Paper presentation

Abstract title: The context of employment discrimination: Interpreting the finding from a field experiment

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Abstract:
Extensive research efforts in the last decades have documented the continuing prevalence of racial and ethnic discrimination in several market domains and across a substantial number of countries. While few sociologists and economists interested in experimental research seem to disagree on the fact that discrimination occurs, there is not a similar consensus on which theoretical approaches that best captures the dynamics of contemporary discrimination. Rather, there seems to be two parallel and often almost mutually exclusive discussions: Most economists discuss whether differential treatment should be explained by racial animus or statistical discrimination, and sustain as such the assumption that discriminatory practices are both intentional and conscious. Many sociologists have on the other hand been influenced by recent evidence from laboratory experiments on implicit or unconscious discrimination, drawing on social psychological theories of automatic categorization and stereotyping processes when assessing the causes of discrimination. Despite the disagreement of the degree in which discriminatory actions are constituted by consciousness and rationality, both economic and social psychological perspectives have a tendency to reduce the question of discrimination to individualistic explanations, leaving less room for more sociologically oriented discussions of when and under what conditions race and ethnicity come to matter. In this paper, I address the current debates on what causes discrimination by providing a contextual approach to the analysis of ethnic discrimination in employments. I present the main empirical
findings from a multi-method research project in the Norwegian labour market, where a field experiment of ethnic discrimination reveal that the probability of receiving a callback for job applicants with foreign sounding names compared to applicants with Norwegian names are reduced on average by 25 per cent. Because field experiments may provide strong evidence of the existence of discrimination but are far less convincing in assessing the mechanisms explaining why discrimination occurs, the experiment was supplemented by 42 qualitative in-depth interviews with a selection of employers that were subjected to the fictitious job applications in the experiment. The rich qualitative materiel questions the initial causal inferences one would draw on the basis of a single field experiment, and documents the multifaceted nature of contemporary employment discrimination. These findings have important implications for the scholarly discussion on the causes of discrimination, as well as for future debates on the development of social politics and antidiscrimination legislation.