



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Labour Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/labeco

Commentary

Comments on "gender and experiments what have we learned from the field and the lab?"

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The discussion of this paper is of an unusual type, because my role is not really to judge the quality and completeness of a survey, which in this case is excellent, but to evaluate instead whether the survey answers the questions posed by the organizers of this interesting and novel session at the conference for the 25th anniversary of the EALE.

My reading of what the organizers were looking for is as follows. Lab and Field experiments have been extensively used in recent years to study issues related to gender differences in labor markets:

- Was this a waste of time?
- If not, what did we learn from this literature?

In a nutshell, these very sharp and clear questions are what the authors of the survey were asked to answer. And, incidentally, I congratulate the organizers because asking this type of questions at the annual conference of a scientific association seems to be a very good idea, particularly in the interest of those young scholars that come to this conference not only to present their work but also to get a sense about where research is going (or better ... should be going) in the field.

Barbara and Ghazala did not shy away from these questions. Their competently crafted survey concludes that field and lab experiments succeeded in providing new and relevant evidence on old questions, like the nature of discrimination and the existence of true productivity differences,¹ thanks to more convincing identification strategies capable to better control, in artificial settings, for the many confounding factors that typically jeopardize the reliability of evidence based on observational data.

Perhaps more importantly, according to the authors, field and lab experiments enabled economists to address new questions about

gender preferences concerning risk, competition, negotiation and other-regarding preferences. Observational data put binding constraints on the possibility to answer these questions. On the contrary, with appropriately designed experiments, researchers can generate the exact data that are needed to study the slippery world of preferences.

There is, however, one potential determinants of gender differences on which the experimental literature seems to have been almost completely silent: the role of the family and in particular of the division of family chores within the family. My own research on this² leads me to suspect that here is where we should search for the source of gender differences in labor markets. Specifically, the unequal division of family chores is likely to be the primary determinant of most if not all the gender differences in labor market productivity and other outcomes. To put it differently, if chores were divided equally within families, profit maximizing firms would have, at least in modern times, no reason to discriminate between man and women.

As long as we think that the relationship between the family and gender differences is relevant and needs to be studied, the experimental literature did not help much on this ground. We are really at the infancy in uncovering the links between the division of family chores and gender differences, because, as far as I can tell, we still know almost nothing on crucial questions like whether the prevailing unequal division corresponds to the preferences of men and women; whether it is still efficient today (... if it ever was in the past); whether the only relevant heterogeneity is across genders or also within genders. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be subgroups of women and men with very similar preferences; that is, groups in which both genders like an equal division of chores and groups in which both prefer an unequal division. If this is the case why we continue to contrast men against women in terms of preferences when differences might be larger within than across genders?

Moreover and perhaps more importantly, depending on the answers to the above questions should we conclude, as economists, that there are market failures and externalities justifying some form of government intervention? Or should we infer instead that observed differences correspond to preferences and there is no need for the government to interfere with private decisions? And if the answer is that interference is necessary, what is the kind of intervention that

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¹ On the issue of productivity differences, I must say that the survey has overlooked a small but interesting experimental literature on multitasking and gender. For example, Thomas Buser and Noemi Peter ("Multitasking: productivity effects and gender differences", *Experimental Economics*, 2012) find results that do not support the stereotype according to which women are better at multitasking. Indeed they find that women suffer as much as men when forced to multitask and are actually less inclined to multitask when being free to choose. On the contrary, Dongning Ren, Haotian Zhou and Xiaolan Fu ("A Deeper Look at Gender Difference in Multitasking: Gender-Specific Mechanism of Cognitive Control", *Natural computation*, 2009) present experimental results that lead to opposite conclusions.

² Alberto Alesina, Loukas Karabarbounis and Andrea Ichino, "Gender based taxation and the division of family chores" *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 2011.

should be adopted among the many possibilities under discussion (quotas, incentives, gender based taxation etc.)

On all these issues the huge literature on experiments and gender has been practically silent, as far as I can tell. And correspondingly almost silent is Barbara's and Ghazala's survey. But then, if we go back to the questions asked by the organizers, we should conclude that from this literature we are not learning much on what (hopefully not only for me) are the most crucial questions that need to be answered.

Actually, after having congratulated the organizers for their unconventional but very welcome questions, let me say that it would have been useful to pose explicitly two additional questions to the authors of the survey:

- What should be the future research agenda based on lab and field experiments concerning gender differences?
- Would this future agenda be feasible and promising?

These are perhaps the most important questions to be answered in the interest of the young members of the association who come to the annual EALE conference looking for hints about where to direct their research. Only the answers to these questions can tell whether this type of research will survive in the future, a piece of information which is at least as important as the one provided by looking at what this literature has accomplished in the past.

My personal feeling is that the list of family related issues that I mentioned above should be a main part of the future research agenda on gender issues. But I suspect that lab experiments will be of little help, while field experiments might have a chance of being more informative.