



On the social inappropriateness of discrimination

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ABSTRACT

We experimentally investigate the relationship between discriminatory behaviour and the perceived social inappropriateness of discrimination. We conjecture that discrimination will be weaker when social norms oppose it. Our results support this prediction. Using a Krupka-Weber social norm elicitation task, we find participants perceive it to be more socially inappropriate to discriminate on the basis of nationality than on the basis of social identities artificially induced using a trivial minimal group technique. Correspondingly, we find that participants discriminate more in the artificial identity setting. Our results suggest norms and the preference to comply with them affect discriminatory decisions and that the social inappropriateness of discrimination moderates discriminatory behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Economic theories seeking to explain discrimination focus on two mechanisms. First, in the presence of incomplete information, profit- or income-maximizing agents use aggregate group characteristics to form statistical beliefs about individual characteristics and then act in accordance with those beliefs by, potentially, treating members of different groups differentially (Arrow, 1972). Second, individuals are assumed to derive direct utility from favouring certain groups relative to others, i.e. they are assumed to have a ‘taste for discrimination’ (Becker, 1957). Such tastes explain why discrimination is observed even in settings where asymmetric or incomplete information is not an issue (e.g. Chen and Li, 2009; Abbink and Harris, 2012). The focus of our paper is on this second form of discrimination, *taste-based discrimination*, and in particular on the psychological foundations of the tastes or preferences for discrimination, which have received remarkably little attention in the literature.

Specifically, in this paper we use experimental methods to investigate whether tastes for discrimination are systematically associated with *social*

norms, i.e. collectively recognised rules of behaviour that define which actions are viewed as socially appropriate within a specific social group.¹ As we discuss further below, there may be a host of factors that shape the tastes for discrimination, including direct altruism towards members of one’s own social group. The key contribution of our paper is to provide evidence that one important taste-shaping factor is a norm-based mechanism that regulates the extent to which actions that favour one’s own group relative to others are regarded as permissible and appropriate. Uncovering this normative component is an important step towards understanding how patterns of taste-based discrimination are shaped.

If social norms moderate the taste for discrimination, the incidence of discriminatory behaviour should positively correlate with beliefs about the appropriateness of discrimination. Similar correlations have been found in relation to other types of economic behaviour. Following Krupka and Weber (2013), lab and lab-in-the-field experiments have shown that in a variety of economic contexts people are more likely to take an action the more socially appropriate they perceive it to be (e.g. Burks and Krupka, 2012 – corporate ethics; Gächter et al., 2013 –

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¹ See Elster (1989) and Ostrom (2000) for definitions of social norms. See Akerlof and Kranton (2000, 2005) for a discussion of the importance of norms for discriminatory behaviour.

gift-exchange; Krupka et al., 2016 – informal contract enforcement; Banerjee, 2016 – bribery). There is also evidence from econometric research (e.g. Buonanno et al., 2009) and natural field experiments (e.g. Allcott, 2011) suggesting norms drive behaviour outside the lab. Thus, in driving behaviour, social norms may effectively substitute for laws (e.g. Huang and Wu, 1994), or may complement them (e.g. Sunstein, 1990; Kübler, 2001; Lazzarini et al., 2004; Posner, 2009; Benabou and Tirole, 2011).

However, a correlation between individuals' beliefs about the appropriateness of discrimination and the prevalence of discriminatory behaviour is a challenge to document empirically using naturally occurring data, not least of all because of the difficulties associated with accurately measuring such beliefs.²

Occasionally, attitudinal surveys include questions that can be interpreted as eliciting respondents' perceptions of the appropriateness of discrimination. For instance, the 2002 wave of the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey asked respondents whether they believed that 'sometimes there is good reason for people to be prejudiced against certain groups'. One can interpret responses to this question as a proxy for the perceived social appropriateness of discrimination. Using this interpretation, we calculated the percentage of residents in each local authority area of Scotland who agreed with the statement. For each area, Fig. 1 plots this variable against the number of racist incidents,³ per 100 non-white residents,⁴ reported to the police in the financial year 2003–4 (Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletin, 2007). A correlation coefficient of 0.27 between the two variables suggests a positive relationship between the social appropriateness of racial discrimination and the incidence of racially discriminatory behaviour, which is consistent with the notion that norms moderate the taste of discrimination.

