Dissertation Assessment: Essays on Information and Discrimination

In this document, I provide my assessment of the Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Essays on Information and Discrimination" by Darya Korlyakova, which has been submitted to Charles University.

General overview

The thesis, "Essays on Information and Discrimination," comprises three closely interconnected chapters that employ large-scale online experiments to investigate the causes and consequences of discrimination in various domains. Each chapter is well-written and adheres to the best practice methods prevalent in the literature on survey experiments and information provision experiments in economics. The empirical analysis of the experimental results is transparent and sound, and it is commendable that all experiments are pre-registered in the AEA RCT registry. The candidate conducts extensive robustness checks in the supporting materials and demonstrates high attention to detail in her experimental designs.

The thesis utilizes large samples, focusing on nationally representative samples or underrepresented groups, and is a significant addition to the growing body of literature that employs information provision experiments to study beliefs and choices, particularly in the context of discrimination. Throughout the thesis, the candidate showcases her ability to address important questions in the discrimination literature using experimental and survey methodology. She also connects her results to both theory and policy, demonstrating a strong understanding of the broader implications of her findings and how they fit into the wider literature on discrimination.

In the subsequent assessment of the individual chapters, I will provide brief summaries of each chapter and suggest some potential improvements to further enhance the quality of this already impressive work.

Comments on individual chapters

Chapter 1: Learning about Ethnic Discrimination from Different Information Sources

Summary
The first chapter of the thesis explores 1) whether misperceptions about ethnic discrimination affect policy attitudes towards minorities, 2) which information sources people seek when learning about ethnic discrimination, and 3) which information source people update most from when the choice of information source is exogenous.

The candidate employs large-scale survey experiments in the Czech Republic to answer these questions. The author uses many of the modern best-practice tools in information provision experiments, including behavioral measures, obfuscated follow-up studies, as well as ways to mitigate potential confounds such as numerical anchoring.

In line with previous work, she finds that people significantly update their beliefs about the extent of ethnic discrimination in response to exogenously provided information. Unique to the study, she also documents that people update their beliefs about ethnic discrimination more when provided information from experts compared to laypeople. In line with previous studies, she also finds that people's policy views are unresponsive to the information. She also provides a discussion about how her findings relate to influential theories such as accuracy concerns and belief confirmation. The conclusion also highlights implications for policy.

Assessment and comments for improvements
This is an excellent chapter that only requires minor modifications. The experimental design is state-of-the-art, the empirical analysis is sound, and the write-up of the results is excellent. Below I list some specific comments that could potentially improve the paper, but are not essential:

1. The paper has many results that connect very well with the broader literature on policy views, but much of the motivation of the paper is to differentiate between different theories of information acquisition. In my view, the biggest contribution of the paper is learning more about how people inquire about information and form their beliefs and attitudes and less about "theory testing". The design does not provide a clear way to differentiate between different theories (such as accuracy concerns and belief confirmation) unless you impose very strong assumptions. For some problems, such as getting news from a politically aligned source, it is perhaps more clear that there is a trade-off between accuracy concerns and belief confirmation motives. The social distance theory

discussion is nice in this regard, but without a clear political or ethnic dimension to the problem, I am not sure how relevant these concerns are. I would thus consider placing less emphasis on theory testing in the introduction and conclusion of the paper.

2. In result 1, I would rather discuss how beliefs relate to the true number rather than the source estimate. How beliefs relate to the source estimate is important to understand treatment heterogeneity, but in result 1 it would be nice to document the extent of misperceptions instead.

3. In the conclusion, the candidate frames her results as providing reasons for both "optimism" and "pessimism". I think the normative stand distracts from the broader message and I would encourage the candidate to use a more neutral language for summarizing the results.

Chapter 2: Do Pessimistic Expectations About Discrimination Make Minorities Withdraw Their Effort? Causal Evidence

Summary

The second chapter of the thesis explores whether correcting misperceptions about discrimination against African Americans affects their effort choices as well as a willingness to pay for race-blind allocation and cheating on a test. The main results are 1) that information provided leads to large updating about the extent of discrimination (respondents think it is less likely that they will be discriminated against in a competitive task), 2) if anything, reduced perceptions of discrimination leads to lower effort in the competitive environment, and 3) there are no impacts on willingness to pay for race-blind allocation or willingness to cheat in the reporting.

Assessment and comments for improvements
In this chapter, the author provides evidence on a very important, yet understudied, question, namely whether beliefs about discrimination affect effort provision. This connects to a broader concern in the discrimination literature about whether "self-fulling prophecies" can lead to an equilibrium in which minorities provide less effort because they anticipate discrimination. The candidate is right that we lack experimental evidence on whether minorities reduce their effort when they anticipate discrimination, and solid experimental evidence on this question is very welcome. It is impressive to have a large sample size of African Americans and a carefully designed experimental set-up in this context.

Below I list some specific comments that could potentially improve the paper, but are not essential:
1. Provide more details about the sample of white respondents who served as the benchmark for the information provided. How representative are they? Should we think of the information as something that is mainly used for constructing exogenous variation in beliefs or something that also allows us to characterize the extent of misperceptions in a rigorous way?
2. You don't find that positive news about discrimination makes minorities less willing to pay for race-blind allocation of earnings. This is somewhat puzzling and requires a more extended discussion. How can you rationalize this finding? Open-ended responses about the reasoning behind the choices could have been interesting in this setting.
3. This is a static setting and many of the consequences of discrimination are dynamic. It would be interesting to study dynamic effects and it might be good to caveat the findings a bit more in terms of external validity.

Chapter 3: Discrimination in Disclosing Information about Female Workers: Experimental Evidence

Summary
The third chapter of the thesis explores discrimination in hiring with a focus on communication between hiring team members. An HR assistant evaluates eight profiles and chooses which information to disclose to a manager who can then hire the workers. The authors manipulate whether each worker profile features a male or female name (as well as whether the name is foreign or not). The main result of the paper is that the assistants are less likely to disclose work-related information and more likely to disclose demographics for female candidates. Specifically, they are more likely to disclose information about marital status and the number of children if a worker has a female name. Interestingly, the effect is driven by males.

Assessment and comments for improvements
In this chapter, the author provides evidence of discrimination in an important domain, namely hiring, and adds to an important body of work showing that discrimination often takes subtle forms. The experimental design and analysis of the data are sound, and the results are transparently presented. The fact that assistants put more emphasis on family-related information for females

could be a significant barrier to female labor force participation and work outcomes.

Below I list some specific comments that could potentially improve the paper, but are not essential:

1. Several outcomes (such as ethnic discrimination and the results of the managers' survey) are not analyzed in the paper, and a more complete analysis of the results would improve the paper.
2. The survey instructions include some open-ended questions on what guided their information selection and what they tried to achieve with the informational selection. A careful examination of these responses (which ideally all should be hardcoded in line with an appropriate coding scheme) would be very interesting and add a lot to the paper.

Concluding remarks

This is an excellent thesis with three related papers that all offer novel insights from carefully designed experiments.

The thesis clearly satisfies formal and content requirements for a Ph.D. thesis in economics. I, therefore, recommend the dissertation for a defense.

Ingar Haaland, May 16, 2023