

# When sociologists and economists team-up

In this interview, Stefanie DeLuca highlights the complementarity between the approach of experimental economics on the field and qualitative interviewed conducted in sociology. She points out how interviews can help understand the mechanisms behind the quantitative results obtained with the economics methods.

*Camille Hémet: Stefanie, you are currently working on a project called “Creating Moves to Opportunity”, together with researchers in economics. Could you tell us what is the main research question that you want to address with this project?*

Stefanie DeLuca: I think the main question we’re trying to understand is: “what can we do about residential segregation in the United States?”. We know from 30 years of interdisciplinary social science that neighborhoods matter for predicting economic mobility for children and life chances for children and families in a number of domains (e.g. health). The question is: What do you do about it so that

people have more equal access to neighborhoods that provide opportunity and resources? There’s a policy in the US right now that provides the most subsidized housing to low-income families, which is the housing choice voucher program. But it turns out that it doesn’t work all that well for increasing neighborhood opportunity. This voucher program subsidizes up to 100% of one’s rent depending on income. Yet, most families who get housing vouchers end up living in neighborhoods that are high to moderate poverty. Overall, we know that neighborhoods matter, we have a policy to help people access wealthier neighborhoods, but then it doesn’t work! What can we do about this lost policy

potential? That’s the purpose of the current “Creating Moves to Opportunity” (CMTO) project, which can be viewed as the second part of voucher policy. And what we were able to do was partner with a couple of housing agencies. It’s actually really interesting because to take a step back, although researchers have been looking at neighborhood effects for a really long time, the evidence wasn’t as convincing to some people as others. The identification strategies maybe were not quite as powerful and convincing up until around 2015, which is when Raj Chetty, Nathan Hendren and Larry Katz had taken some data from a previous housing experiment that was aiming to give people a chance to move out of

high-poverty neighborhoods (“Moving to Opportunity”, MTO) and reanalyzed this data by attaching it to tax records for 20 million American families, including those who participated in this housing experiment. They found that when children moved younger than age 13, they earned more as adults, were more likely to go to college and get married. This sparked a new interest in neighborhood effects. This paper really catalyzed policy attention. As a result of the attention, presidential candidates were interested in understanding more about this as part of their policy platforms. But it also raised attention of other local actors, like public housing authorities, who are the administrative arms of the Department of Housing in the US, as they administer housing subsidies. As a result, a number of housing agencies approached Raj and the team and said they’d like to figure out how to do a program that might have these positive effects for families. In particular, we first started working with the housing agencies of Seattle and King County, in part because the funding came from the Gates Foundation that has a lot of interest in the Seattle area. We were invited in. This is an important detail: partnering with the Seattle and King County housing authorities to work with them did enable us to create this intervention (the CMTO program). That’s where we started and how we ended up getting to the intervention.

And I think it’s exciting because it’s not just about asking some of the most profound questions, but it is also about implementing interdisciplinary mixed methods, as part of an invitation by practitioners to have researchers join the table.

**Camille Hémet:** *This is indeed an important improvement in the way we can conduct research projects and policy evaluation. Before talking more about mixed methods and your personal implication in this project, could you explain what is the methodology that is used to evaluate the CMTO program?*

Stefanie DeLuca: The design of the intervention is a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT). It’s a multi stage RCT. But to simplify, I’ll just talk about the first stage. What we did in partnership with the Seattle and King County housing agencies was develop a package of services that seemed likely to be helpful based on previous research and also based on previous practice from some other work. Especially in Baltimore, there is an innovative housing policy that was aimed at helping families move out of racially segregated and economically isolated neighborhoods. And the treatment package had three components. One was more family facing, and that was a staff from a local nonprofit that had expertise in housing, and working with disadvantaged populations would sit down with families

after they had gotten their voucher, who were assigned to the treatment group and go over with them the map of the area and which neighborhoods were the designated high opportunity neighborhoods and then be able to get a sense of who the families were and what they were interested in terms of schools for their kids, employment opportunities, even other educational opportunities for the adults.

**Camille Hémet:** *It was not only about providing information, but also trying to fit the households needs.*

Stefanie DeLuca: Exactly. In fact, the findings reveal that the customization part was a really important piece of the program. People who were called “navigators” embodied this customization part, and became a really big part of the story. The first bucket of the program consisted in one-on-one meetings that were customized in their frequency and intensity of help. The second bucket was assistance for landlords, whereby navigators did outreach to recruit landlords in the area who had rental properties in high opportunity neighborhoods in their portfolios. The navigators tried to get these landlords to be on board and consider renting to voucher holders, because typically that doesn’t happen as often as would be helpful for the policy to be effective. The navigators were able to do outreach and then also as part

