Research Philosophy

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I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Connecticut with a deep interest in explaining the causes and effects of the large increase in inequality seen across the world in the past few decades. I believe that economic research informs how we live, both on the macro and micro levels. Gaining a deeper understanding into internal decision making processes as well as the complex and myriad relations that occur when hundreds of millions of human beings interact is of immense fascination to me and incredible relevance to the world at large.

Background and Previous Research Publications

When I was a child my family moved often. Before I had turned 12 we had lived in a dozen U.S. States. This rapidly shifting perspective gave me an appreciation for the differences and similarities between people groups. While the culture and geography varied, people were people everywhere and acted in shockingly similar ways. A friend in Birmingham, AL might have the same desire to be a firefighter as a friend in Boise, ID, and for the exact same reasons. People face similar fears and costs, and aspire to achieve similar goals.

This view was reinforced as I broadened my perspective. Teaching math in a South African orphanage was not so different from mentoring troubled youth in inner-city California. These experiences catalyzed a belief that there may be no silver bullet for ending poverty, want, oppression and hatred. However, there exists a truism throughout human experiences. When the rules are open and fair, where people pay their fair share for public goods, and where they enjoy quality institutions that safeguard their rights, people prosper. When the rules are written to benefit the writers, when rent seeking behavior becomes endemic and where special interest groups rule their own little fiefdoms, all individuals lose out on their potential.

I have attempted to answer interesting questions while building my empirical and theoretical skill set. When I was an undergrad I ran a simulation partnered with a microfinance organization to discern if it mattered who was lent money, holding adverse selection and moral hazard constant. In my Ph.D. studies I have looked at ethnic conflict and occupational sorting, but it has been the issue of intergenerational transfers that has most fixated my attention.

This issue has become more important in recent years. There has been a large increase in inequality, both of wealth and income, and that increase seems to be accelerating. There is an important policy dimension as well, with the treatment of different sources of transfer coming under scrutiny by current policy makers.

My Job Market Paper:

Houses Divided: a model of intergenerational transfers, differential fertility and wealth inequality

Increasing income and wealth disparity in the United States has prompted a renewed focus on the mechanism of inequality. A major puzzle of this phenomenon is that wealth inequality is more pronounced than income inequality. This paper contributes to the literature by studying the impact on wealth inequality from savings, bequests, and fertility differences between the rich and the poor. We find that bequests have a significant impact on wealth inequality and the fertility difference between the rich and the poor amplifies the impact of bequests. In addition, we find that life-cycle saving and anticipated bequests interact with each other, and this interaction is important for fully understanding wealth inequality in the United States.

Other Research:

Taxing the Dead: an analysis of intergenerational transfers and levies

The most recent US election revealed large differences in beliefs about the optimal structure of the United States estate tax regime. The contribution of this paper is to analyze the impact of differing methods of taxing intergenerational transfers, in the context of a dynamic general equilibrium overlapping generations model with endogenous fertility. This paper is the first to consider the impact of switching from an estate to inheritance tax in the presence of endogenous fertility, and the fallout such a switch would have upon inequality and welfare.

Those Who Can: Occupational Sorting and Recession

The central question of this paper is what effect an increase in risk in the private labor market has on the public labor market. This paper's hypothesis is that in times of economic distress and recession, the expected quality of individuals who are hired in low risk occupations increases. Using data from the American Community Survey, North Carolina Education Data Research Center and The National Bureau of Economic Research, I find recession-caused migration into the public education profession, document sorting on an observable measurement of teacher ability and find that recession hired teachers have higher value-added scores.

Killing for Profit: a model of intrastate conflict

There is no doubt that high levels of intrastate conflict are devastating for an economy. A clearer understanding of what attributes affect the level of violence that economies and societies endure could be a critical turning point in attempting to defuse future conflicts before they happen. Police actions, terror campaigns, ethnic cleansing, and civil war between opposed conflict groups leads to lives lost, increased medical costs, infrastructure destroyed, technological regression, lowered confidence, drops in foreign investment, population displacement, and permanent damage to individual quality of life. The main question this paper attempts to answer is: would rational actors engage in violent behavior, and if so, why? At the core of this approach to conflict is the understanding that violence happens or does not happen as a result of two opposing forces. First is the additional economic power that a conflict group can obtain through violence, through control of critical resources and governmental apparatus. Second is the asset destruction caused by intrastate violence.

Not All Micro-Loans Were Created Equal: The Effect of Supply Chain Location on Micro-Lending

The positive effects of micro-loans on the impoverished has become veritable gospel to economic development professionals. Pioneered by Muhammed Yunus in the 1970s, the concept of making small loans to groups of poor entrepreneurs has become a mainstream tool of development and poverty reduction agents around the globe. However, little research has been done at this time into the microeconomic mechanics of small scale finance, especially the different outcomes of the loan depending on what sector of the economy the debtor is engaged in. A simulation designed to pursue further understanding of this subject, and conducted in partnership with Opportunity International, a micro-finance NGO, and the Westmont Investment Club, reveals whether different outcomes of a micro-loan were caused by a debtor's location in the production chain.

Future Plans:

In the years to come I plan to delve deeper into the complex interactions between intergenerational transfers and inequality. I would like to identify more clearly the precise relationship, in order to allow for policy prescription. Harnessing the desire for humans to provide for their descendants can unleash a powerful tool that can be used to further educational, productivity and dynamism goals.

Concluding Remarks:

I firmly believe that the world's systems - economic, political, and social - are at a crucial point. High quality analytics are more important than ever before, and only through achieving greater understanding of the processes that govern us will we be able to navigate the transition period ahead of us. Never has the future looked so bright, or the price of failure so great. I believe that my research will contribute in a small way to furthering the march of humanity towards greater opportunity and prosperity. And I am very excited to be a part of that trek.