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Measuring multiple discrimination through a survey-based methodology

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the concept of multiple discrimination and its measurement through survey methods. The study was designed as a quasi-experimental comparison of survey mode effects on the quality of discrimination measurement: the traditional 'face-to-face' survey, the conventional self-completed mode and CAWI (finally deleted due to its non-comparability). Consistent with our hypothesis, some support was obtained for the social desirability bias and survey mode effects: 1) self-administration of questionnaires favours the declaration of discriminatory attitudes and personal experiences of discrimination; 2) the effect of privacy is greater in direct indicators of discriminatory attitudes; 3) perceptions and experiences of discrimination are more frequently reported by highly educated respondents. Nevertheless, contrary to our expectations, less educated respondents are also affected by survey mode and continue to be underrepresented in self-completed methods. The current research aims to serve as a basis for further research in this area.

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1. Introduction

The term 'multiple discrimination' describes the specific situation when a person belongs to more than one disadvantaged group and thus experiences forms of discrimination of a more complex and severe nature than those subject to discrimination on a single ground (ENAR, 2007). A better understanding and more comprehensive action on multiple discrimination has been a recurring concern. Its importance for public policy was highlighted in the Beijing platform Action for Equality, Development, and Peace, set up by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and it has since been recognized explicitly within several EU policy documents and legislation (Burri and Schiek, 2008; Carles and Jubany-Baucells, 2010). The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, along with the Racial Equality and Employment Framework Directives of 2000, and the declaration of 2007 as the European Year of Equal Opportunities, all focused attention on issues of inequality and discrimination, and on multiple discrimination in particular. To the extent that they have been successful, these legislative initiatives have likely shaped perceptions of personal discrimination, as well as individuals' understanding of discrimination more generally (Harnois, 2015, p. 7). From the perspective of the social and legal sciences, the detection and measurement of this form of discrimination constitute a particular problem. As stated, 'these are the most difficult forms to detect because even though people may be vulnerable to discrimination for different reasons (for being a woman and also an immigrant; being an

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immigrant and having a disability; being black and gay, etc.), in order to establish whether this form of discrimination exists it is important to confirm that discrimination occurred for at least two different reasons' (MSSSI, 2014, p. 35).

This paper focuses on the measurement of multiple discrimination by survey methodology, although there are a number of other approaches to determine the existence of discrimination, such as the analysis of statistical imbalance or experiments. Using large-scale datasets, researchers can identify systematic disparities between groups and chart their direction over time. Important patterns of discrimination can be detected (Petersen and Saporta, 2004) and possible consequences of discrimination analysed. Nevertheless, the main liability of this approach is that it is difficult to effectively account for the numerous factors relevant to unequal outcomes, leaving open the possibility that the disparities we attribute to discrimination may in fact be explained by some other unmeasured cause(s). This leads several authors to question their reliability (Pager and Shepherd, 2008; McGinnity and Lunn, 2011), since the differences may be due to incomplete measuring.

Because of the methodological difficulties of measuring discrimination, works of sociology and economy are now displaying a growing interest in field experiments as a method of empirical research into labour market discrimination (Nelson and Probst, 2004; Riach and Rich, 2006) or when renting a house: differences in the outcome for equivalent candidates point to discrimination. Experimental approaches to measuring discrimination excel in exactly those areas where statistical analyses flounder. Experiments allow researchers to measure causal effects more directly by presenting carefully constructed and controlled comparisons. However, societies are multi-ethnic and people's membership is categorised in everyday life on the basis of various attributes (such as gender, age, and ethnicity) at the same time. Discrimination should therefore be studied against a more complex and realistic background (Carlsson, 2010) and experiments suffer from some important limitations. Critiques of the audit methodology have focused on questions of internal validity (e.g., experimenter effects; the problems of effective tester matching), generalizability (e.g., the use of overqualified testers, the limited sampling frame for the selection of firms to be audited), and the ethics of audit research (Heckman, 1998; Pager, 2007).

Self-reported data represents an alternative method of measuring multiple discrimination. It allows to analyse multiple grounds of discrimination, perceptions, prejudices, stereotypes and sociodemographic profiles (background) simultaneously. The weakness of this approach is whether or not it is possible to validly measure the occurrence of discrimination based on the experiences of targets. The vulnerability of survey data to several errors of non-observation and measurement (Groves, 1989; Biemer and Lyberg, 2003; Cea D'Ancona, 2004) leads to questioning the validity and reliability of survey data. This depends on who you ask, who responds, what is asked, in which order, how and when.

In this paper we explore the attitudinal and behavioural approach to assess multiple discrimination based on self-reported data through survey research. It offers main results from the MEDIM project, a project aimed to work out a conceptual framework for multiple discrimination; to explore the main axes of discriminatory discourse (through focused-biographical interviews and group discussions with natives and foreigners in Spain), and indicators and survey method that better measure both overt and subtle discrimination. Specifically, this paper is aimed at two **main objectives**:

- 1) To propose indicators for measuring blatant and subtle discrimination. We conceptualize discrimination as a complex system of social relations involving actions, subtle or overt, 'that serve to limit the social, political, or economic opportunities of particular groups' (Fredrickson and Knobel, 1982, p. 31). Discrimination may be either direct or indirect, and may have both short- and long-term consequences (Bobo and Fox, 2003). Contemporary forms of discrimination, however, are often subtle and covert, posing problems for social scientific conceptualization and measurement.
- 2) To provide evidence of which survey method measures multiple discrimination most effectively. The study attempts to check whether, as has been previously supported (Krysan, 1998; Heerwegh and Loosveldt, 2007; Kreuter et al., 2008; Krumpal, 2013), self-administration favours the declaration of negatively assessed behaviours, opinions and attitudes. This has been one of the most consistent findings in survey mode comparisons. Item non-response and the quality of the answers (cognitive efforts and social desirability) are also closely related to the accuracy and relevance of the information retrieved.

As De Leeuw et al. (2008) have stated, different survey modes have different ways of contacting potential respondents; they may result in different rates of contact or cooperation (non-observational errors); and may also lead to different answers to survey questions (observational or measurement errors). The study was designed as a quasi-experimental comparison of the effects of survey modes on the quality of discrimination measurement: the traditional 'face-to-face' survey, the conventional self-completed mode and CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview). Major **hypotheses** were as follows:

- 1) Self-administration favours the declaration of personal experiences of discrimination, due to the condition of greater anonymity. Based on the fact that people tend to deny or minimize their personal experiences of discrimination to maintain a positive self-image and a personal perception of control over events (Dumont et al., 2006), greater concealment of personal experiences of discrimination is expected when the answer is given to an interviewer (face-to-face survey) than when the respondents themselves answer the questionnaire (self-administered survey).
- 2) Privacy provided by self-completion has a greater effect on direct indicators of discriminatory attitudes (related to prejudices etc.) than on indirect ones (i.e. questions measuring the perception of discrimination and concerning anti-discrimination policies). In the direct indicators, a greater difference is expected between the responses collected through face-to-face and self-completion surveys, as the respondents can more easily intuit what interpretation will be

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