The acceptability of prejudice-based humour has sometimes been used as a proxy for the normative appropriateness of discrimination (see, e.g., Crandall et al., 2002). Fig. 2 plots, over the period 2004 to 2014, the frequency of Google searches in the US for 'N***** jokes' (we apply the censorship for this paper; the original search term was uncensored⁵), as a proportion of all Google searches in the US (Google Trends, 2016). Searching for racist jokes about black people can be treated as evidence that the searcher perceives discrimination against black people to be socially appropriate. Fig. 2 also plots, on an annual basis over the same period, the number of incidents in the US involving hate crimes motivated by an anti-black bias that were reported to the FBI, per every 100 people living in areas where the hate crimes are reported (United States Department of Justice, 2015).⁶ Both the frequency of anti-black joke searches and the rate of anti-black hate crime incidents declined considerably over the period. This is suggestive of a positive relationship in the US between the change over time in the social appropriateness of discrimination against black people and the change over time in discriminatory behaviour against black people.

In spite of these examples, the paucity of useful naturally occurring data with which to investigate the empirical relevance of norms for discriminatory behaviour advances the case for using experimental methods to address the question. Our paper does this, with an empirical strategy relying on four main elements.

First, we use standard experimental techniques to prime participants to think about particular dimensions of their identities. The

priming aims to trigger a process of social identification by encouraging subjects to identify with half of the participants in their experimental session and not with the other half.

Second, in the decision-making phase of the experiment we ask subjects to distribute a given amount of money between two potential recipients, one an individual sharing their primed identity ('in-group'), the other an individual not sharing their primed identity ('out-group'). This simple allocation task allows us to measure discrimination as the extent to which individuals are willing to favour members of their own social group at the expense of the out-group.

Third, crucially, we exogenously vary the dimension of identity that is primed. We do this across two treatments that we designed to vary the perceived appropriateness of discriminating in favour of the in-group and against the out-group, while holding other aspects of the decision-making context constant.⁷ Under one treatment, social identities are based on nationality; we form groups in the laboratory based on whether participants are British or Chinese. Under the other treatment, social identities are entirely artificial; groups are formed according to the colour of ball that each participant draws blindly from a bag. We expect the norms that mandate how a decision-maker should treat in-groups and out-groups in our experiment to differ across the two treatments. Specifically, we expect discrimination against out-group and in favour of in-group members to be perceived as *less* appropriate when identity groups are formed on the basis of nationality than when they are artificially formed on the basis of the colour of balls randomly picked. Indeed, when identity groups are artificially formed, participants have no directly relevant social norm to which to refer for guidance about the social appropriateness of discrimination. If this is the case, our exogenous manipulation varies the strength of the norm relating to discrimination across our treatments and, if discrimination is systematically shaped by norms, we thus expect discrimination to be stronger between the artificial groups.

Fourth, as well as measuring discrimination, we directly measure the perceived social appropriateness of discrimination in each treatment. We do this by employing the 'norm-elicitation' task introduced by Krupka and Weber (2013), in which participants are described the allocator game and are asked to evaluate the social appropriateness of each and every possible action available to the allocator. We use this norm-elicitation task to construct an incentivized measure of the extent to which participants' perceptions of the appropriateness of discrimination vary across our two treatments and to examine the extent to which these differences in perceived appropriateness translate into differences in discriminatory behaviour in the allocation task.

Our results show that, in both treatments, discriminatory actions are viewed as socially inappropriate. However, as expected, discrimination is perceived to be significantly less appropriate in the nationality treatment compared to the artificial identity treatment. The results of the decision task correlate with these differences in perceived appropriateness: while few participants discriminate in either treatment, discrimination is significantly stronger between artificial groups than between nationality groups. These results are consistent with the notion that the perceived social appropriateness of discrimination varies according to the way identity groups are defined, and this corresponds with individuals' revealed preferences for discrimination.

That discrimination can be observed along a trivial, artificially-induced dimension of identity highlights the strength of the human inclination to discriminate against out-group members, and the ease with which in-group bias can be triggered (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2001). That we observe weaker discrimination when identity is based upon the more meaningful characteristic of nationality, and that such

² See Krupka and Weber (2013) and Mackie et al. (2015) for a discussion of the difficulties of measuring social norms empirically.

³ The Scottish police define a racist incident as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person.' (Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletin, 2007)

⁴ The contemporaneous proportion of non-white residents in each Scottish local area is taken from the 2001 UK Census (National Records of Scotland, 2011).

⁵ We deliberated over our decision to censor the word, but eventually concluded that we felt uncomfortable using it uncensored even in a scientific context. We expect readers will be able to guess the extremely derogatory term describing black people that we refer to.

⁶ We report this, rather than the absolute number of hate crimes, to adjust for the fact that the population covered by the FBI's hate crime statistics varies from year to year. The proportion of black people in the covered population is not available.

⁷ To illustrate the idea that discrimination may be perceived as more appropriate along certain dimensions of identity than others, consider sports or music fandom versus ethnicity or gender. Norms may render it appropriate to discriminate against others who support a different football team or listen to a different type of music, but not appropriate to discriminate against others who are different in terms of ethnicity or gender.

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