrimination and give a better understanding of various underlying mechanisms of discrimination.

Two articles in this issue of *Cityscape* discuss how field experiments on discrimination can be extended to include protected classes other than ethnic and racial minorities. Claudia L. Aranda gives a concrete example of how exactly field experiments can be used to document discrimination against people who are deaf or hard of hearing and people who use wheelchairs. She elaborates on the difficulties involving designing an experiment for testing disability discrimination and then presents the results of a recent study. She found that people who are deaf or hard of hearing and people who use wheelchairs all face barriers in the housing market (Aranda, 2015). It is interesting to compare these findings with a very recent European study on disability discrimination in the housing market. Fumarco (2015) focused on whether blind tenants assisted by guide dogs are discriminated against in the Italian rental housing market. By contrast with the American study, Fumarco (2015) relied solely on correspondence tests and on a randomized design; that is, only one inquiry was sent to each real estate agent. One out of three possible potential tenants—a married couple, a married couple in which the wife was blind and had a guide dog, and a married couple with a dog—was randomly assigned to each real estate agent. His results showed that some real estate agents discriminated against the blind tenants because of the presence of the guide dog, not because of the disability.

Margery Austin Turner suggests in her article ways of extending the estimates on housing discrimination to an additional three protected classes: families with children; lesbian, gay, and transgender homeseekers; and renters using housing vouchers. Along this line, I would like to add another protected class: elderly people. A field experiment in the Swedish labor market, for instance, provided clear evidence of ageism (Ahmed, Andersson, and Hammarstedt, 2012). It is, therefore, reasonable to hypothesize that age discrimination might exist in the housing market as well. Of course, complexities are involved in designing an experiment for testing age discrimination, and we may not be able to address all three questions Turner (2015) poses in her article as a guideline for designing an experiment for other protected classes. Nonetheless, attention to the circumstances of the elderly population is of utmost importance. The growing elderly population is one of the biggest social and economic challenges for our societies in the future. This development will affect most policy areas, housing being one of them.

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