Audit Studies: Behind the Scenes with Theory, Method, and Nuance

Table of Contents

Audit Studies: Behind the Scenes with Theory, Method, and Nuance

List of Contributors

Stijn Baert
Tenure Track Professor of Empirical Labour Economics
Ghent University

Ryan Beasley
Computer Scientist
SimQuest Solutions, Inc.

Marc Bendick, Jr.
Bendick and Egan Economic Consultants, Inc.

Max Besbris
Assistant Professor of Sociology
Rice University

William Carbonaro
Associate Professor of Sociology
University of Notre Dame

Frances Cherry
Professor of Psychology
Carleton University

Charles Crabtree
Ph.D. candidate in Political Science
University of Michigan

Jacob William Faber
Assistant Professor of Public Service
New York University

S. Michael Gaddis
Assistant Professor of Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles

Sarah Lageson
Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice
Rutgers University

Joanna Lahey
Associate Professor of Government and Public Service
Texas A&M University

David S. Pedulla
Assistant Professor of Sociology
Stanford University

Peter Rich
Assistant Professor of Policy Analysis and Management
Cornell University

Jon Schwarz
Ph.D. candidate in Sociology
University of Notre Dame

Patrick Sharkey
Associate Professor of Sociology
New York University

Christopher Uggen
Distinguished McKnight Professor of Sociology and Law
University of Minnesota

Mike Vuolo
Assistant Professor of Sociology
The Ohio State University

I. The Theory Behind and History of Audit Studies

Chapter 1
An Introduction to Audit Studies in the Social Sciences
S. Michael Gaddis

An audit study is a specific type of field experiment primarily used to test for discriminatory behavior when survey and interview questions induce social desirability bas. In this chapter, I first review the language and definitions related to audit studies and encourage adoption of a common language. I then discuss why researchers use the audit method as well as when researchers can and should use this method. Next, I give an overview of the history of audit studies, focusing on major developments and changes in the overall body of work. Finally, I discuss the limitations of correspondence audits and provide some thoughts on future directions.

Chapter 2
Making it Count: Discrimination Auditing and the Activist Scholar Tradition
Frances Cherry and Marc Bendick, Jr.

Discrimination auditing can usefully be viewed as part of a tradition of social science activist scholarship since World War II. This perspective suggests that the single-minded pursuit of methodological rigor, especially when reflected in exclusive reliance on documents-based audits, often sacrifices other characteristics historically associated with auditing's unique contributions to societal and scientific advancement. This chapter advocates and illustrates a balanced research agenda in which the most rigorous auditing studies are paralleled by others more directly in the activist scholar tradition.   The hallmarks of that tradition are: in-person testers, the lived experience of discrimination, researcher-community partnerships, and goals beyond academic ones.

Chapter 3
Ethnic Discrimination in the Labour Market: A Register of (Almost) All Correspondence
      Experiments Since 2005
Stijn Baert

This chapter aims to provide an exhaustive list of all (i.e. 90) correspondence studies on hiring discrimination that were conducted between 2005 and 2016 (and could be found through a systematic search). For all these studies, the direction of the estimated treatment effects is tabulated. In addition, a discussion of the findings by discrimination ground is provided.

II. The Basics of Audit Studies: Planning, Implementation, and Analysis

Chapter 4
Technical Aspects of Correspondence Studies

Joanna Lahey and Ryan Beasley

This chapter discusses technical concerns and choices that arise when crafting a correspondence or audit study using external validity as a motivating framework. The chapter discusses resume creation, including power analysis, choice of inputs, pros and cons of matching pairs, solutions to the limited template problem, and ensuring that instruments indicate what the experimenters want them to indicate. Further topics about implementation include when and for how long to field a study, deciding on a participant pool, and whether or not to use replacement from the participant pool. More technical topics include matching outcomes to inputs, data storage, and analysis issues such as when to use clustering, when not to use fixed effects, and how to measure heterogeneous and interactive effects. The chapter ends with a technical checklist that experimenters can utilize prior to fielding a correspondence study.

