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Guest Editors' Preface to the Special Symposium on Field Experiments

Field experiments—in which researchers use scientific experimental methods to elicit causal treatment effects in the field or with field subjects—are now being applied to a broad range of topics in economics. This method has arguably opened up new ways to test economic theories, to provide evidence from novel settings, and to reach new audiences with this evidence, because field experiments provide an additional platform to inform policy and the thinking in the study of economics. Even though field experiments are not a specific area of research, specific training—as well as an entrepreneurial aptitude and negotiation skills—is required to implement studies in the field when aligning the research interest with that of firms, organizations, and government agencies and to convince them to follow the experimental protocol.

We now witness two welcome trends in the studies that employ field experiments. First, as the influx of researchers who enter academia trained with the tools of field experiments increases, we see a remarkable refinement in the experimental methods employed together with better organizational skills to run larger and more complex experiments. Second, many field experiments are now driven by a tighter interaction between evidence and theory and a more intelligent integration of the experimental methods with other empirical approaches.

The four papers selected for this symposium reflect these trends and give an excellent illustration of the state of art. The contributions have been chosen from a large number of submissions that have all undergone stringent peer review.

In their paper, Oreopoulos and Dunn explore a question of the effect of information provision on human capital acquisition, which is of first-order importance to the design of education policy. Even though it is often assumed that people make fully informed education decisions, they show in an elegant field experiment how seemingly subtle yet cost-effective information interventions can have a lasting impact on educational behavior. They recruited 1,616 students from disadvantaged schools in Toronto and asked them to fill out two surveys, three weeks apart. Half of the students were shown a film promoting further education and were then offered a simple way to calculate the costs and benefits of education. The authors find that this significantly changed students' priors about the value of education and led them to request further college and university application materials.

In an innovative approach to testing three different models of social preferences in a random price voting mechanism, Keisner, Messer, Schulze, and Zarghamee use an artifactual field experiment employing—quite creatively—the economic 'bad' of water 'contaminated' by a sterilized cockroach. The relevance of this study is in nesting three models of social preferences—Charness and Rabin (2002), Fehr and Schmidt (1999), and Bolton and Ockenfels (2000)—and testing which of them has most play in the data. But this paper goes one step further by using their data to shed light on how voting outcomes will differ given the presence and type of the agents' social preferences.

Aretz and Kube study whether offering donors the ability to choose the destination of their charitable donations affects the size and frequency of giving. Charitable donations have been an important platform for field experiments, and these experiments have had a substantial effect on the fund-raising strategies of many charities. In this study, the authors collaborated with a charity that sent out 57,000 letters as part of a fund drive. All letters contained the same information, but the letters in the treatment group permitted donors to specify the country to benefit from the donation. There is no treatment response in terms of response rate and donations, challenging us to think harder about how to predict the effect of framing and choice sets in this context.

Alpízar and Martinsson explore the importance of the social context within which donations are made. Using data from visitors arriving at a national park, they show that visitors arriving in groups donate more frequently compared to individual visitors; yet total donations are not higher. The critical factor is whether people are observed by a third party, whose presence is treated as random at the time of donations. Being observed leads to a significant increase in donations for groups but not for individual visitors. This social and group interaction in donations is still an underexplored channel to improve the design around charitable donations.

The diversity of these papers is a wonderful illustration of how field experiments are now well established within economics. It is our hope that this symposium inspires even more researchers to use field experiments in economics.

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