of the leasing out process, they were able to work with landlords in the same way as they worked with families. “What do you need? What are your concerns? If you might lease your housing unit to this parent who has a credit issue or a previous eviction, we’d be willing to give you a larger security deposit”. Or “You should meet this parent and she will explain to you who she is, what she wants to do”. Because what navigators were also doing was helping families prepare scripts and rental resumes. They were called in to prepare for these otherwise intimidating and demoralizing conversations with landlords. And the navigators brokered a bit and then tried to do outreach in the community to get more landlords aware of the program. And the third bucket was financial assistance to sweeten the deal for landlords by offering up to \$3,500 per family, that could be used as an extra bump in the security deposit to assuage landlords concerns about damages or losing revenue in some way. But the resources could also be used to pay off remaining back rent from another unit if they had to leave mid lease or moving costs, etc. There are services and support for families, resources for landlords and, finally, finance. These are the three pieces. In the first phase of the experiment, families who were in the treatment group were offered these services if they were willing to move to an

opportunity area. Everybody got the voucher, including the control group, and no one had to do these moves. In the second piece, we separated out the different components of two different degrees to see what might be the most important and to consider cost effectiveness in terms of “what does it take to get a family over the hump of leasing up in some of these neighborhoods?” And in the midst of this, we layered in the qualitative work to be able to understand mechanisms.

*Camille Hémet: You are saying that the role of qualitative interviews was very important to pin down the mechanisms. Can you tell us more about what is your role as a sociologist and what is the role of qualitative surveys?*

*Stefanie DeLuca: We started the fieldwork while families were moving. And we ended up being able to talk to families who were moving and who had already moved. At this moment, there is so much attention in the policy world to housing affordability. There were other agencies that were interested in potentially expanding or trying to get services like this in their local agencies. It was important to really get it right or understand how it worked, in the perspective of scaling up and for exporting the design and the findings. It really made it of heightened importance to have the mechanisms right. We spent time with families and we’ve now interviewed 252 families*

*across both phases, and almost 80% have been interviewed at least twice. We’ve had about 403 interviews total since 2019, and the interviews allowed for families to give their perspective on both their residential histories, their family background and what it was like to participate in the program. The invitation with the interviews was an invitation to tell me about this without really digging deep with detailed questions, but letting the families lead the conversation so that we were more likely to get inductive insights around the program as opposed to coming in with preconceived questions. We were able to get these interviews done as the experimental results were being analyzed. And what jumped out at me (and I’ve been doing fieldwork for a long time and even studying housing interventions) was how emotional families got, how emotional the parents (mostly moms, but not exclusively) got when they started talking about the program. And what a relief they felt getting help where they felt like they were supported and that somebody was trying to ask them what they wanted and that they were part of the program and working with caring people and not having people talk down to them. It’s not surprising in retrospect, that there are so many words like relief, confidence boosting, support, feeling, etc jumping off the interviews, and not so much talking about the maps of the opportunity neighborhoods or*



the financial assistance, which, of course, as the interview went on, people would talk about. But what jumped off was really how important were the staff who made the program work. I think it sheds light on the fact that the assumptions we have going into interventions and policies like this might be wrong. For example, we might think that providing financial or informational support is what will get people to move to better neighborhoods. But what we discovered through the interviews was it was largely about families' fears of not finding a place to live, not succeeding. Housing searches are difficult in general, and they're really difficult with vouchers. And what the intervention was able to do is actually increase families' beliefs about the probability of success. That was important because optimism and confidence was what kept families searching. And this psychological process was actually really important to the intervention, because sometimes these searches took months. We might not have been able to see that without the interviews. The second RCT was able to also confirm this with looking at different dosages of help from the navigators. Then, the second round of qualitative work also looked at families' responses depending on the treatment

group they were in, right up to the point where they were going to lease up and then something fell short. What fell short was precisely what the full package would have provided. It was really interesting. I think that the qualitative work can do a few different things when paired with quantitative work and experiments. And I think part of it allows you to learn beyond what researchers imagine at the beginning. It can generate hypotheses to be tested, but it also can inform models. And in this case, it was helping inform choice models around neighborhoods, as social and psychological determinants of housing search success had not been quite so formalized and accounted for in previous models. That is another piece of it that I think can really help. There are many ways through which the qualitative work can contribute.

**Camille Hémet: One last question: Could you share your feelings on how difficult or easy it is to work with researchers from another field?**

Stefanie DeLuca: It is costly because you have to do more homework to maybe read up on other literatures and understand terms or standards or tools. I think the innovation that comes with this extra cost can be enormously beneficial. But I think we need scientists

who are willing to be patient and take that risk to have a bigger impact. I think it's difficult for everyone to be doing all of the different parts of a study from their different vantage points. But you have to know enough about the other pieces and the other disciplines to be able to really situate the contribution. I think there are a lot of similarities between economists and sociologists, but a lot of preconceived notions about why they shouldn't work together. There's an old saying that economists study people's choices and sociologists study how people don't have any. And I think the joke is really about the tools that each discipline brings conceptually and then methodologically as well. I think sociologists tend to focus less on decision making, partly because it's touchy, a touchy subject where you don't want to end up looking like you're blaming the victim for making poor choices. But sociologists study circumstances and structural conditions in power that give people different levels of privilege and constraint. An economist formally studies choice, but often relies on a narrow canon of theory and explanation for why it is that we see choices expressed the way we do. I think the marriage of these two sorts of sets of frameworks is really valuable.

Camille Hémet, professor at the Paris School of Economics and the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, conducted this interview.

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