Research Statement

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Field and Areas of Interest  My field of research is labor economics, broadly defined to include forays into economic history, family economics, and the economics of education. Within this field, I can identify two core areas of interest. First, I am interested in human capital accumulation both early in life, through schooling and parental investment, and during adulthood, through training, learning by doing, and migration. I have been engaged in exploring how human capital accumulation is affected by public policy, for instance, compulsory schooling laws, minimum wage provisions, and immigration policies, and I plan to further my inquiry into the roles that human capital accumulation plays in the inter-generational transmission of well-being. Because many of the decisions underlying human capital accumulation are made within the context of a household, I extend attention, as often possible, beyond the individual and towards his or her family, household, and extended family. Second, I am interested in labor supply and its interactions with public policy, with special emphasis on public assistance policies and income taxation. Within this area, I intend to continue exploring the role of measurement, modeling complexity, and the out-of-sample validity of joint models (static or dynamic) of labor supply, program participation, and income reporting behavior.

Medium-term Research Agenda  The companion document “Research Agenda: Synopsis of Ongoing and Prospective Projects” describes in details my research projects. For each project, I identify the questions addressed, justify the approach (model and data) proposed, and synthesize the expected contribution to the existing literature. The projects, which are at different stages of completion, are throughout these notes referred to by their section number. They are: 1) the Cosigner project, 2) the Wage Floors projects, 3) the External Validity of Randomized Experiments projects, 4) the Immigration Reform Projects, and 5) the Transmission of Well-being Across Generations projects. Next I elaborate on two key features of my research: the methodology I adopt and the data I employ. Together with the area of inquiry to which the projects belong, these two features are the common denominator of my research.

Methodology: Combining Experimental Variation and Behavioral Models  I am interested in combining behavioral models with data from randomized social experiments, as exemplified by my joint work with Dean Karlan (section 1) and Patrick Kline (section 2). Dean Karlan and I have designed a randomized experiment that faced prospective borrowers with different loan conditions. The experiment was fielded in Peru between 2009 and 2011. We will use the data, obtained from our surveys as well as from the lender’s records, to infer key parameters shaping intra-household decision making. Patrick Kline and I take advantage of several large scale demonstration projects implemented in the 1990’s by various U.S. states as waivers from the federal welfare policy. Again, the data is a combination of survey and rich administrative information. Each of these projects addresses specific questions but, importantly, both aim to contribute to a small but growing literature (e.g. Todd and Wolpin (2005), Duflo, Hanna and Ryan (2010), Ferrall (2012)) that builds quantitative structural models exploiting the variation induced by experiments with the goal of estimation/validation and,
ultimately, of expanding our ability to conduct counterfactual policy analysis. Both projects also aim to bridge the gap between the non-parametric approaches used extensively in the program evaluation literature and the theory-based approaches used to justify exogeneity assumptions in the absence of experimental variation.

Data: Combining Survey and Administrative Sources My research work has a strong empirical bent. Several projects showcase my keen interest in collecting and compiling the data most suited to the questions under study.

As a first example, when Lia Pacelli, Elena Pastorino, and I (section 4) set out to study the effects of minimum wage regulations on human capital accumulation in the context of European labor markets, we quickly stumbled against data limitation because multiple minimum wages typically exist within each European country. For instance, in Italy the minimum wage varies by industry, by job tenure, and by the worker’s level in the job ladder. Thus, no existing data source is sufficiently comprehensive to enable a detailed empirical analysis of minimum wage effects in Italy. Accordingly, we collected time series of wage floors by industry, level in the job ladder, and seniority for the period 1980-2004. We are working on linking this source to existing administrative longitudinal records covering a random extract of the Italian workforce. On a related note, we are also working on an equilibrium model of the labor market that can handle the complexity of these regulations, take advantage of the rich micro-level data, and elucidate the pathways through which these regulations affect workers’ allocation to jobs and tasks, and their training and labor market histories.

As a second example, I am assembling a unique data base from multiple archival sources spanning the years 1870-1920 and encompassing successive generations of residents of an Italian municipality (section 5). The archival sources include census sheets, tax records, school records, conscription lists, population registers and cadastres. Because these sources are nominative and cover all the municipality’s residents, I can link them at the individual, family, and household level. I have already used this source to understand, at the micro-level, the process by which literacy spread starting in the second half of the 19th century. I plan to further rely on this extremely rich and unique source to explore a wide range of other issues broadly related to the role of the family in mediating the process of economic development and growth both across space and over time. I am especially interested in issues related to how fertility, educational attainment, skill acquisition and job specialization, marriage, and migration responded to the sweeping changes in commodity prices and transportation costs, and to the major advances in production technology and medical care that occurred in the second part of the long 19th century.

As a third example, I have tapped into a unique data base covering three decades of U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services records (section 6). For each year, the INS records include all individuals who obtain permanent legal residence or become naturalized U.S. citizens. I plan to use these records in conjunction with several decades of aggregate Mexican census data as well as a widely used data source gathered since 1982 in surveys administered in selected Mexican communities, the Mexican Migration Project (MMP). My goal is to employ the data in the estimation of a model of migration suitable to assessing alternative immigration reform bills. The INS and census information will be used to tackle two problems with the MMP data. First, the MMP communities are not representative of the population of Mexican communities at any point in time. Second, with reference to each community’s sample, long term migrants who either have formed a household in the US or have brought their dependents to the US are more likely to be missing from the community sample.