

Use of Black English and Racial Discrimination in Urban Housing Markets

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In this 1999 experiment, college students call prospective landlords on the phone to find out about rental property. Using different linguistic styles associated with race and ethnicity, the authors conclude that racial discrimination is alive and well in the urban housing market in Philadelphia.

Racial discrimination was institutionalized in the American real estate industry during the 1920s and was well established in private practice by the 1940s. Until 1968, when the Fair Housing Act was passed, this discriminatory behavior was open and widespread among agents. After this date, outright refusals to rent to African-Americans became rare, given that overt discrimination might lead to prosecution. As a result, black renters came to experience a more subtle process of racial exclusion. Rather than finding “white only” signs or statements that “colored need not apply,” they encountered covert barriers surreptitiously placed in their way. Although the separate acts of discrimination may have been small and subtle, together they had a powerful effect in retarding black spatial assimilation (Massey and Denton 1993; Yinger 1995). Because the discrimination was latent, however, it was not directly observable, even by its victims.

Under these circumstances, the only way to know whether discrimination has occurred is to compare systematically the treatment of prospective black and white renters who have similar social and economic characteristics. Differences in treatment are usually established by means of an audit study. Teams of white and black auditors are paired and sent to landlords to pose as renters seeking a home or apartment. They are trained to present comparable housing needs and family characteristics, express similar tastes and desires for housing, and offer a common socioeconomic profile. After each encounter, auditors fill out a report of their experiences, and the results are later tabulated and compared to determine whether there are systematic differences in treatment between races (see Yinger 1986, 1989).

In 1987, Galster (1990) wrote to more than 200 local fair housing organizations and obtained written reports of 50 different audit studies carried out in residential rental markets throughout the United States during the 1980s. Despite differences in measures and methods, he concluded that “racial discrimination continues to be a dominant feature of metropolitan housing markets in the 1980s” (p. 172). Using a fairly

conservative measure of racial bias, he estimated that blacks experienced a 50% chance of discrimination, on average, in rental markets of American urban areas.

This figure was confirmed by a nationwide study conducted in 1988 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Yinger 1993). Twenty audit sites were randomly selected from among metropolitan areas having central-city populations exceeding 100,000 and black percentages more than 12%. Real estate ads in major newspapers were randomly sampled, and landlords were approached by auditors who inquired about the availability of advertised units and about any other units that might be available. Auditors were given standard incomes and family characteristics appropriate to the unit advertised (Urban Institute 1991). Investigators found that housing was made systematically more available to whites in 45% of all rental transactions and that whites were offered more favorable rental terms in 17% of those cases when rental housing was made available (Yinger 1995). When housing availability and rental terms were considered jointly, the cumulative likelihood of experiencing some form of discrimination in U.S. rental markets was 53%.

Audit studies represent a quasi-experimental research design (Campbell and Stanley 1966). Even though they offer researchers more control and greater internal validity than other designs commonly used in the social sciences, they nonetheless have been criticized for too often relying on ambiguous definitions of “unequal treatment” and for confounding random and systematic effects (see Fix, Galster, and Struyk 1992; Heckman and Siegelman 1992). Despite these problems, however, data from audit studies are generally accepted as providing strong evidence of racial discrimination by U.S. courts (see Metcalf 1988).

Although audit designs have many obvious attractions, the studies conducted to date suffer from two serious weaknesses. First, prior work has focused mainly on institutional landlords—those offering large numbers of rental units to the market—because these are easier to sample and visit, and they represent a relatively large share of rental housing. Nonetheless, much of the discrimination actually experienced by African-Americans is probably meted out by small landlords renting one or two apartments at a time. Second, nearly all studies so far have relied on face-to-face interactions between auditors and landlords rather than more impersonal forms of contact and communication.

In this day and age, there is ample opportunity for discrimination *before* a personal encounter between a landlord and renter. Research shows that Americans are capable of making fairly accurate racial attributions on the basis of linguistic cues alone (Feagin 1994). Not only are they quick to identify the race of someone speaking Black English Vernacular, but they are also able to identify the race of code-switching blacks—those

speaking Standard English but with a “black” pronunciation of certain words (see Doss and Gross 1994). Indeed, subjects in one study were shown to be quite capable of making accurate racial inferences based solely on hearing the word hello (Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh 1999).

