Title
Review: *Measuring Racial Discrimination* edited by Rebecca Dabady, Marilyn Citro, and Constance Forbes

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Measuring Racial Discrimination edited by Rebecca Dabady, Marilyn Citro, and Constance Forbes. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2004. 317 pp. ISBN 0-309-53083-0

Measuring Racial Discrimination is the product of a larger National Research Council project designed to better understand the role of race in America. The book considers the definition of race and racial discrimination, reviews the existing techniques to measure racial discrimination, and identifies areas for future research. The Committee on National Statistics (part of the National Research Council of The National Academies), with the support of the Ford Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Education, convened a panel of interdisciplinary scholars. The resulting text, edited by Rebecca Dabady, Marilyn Citro, and Constance Forbes, builds a conceptual foundation for the empirical exploration of racial discrimination in America.

A clear agenda undergirds the work. The authors continually remind readers that "large and persistent outcome differences" (p. 5) do not "themselves provide direct evidence of the presence or magnitude of racial discrimination" (p. 5). The methodological challenge to these experts is to develop data sets, research designs, and data analysis techniques upon which one is able to draw causal inferences. As stated by the authors, measuring discrimination requires researchers to answer the "counterfactual" question: "What would have happened to a nonwhite individual if he or she had been white" (p. 77)? Answering this question, according to the authors, is fundamental to providing policy makers with conclusive evidence that race-based discriminatory behaviors or processes cause persistent differential outcomes.

This book will be of great interest to two main audiences—researchers with a particular content interest in racial discrimination and methodologists interested in the inherent challenges associated with such a complex and multidimensional topic. That being said, the text more generally will appeal to any student researcher attempting to establish a basic methodological framework. However, it is important to note what this book is and what it is not. The book details research methodologies in the service of future public policy. To some readers, couching race and racial discrimination in such terms may seem heartless and septic. That argument certainly has merit. And there are also those who believe the search for causal inference is not a worthwhile or meaningful task. Yet, given the current legislation that mandates certain levels of evidence in educational research, the authors' set of concerns has consequences for this particular policy context. Therefore, a reader must accept – or at least tolerate – reduction of complex social processes to variables in order to participate in a larger conversation.

The book is organized into three parts. Part I, entitled "Concepts," provides a historical and theoretical overview of race and racial discrimination in America. The authors reject a biological definition of race in favor of defining race as a social-cognitive construct—a perception mediated by the social environment. The panel is concerned with persistent differential outcomes in five domains—labor markets, education, housing/mortgage lending, criminal justice, and health care. Part II, entitled "Methods," provides an overview of the overarching methodological concern for causal inference and it details four methods used across social and behavioral disciplines to measure racial discrimination, laboratory experiments, field experiments, analysis of observational data and natural experiments, and the analysis of survey and administrative record reports. Each of the methods is primarily discussed in terms of drawing causal inferences. The final chapter of Part II provides a discussion of specific issues regarding methods and data relevant to research efforts in the area of racial profiling—a particular form of racial discrimination. The extended treatment of this topic serves to provide a detailed example of the difficulties related to the research topic. Part III, entitled "Data Collection and Research," identifies "priority areas" (p. 204) for research and data collection. The chapter details the federal government standards for collecting data on race and ethnicity as well as the measurement issues that affect reporting of race and ethnicity. The authors also highlight the concept of cumulative discrimination, discrimination over time, and across domains, as an important consideration in future research projects.

Due to the efficient and detailed coverage of the research process, particularly in Chapter 9, "An Illustration of Methodological Complexity: Racial Profiling," the authors provide a grounded sense of the thought and creativity behind high-quality research. The authors logically walk readers through careful and thorough defining of the interest area, construction of the research problem, determination of design, and exhaustive searching for competing hypotheses, so that stronger evidence for causal claims can be established. Furthermore, the authors argue that once a researcher establishes "the existence of racially disparate outcomes" then the "difficult analytical challenge" is to determine the extent to which racial discrimination explains the "measured disparities" (p. 195).

Beyond an informative overview of general research practice, the text provides a knowledge check or review of the major methods used in the social and behavioral sciences. Technical discussions of particular methodologies are framed within research purposes and are consistently linked to real-world application examples. Each and every equation is explained in words. Several tables provide readers with comprehensive resources. The book also makes use of the textbook-like technique of setting off detailed case studies of relevant material. The recommendations made by the authors at the end of each methods

chapter provide intellectual food for thought regarding questions/topics that warrant further analytical exploration.

Since causal inference is the primary concern of the authors, the methodological hierarchy in the social and behavioral sciences is explained in great detail. It is hard to find a better overview of this kind of methodological thinking than what is contained in this report. Moreover, the authors' insistence upon having an "appropriate model of the process" at work behind racial discrimination and their argument for "clearly articulated and justified assumptions" highlight the importance of sustained and multi-method research (p. 196).

The panel works to carefully build the case that more comprehensive data and powerful statistical tools than those currently used are needed to determine whether differential outcomes by race are, in fact, attributable to racial discrimination. The authors state "it is possible to provide a stronger argument for causal inference by combining methods" (p. 85). Yet, despite the ink dedicated to the discussion of how the accumulation of evidence through multiple studies can infer causation, the authors fail to provide a detailed conceptualization of how methods are integrated within a single research project to inform and strengthen each component. With one exception, all examples of mixed-method research contain independent studies only related through meta-analysis. In the conclusion, studies of the well-being of low-income families following major changes in welfare policy are mentioned in passing. However, this is the only example in which one gets the sense that quantitative and qualitative methods were integrated to inform the underlying models, assumptions, and justifications of the overall research.

This book is dense, but digestible and productive. The treatment of causal inference, while very much tied to racial discrimination, easily translates to other research projects where one cannot directly manipulate the variable of interest. Furthermore, the consideration of statistical probability in such endeavors is refreshing and useful. Given current methodological discussions regarding causal inference in educational research, this book is an excellent primer in thinking about such purposes. The quality and sophistication of the discussions presented in this book are inspiring. As a researcher-in-training, it is a stimulating and worthwhile activity to map your own skills and interests onto the work and ideas presented in this volume in order to gain a relative perspective of how your work fits into the larger social science research community.

Reviewer

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