Chapter 5
An Introduction to Conducting Email Audit Studies
Charles Crabtree

This chapter offers the first general introduction to conducting email audit studies. It provides an overview of the steps involved from experimental design to empirical analysis. It then offers detailed recommendations about email address collection, email delivery, and email analysis, which are usually the three most challenging points of an audit study. The focus here is on providing a set of primarily technical recommendations to researchers who might want to conduct an email audit study. The chapter concludes by suggesting several ways that email audit studies can be adapted to investigate a broader range of social phenomena.

Chapter 6
To Match or Not to Match? Statistical and Substantive Considerations in Audit Design and
Analysis
Mike Vuolo, Christopher Uggen, and Sarah Lageson

In audits, as in all experiments, researchers are confronted with choices about whether to collect and analyze repeated measures on the unit of analysis. In typical social science practice, this decision often involves consideration of whether to send single or multiple auditors to test for discrimination at a site that represents the unit of analysis, such as employers, landlords, or schools. In this chapter, we provide tools for researchers considering the statistical and substantive implications of this decision. For the former, we show how sample size and statistical efficiency questions hinge in large part on the expected concordance of outcomes when testers are sent to the same unit or site. For the latter, we encourage researchers to think carefully about what is gained and lost via matched and non-matched designs, particularly regarding the finite nature of certain populations, resource constraints, and the likelihood of detection in the field. For both approaches, we make recommendations for the appropriate statistical analysis in light of the given design and direct readers to software and code that may be helpful in informing design choices.

Chapter 7
Opportunities and Challenges in Designing and Conducting a Labor Market Resume Study
William Carbonaro and Jon Schwarz

In this chapter, we summarize the results of an audit study that we conducted in the city of Chicago. Our study examined how race, high school credentials, and academic grades were related to call backs for jobs. We briefly describe the design and results of our study, and then discuss numerous broader issues about audit studies. Our main goal is to help researchers who plan to conduct similar studies in the future by highlighting and reflecting upon challenges, obstacles, and unexplored opportunities in our work. We conclude with several recommendations for future researchers who plan to use an audit design to study labor market stratification.

Chapter 8
The Geography of Stigma: Experimental Methods to Identify the Penalty of Place
Max Besbris, Jacob William Faber, Peter Rich, Patrick Sharkey

The United States remains a spatially segregated nation by many measures including race, income, wealth, political views, education, and immigration status. Scholars have, for many years, grappled with questions stemming from spatial inequality and have come to recognize the neighborhood in which an individual lives as a socially organizing unit of space, predictive of many individual-level outcomes. The mechanisms that underlie the relationship between neighborhoods and outcomes for residents, however, remain relatively underexplored. In this chapter, we show how the use of audits and field experiments can help uncover one such mechanism—place-based stigma in social interactions. Specifically, we describe the methodology of a previous study (Besbris et al. 2015) that revealed how signaling residence in a poor community of color negatively affected sellers' ability to attract buyers in a classified marketplace. We focus on the study's operationalization of neighborhoods and show how future research can use non-individual-level treatment characteristics such as units of space. Doing so helps us better understand the causal relationship between space and individual-level outcomes, as well as better parse the effects of individual-level variables versus non-individual-level variables, which are often conflated in non-experimental research. We close by suggesting the implementation of field experiments in testing for effects at other geographic scales, such as metropolitan area, state, region, country, or continent.

Chapter 9
Emerging Frontiers in Audit Study Research: Mechanisms, Generalizability, and Variation
David S. Pedulla

Audit studies have gained popularity in the social sciences, producing important insights about discrimination and bias across a range of social statuses, such as race and gender. Yet, important questions persist about why, when, and where discrimination and bias emerge. In this chapter, I suggest that tackling these issues is a central task of audit studies and discuss emerging frontiers of audit study research that are attempting to address these pressing issues. First, audit studies can contribute to our understanding of why discrimination occurs by incorporating

strategies to uncover the mechanisms that drive the empirical patterns observed in the data. Second, audit studies can provide insights about when and where discrimination and bias occur by paying attention to theoretically important variation in average treatment effects and clarifying the representativeness of a given set of findings. Throughout, I present evidence from recent audit study research that pushes the boundaries on each of these frontiers and discuss potential paths forward to continue to advance the design, implementation, and contribution of this method to social science research.