Because Black English Vernacular and Black Accented English are widely spoken by African-Americans in the United States, much discrimination in U.S. housing markets probably occurs *over the phone*—that is, before white rental agents and black clients ever meet. All we need to assume is that prospective landlords are capable of recognizing black linguistic styles and associating them with the race of the speaker, an assumption that is quite consistent with prior research in sociolinguistics. To discriminate, all a landlord needs to say when he or she hears a “black” voice on the other end of the line is that the unit is “already rented.” In an era of voice mail and phone tag, moreover, it is even easier just not to return messages left by speakers of Black English, thus letting a machine do the racial screening. Through technology, a racist landlord may discriminate without actually having to experience the inconvenience or discomfort or personal contact with his or her victim.

In their qualitative interviews with middle-class blacks, Feagin and Sikes (1994, 229) uncovered considerable anecdotal evidence of this sort of discrimination. In one vignette, they tell of a black woman who called about an apartment advertised in the paper:

She called, and they told her that the apartment was rented. And she called [a friend] on the phone and said, “I’d like for you to call them ... because you sound like a white person.” And [the friend] called and the apartment was still unrented.

As a result of this sort of subtle discrimination, the authors concluded that “the intentional use of a ‘white-sounding’ voice, either one’s own or a friend’s, is one painful strategy that middle-class black homeseekers have developed to get around some discrimination” (Feagin and Sikes 1994, 229).

Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh (1999) undertook a systematic audit study to document more precisely this sort of phone-based discrimination in the San Francisco Bay Area. They identified prospective landlords through classified advertisements in regional newspapers, and then in separate phone calls, one tri-dialectal experimenter spoke in three successive linguistic styles whose order of presentation was randomly varied: White English, Black English Vernacular, and Chicano English. Over the course of 989 trials, data conclusively showed that landlords do, in fact, discriminate against prospective tenants on the basis of the sound of their voice during telephone conversations. Not only were speakers of nonstandard dialects significantly less likely to get an appointment to see a unit, but this likelihood also varied systematically with the racial composition of

the neighborhood. In general, the whiter the area, the less likely a speaker of Chicano or Black English was to receive an appointment.

In the present study, we seek to extend this earlier work. Not only do we corroborate prior results by documenting the existence of phone-based racial discrimination in a large eastern metropolitan area, but we also develop more precise measures of the incidence, severity, and nature of discrimination using the telephone. We also explore the degree to which race interacts with class and gender to influence residential outcomes and document the specific mechanisms by which phone-based discrimination occurs. Methodologically, we suggest that telephone audit studies offer social scientists a cheap, effective, and timely way to measure the incidence and severity of racial discrimination in urban housing markets, and we recommend their wider application by social scientists throughout the country.

Research Design

This study was implemented as part of an undergraduate sociology course in research design at the University of Pennsylvania taught by the first author during the spring of 1999. The multiracial class of men and women included native speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV), Black Accented English (BAE), and White Middle-Class English (WME). The distribution of the class by gender and linguistic styles permitted investigators to consider six different treatment conditions in assessing the nature of housing discrimination over the phone: male BEV, male BAE, male WME, female BEV, female BAE, and female WME. Although it would have been of considerable interest to investigate the effect of class more completely by including white males and females speaking Philadelphia's distinctive working-class accent, the students included no native speakers of this dialect.

Although BEV and BAE may both be identified as "black sounding," we suspect that most listeners can tell the difference between the two dialects and that they attach different class labels to each style of speech. Specifically, we hypothesize that when an African-American speaks Standard English with a black pronunciation of certain words (BAB), listeners infer that the speaker is black but of middle-class origins, whereas the combination of nonstandard grammar with a black accent (BEV) signals lower-class origins. If this assumption is correct, then our six treatment conditions permit us to test for a three-way interaction between race (black-white), gender (male-female), and class (lower-middle).

Under the guidance and supervision of the first author and a postdoctoral fellow (the second author), students in the methodology class collaborated in designing an instrument for use in a telephone audit study to be conducted in the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

If machine answers:
Hello. My name is _____. I'm interested in the apartment you advertised in _____.
Please call me back at _____.
Number of Callbacks Before Speaking to Agent:
___ 1
___ 2
___ 3
___ Never Returned Call

If person answers:
Hello, My name is _____. I'm interested in the apartment you advertised in _____.
Are any apartments still available?
___ Yes ___ No

If units still available:
Do you have any one-bedroom apartments? ___ Yes ___ No
How much is the rent for that apartment? ___
Do you have any other apartments available? ___ Yes ___ No
What does the rent include?
___ Heat/AC
___ Electricity
___ Gas
___ Water

How much do I have to put down? ___
Are there any other fees? ___
How long is the lease? ___
What is the address? _____
How many apartments in the building/complex? ___
Is there parking? ___ Yes ___ No

Closing:
Thanks. I'm looking at other places, so I'll get back to you if I want to see it. Who should I ask for?
Name: _____

FIGURE 1: Auditor Script Used In Study of Racial Discrimination in Philadelphia Rental Housing Market, March–April 1999

during the spring of 1999. First they worked to develop a scripted interaction for use with prospective landlords, and then they created a set of standard auditor profiles that could be employed to answer questions from curious rental agents. The audit instrument employed in the study is shown in Figure 1.

In designing this instrument, we sought to develop a standard script that was simple and straightforward and that gathered salient information about the telephone encounter that could be coded up and analyzed later to measure different kinds of discrimination. After a draft of the basic script was developed, the authors worked with black students in class to translate it into BEV. When problems were encountered in translating, we returned to the original script and modified it to effect a smoother transition between “White” and “Black” English. We conducted a small pilot survey to test both forms of the

instrument, which revealed a few other problems that required additional modifications. The document shown in the figure is the final version of the auditor script.

As can be seen, the first step in the scripted interaction involves establishing direct contact with a realtor. In nearly half of all cases (46%), the initial call resulted in contact with some form of voice mail. In this event, the script instructed auditors to leave a short request for a return call. Auditors were instructed to leave such a message at least three times before giving up. If and when phone contact with a rental agent was established, the auditors then proceeded through a scripted conversation designed to gather basic information about the apartment, whether it was still available, and the terms under which it might be rented (the amount of monthly rent, what utilities were included, size of security deposit, whether there were application fees, and the length of the lease). After completing the instrument, auditors noted the date and time of the call.

Auditors were trained to follow the script as closely as possible and to provide additional information to the rental agent only in response to a question. To standardize the information provided in response to such questions, we created a set of common profiles that were assigned to each auditor. These profiles are summarized in Figure 2. Basically, we sought to project the image of a recent college graduate in his or her early to mid-20s with an annual income of \$25,000 to \$30,000. Assuming that landlords normally expect tenants to pay 30% of their income as rent, we established a rent ceiling of about \$800 for a one-bedroom apartment, although auditors were allowed to explore higher rents for two-or three-bedroom units (if asked, they were instructed to say they had a roommate). We deliberately chose pseudonyms that were racially neutral and gave everyone a lower white-collar job in Philadelphia's large and diverse medical sector.

Over four successive weeks in March and April 1999, we chose rental listings from three selected sources. In the first week, we chose listings from *Apartments for Rent* magazine, a monthly that is distributed free of charge at street corners, supermarkets, and other public places. In the second week, we undertook the same operation for *The Apartment Hunter*, a similar periodical published by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Finally, in the last two weeks, we took ads directly from the Sunday Real Estate Section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* itself. The two monthly periodicals generally gave us access to large, professionally managed apartment complexes and real estate developments, whereas the *Inquirer* included many small one-to three-unit properties that were owner managed. The listings included in our sample covered all zones in the metropolitan area, including center city (an elite district), a variety of working-and middle-class city neighborhoods, lower-middle-class suburbs, and more prestigious upper-middle-class suburban areas.

We attempted to call all listings meeting our rent criteria.

Profile		
Characteristic	Male	Female
Name	Michael Smith	Lisa Ford
	Richard Williams	Jennifer Campbell
	John Clark	Ashley Davis
Place of work	Jefferson Hospital	Jefferson Hospital
	Pennsylvania Hospital	Pennsylvania Hospital
	U. Penn Medical Center	U. Penn Medical Center
	Childrens' Hospital	Children's Hospital
Kind of work	Administration: Billing	Administration: Billing
Family status	Single	Single
	Age 25	Age 25
	No kids	No kids
Income	\$25,000–\$30,000 annually	\$25,000–\$30,000 annually
Rent ceiling	\$800 per month	\$800 per month
If questioned:	Might have roommate	Might have roommate
Current residence	University City	University City
	Ardmore	Ardmore
	Mount Airy	Mount Airy
	Center City	Center City
	Moving to Philly	Moving to Philly
Reason for move	Lease is up	Lease is up
	Roommate moving out	Roommate moving out
Miscellaneous	Nonsmoker	Nonsmoker
	Has car	Has car
	No pets	No pets

FIGURE 2: Auditor Profiles Used in Study of Discrimination of Philadelphia Rental Housing Market, March–April 1999

Basic Data

Over the course of March and April 1999, four male and nine female auditors speaking WME, BAE, or BEV made 474 actual or attempted contacts with 79 rental agents who advertised apartments in the sources just described. Given the distribution of linguistic abilities among students, two auditors took turns playing the role of female WME, female BAE, female BEV, and male WME, but only one speaker each was available to assume the roles of male BAE and male BEV. Preliminary results from the study are summarized in Table I, which presents means computed for each of the six different treatment groups.

These data offer strong prima facie evidence for the existence of phone-based discrimination in the Philadelphia rental housing market. Specifically, they yield four basic

TABLE 1: Indicators of Possible Discrimination in Rental Housing Market of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area, March–April 1999

	Males			Females		
	WME	BAE	BEV	WME	BAE	BEV
Access to rental units						
Mean calls made	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.9	1.9
% reaching agent	87.0	80.0	72.0	75.0	71.0	63.0
% with unit available	86.0	79.0	61.0	80.0	80.0	60.0
% accessible	76.0	63.0	44.0	60.3	57.0	38.0
Other barriers to access						
% mentioning credit	3.0	10.0	9.0	5.0	21.0	23.0
% requiring fees	11.0	47.0	29.0	20.0	19.0	37.0
Cost						
Mean rent (\$)	612	631	630	593	666	597
Mean deposit (\$)	1,311	1,423	1,381	1,348	1,459	1,348
Mean fee (\$)	11	32	25	17	25	43
Number of audits	79	79	79	79	79	79

NOTE: WME = White Middle-Class English; BAE = Black Accented English; BEV = Black English Vernacular.

conclusions. First, blacks generally experience less access than whites do for units of rental housing; second, females experience less access than males; third, lower-class blacks (those speaking BEV) have less access than middle-class blacks (those speaking BAE); and finally, race, gender, and class interact in a nonadditive way to influence rental outcomes.

Consider, for example, the mean number of phone calls auditors had to make to reach an agent (which had an upper limit: 3). Whereas white males had to make an average of 1.56 calls to reach a rental agent or the limit, black males made at least 1.71 calls. Among women, the differential was 1.72 calls for whites compared with 1.86 or more for blacks. At the same time, males had to make fewer phone calls than women, regardless of race. Among whites, males made 1.56 calls compared with 1.72 for women, and among black-accented males, the differential was 1.72 for males compared with 1.86 for females. Moreover, low-class blacks made more phone calls than middle-class

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blacks: African-American men speaking non-Standard English (BEV) made 1.78 phone calls compared with just 1.71 for those speaking Standard English. Finally, the effects of race, class, and gender interacted such that poor black women experienced by far the most trouble getting through. Among female speakers of BEV, the average number of calls made was 1.92.

The interaction of race, class, and gender is readily observable in the likelihood of reaching a rental agent. At the top of the hierarchy are white males, 87% of whom were able to speak with a rental agent; next are black-accented males, 80% of whom got through, followed in turn by white middle-class females (75%), men speaking BEV (72%), females speaking BAE (71%), and females speaking BEV (63%). Speaking to an agent, however, is only half the battle; to gain access, one also has to learn that a rental unit is available, and here we once again find obvious differentials between groups.

Whereas 86% of white middle-class males who got through to an agent were told that a unit was available, the figure was 80% for white middle-class females, 79% for middle-class black males (those speaking BAE), 61% for lower-class black males (those speaking BEV), and just 60% for poor black females (those speaking BEV).

The product of these two proportions—the share reaching an agent and the share being told a unit was available—indicates overall access to rental units in the Philadelphia housing market. Whereas more than three-quarters of white middle-class males gained access to a potential rental unit (76%), the figure dropped to 63% for middle-class black men (those speaking BAE), 60% for white middle-class females (those speaking WME), 57% for black middle-class females (those speaking BAE), 44% for lower-class black men (those speaking BEV), and just 38% for lower-class black women (those speaking BEV). In other words, for every call a white male makes to find out about a rental unit in the Philadelphia housing market, a poor black female must make two calls to achieve the same level of access, roughly doubling her time and effort compared with his.

Beyond simple access, we considered other potential barriers to housing. Although our auditor script did not ask about credit explicitly, we kept track of spontaneous instances when an auditor's credit history was raised as a potential problem in leasing a unit. Whereas credit was spontaneously mentioned to only 3% of white middle-class males, it was brought up as a potential issue for 5% of white middle-class females, 10% of black males regardless of class, roughly a fifth of middle-class black females (21% of those speaking BAE), and nearly a quarter of lower-class black women (23% of those speaking BEV).

Credit concerns were often expressed concretely in terms of a fee charged for a credit evaluation or some other expense associated with making an application. Only 11% of white middle-class males were told that some kind of fee was involved, compared with 20% of white middle-class females, 29% of black lower-class males, and 37% of lower-class black females. In contrast to other indicators, the highest incidence of potential discrimination was observed among middle-class black men, 47% of whom reported being told of a fee. If we take \$0 to be the fee in cases when no fee was mentioned, then the average cost for the privilege of *just being considered* as a potential renter was \$11 for white males, \$25 for poor black males and middle-class black females, \$32 for middle-class black males, and \$43 for poor black females. We did not detect any clear differences by race, class, or gender in terms of the amount of monthly rent or the size of the deposit.

Quantifying the Barriers to Access

Although the foregoing intergroup differences suggest a process of structured discrimination with respect to race, class, and gender, we have not yet conducted any formal statistical tests or introduced any controls. To carry out a more rigorous test of our hypotheses, we present in Table 2 coefficients from a series of logistic regression models that were estimated to predict whether the auditor spoke to an agent, whether a unit was reported as available, whether the auditor ultimately gained access to information about the unit, and, if so, whether application fees were required and credit worthiness was mentioned as an issue. Because we were unable to randomize the order in which the phone calls were made, the models included a control for order of presentation (coded 1 through 6), and because we were unable to control the experimental environment from audit to audit, we included a set of 78 dummy variables to represent each of the 79 separate rental units, thus controlling statistically for idiosyncratic differences between audits (the first audit served as the reference category). To conserve space, coefficients associated with these control variables are not shown in the table but will be sent on request.

The inclusion of these controls in a multivariate logistic regression clarifies and makes more precise how race, class, and gender interact to influence access to rental units in the Philadelphia housing market. As indicated by the plethora of statistically significant negative coefficients, compared with white middle-class males, other groupings of race, class, and gender have a significantly harder time gaining access to rental housing. As already observed in the table of means, men generally gain greater access to rental housing than women, whites have greater access than blacks, and middle-class African-Americans have greater access than those whose speech indicates lower-class origins. What is most interesting, however, is how race, class, and gender *interact* to determine access to rental units. Although being black, female, or of lower-class origins may each reduce access to rental housing, by far the least access is achieved by those who are **black, female, and poor.**