

IWER: Selected Doctoral Theses

TITLE:

Essays on Job Search, Unemployment and Regulatory Compliance”

– Gökçe Başbuğ (2017)

COMMITTEE:

Roberto Fernandez (co-chair), Thomas Kochan (co-chair), Emilio Castilla, Paul Osterman, Ofer Sharone, Susan Silbey

ABSTRACT:

This dissertation is composed of four essays, each studying limits to the means that are famously known to be effective. In the first essay, I investigate the effect of using social ties on the quality of opportunities pursued in job search. Using fixed effects models, I show that when the job seeker uses contacts, she pursues jobs that pay less than the jobs she pursues through formal methods. In addition, the analysis shows that networks limit the geographical and occupational diversity of jobs pursued.

In the second essay, using a mixed methods approach I examine how the negative emotional toll of long-term unemployment (LTU) is shaped by the interaction of gender and marital status. The interviews reveal a pattern with more marital tensions that exacerbate the emotional toll of LTU reported by married men than married women. The analysis of survey data shows that overall marriages are helpful to the wellbeing of both unemployed men and women. Yet, for married men but not for married women, the analysis revealed that the significance of the benefits derived from marriage disappears once household income is controlled.

The third essay examines whether introducing choice into a mandatory training program makes any difference in Unemployment Insurance recipients' job search performance. Using a field experiment design, I compare job search outcomes of individuals who have unconstrained workshop choices to others who only have a constrained option. Analyses show that providing the option of selecting which workshop to attend does not improve outcomes for unemployed. In the fourth essay, using data from safety inspections in laboratories at a large university, I investigate whether conducting semi-annual inspections and reporting findings back to responsible constituencies decreases the number of violations. The analyses show that the Environmental, Health, and Safety Management System did not reduce the number of violations. Rather, the results show a widening gap between compliant and non-compliant scientists. Using both lab-level quantitative data and interviews with inspectors and EHS personnel, I delineate the factors that impede the success of the system.

TITLE:

“(Trans)National Rules and Local Performances: Sustainability Standards in the Cocoa Sector of Ghana, Ecuador, and Brazil” – Maja Tampe (2016)

COMMITTEE:

Thomas Kochan (chair), Richard Locke, Michael Piore, Matthew Amengual, Rodrigo Canales

ABSTRACT:

Sustainability standards have been construed as potent solutions for agricultural producers in the Global South to solve major issues around poverty, inequality, bad labor and environmental conditions, and they have been spreading rapidly. Standards promise better livelihoods for producers through higher prices, farmer organization, and compliance with improved labor, environmental, and managerial practices. Yet actual improvements occur inconsistently. This dissertation examines this inconsistency by asking under what conditions and through what mechanisms sustainability standards improve livelihoods for producers in their labor and economic conditions.

I find that producers, themselves, must make standards work and discover how to translate transnational rules into locally suitable practices. This process of discovery comprises two challenges: to upgrade by adding value to the adopting rural enterprise and to turn rules into practices. Overcoming these challenges is contingent

on two conditions. First, adopters must integrate this process of discovery with a high-performance work system that mobilizes the skills and motivation of employees for productivity and quality gains. Second, adopters' learning depends on external reinforcement, positive through support for learning or negative through a threat of sanctions. The empirical material for this argument stems from a multi-method study of sustainability standards in the cocoa sector of Ghana, Ecuador, and Brazil. A five-year panel study from Ghana shows that, on average, livelihood improvements with standards are underwhelming. In Ecuador, my findings from comparing two certified farmer groups show that the path to better outcomes leads through upgrading, and not through standards by themselves. In Brazil, evidence from a participant-observation and interview-based study with cocoa plantations demonstrates that adopters must be able to proactively turn rules into on-the-ground behaviors.

Theoretically, this dissertation contributes a practice and labor lens to transnational private governance research and, in doing so, theorizes relationships between adopters' practices, private standard implementation, and market and regulatory contexts. Empirically, I propose that mitigating the weaknesses of private governance cannot be solved by adding more public regulation or more governance from buyers. Instead, I recommend to support agricultural producers by complementing transnational rules with local communities of practice in order to speed up processes of upgrading and discovery.

TITLE:

“Essays on Employer Credit Screening, Manufacturing Skill Gaps, and the Relationship Between Skill Demands and Capital Intensity” – Andrew Weaver (2015)

COMMITTEE:

Paul Osterman (chair), Tom Kochan, Frank Levy

ABSTRACT:

This thesis consists of three essays that explore hiring criteria, skill demands and labor market outcomes. The first essay investigates the use of worker credit status as a hiring screen. The practice has sparked debate, with opponents asserting that it amounts to discrimination and proponents maintaining that it is an important tool for employers to assure the quality of new employees. This study uses a unique identification strategy along with credit proxy variables in a national dataset to test whether credit status reveals information about an employee's character that is predictive of employee productivity. The study finds that the character-related portion of credit status is not a significant predictor of worker productivity.

The second essay addresses the question of whether U.S. manufacturers face a skill gap in hiring production workers. This study explores the issue by presenting and analyzing results from an original, nationally representative survey of U.S. manufacturing establishments that directly measures concrete employer skill demands and hiring experiences. The results indicate that demand for higher-level skills is generally modest, and that three quarters of manufacturing establishments do not show signs of hiring difficulties. Among the remainder, demands for higher-level math and reading skills are significant predictors of long-term vacancies, but, contrary to some theories of technical change, demands for computer skills and other critical thinking/ problem-solving skills are not. In terms of mechanisms, factors that complicate the interaction of supply and demand and that are associated with communication/coordination failures appear to play an important role.

The third essay combines data from an original manufacturing skill survey with industry-level data on capital and equipment to explore the connection between capital intensity and current skill demands. The results indicate that contemporaneous capital intensity does predict higher level skill demands, but the effect is driven by higher-level reading skills rather than the math and computer skills that dominate the current debate. With regard to historical patterns, the study finds that the relationship between historical capital intensity and current skill demands changes over time, with increasing capital investment per worker showing opposite effects in the 1990s and 2000s.

TITLE:

“Translating Ideology into Action: The Parallel Stories of the Apostles of Development in Guatemala and the Cooperative Brigadistas in Nicaragua” – Alberto Jose Fuentes (2014)

COMMITTEE:

Ben Schneider (co-chair), Richard Locke (co-chair), Michael Piore; Matthew Amengual

ABSTRACT:

This dissertation discusses the transformation of two Central American agro-industries during the 1980s and 1990s, the Guatemalan sugar and Nicaraguan cheese industries. Early in this period, the two relied on semi-artisanal production processes, poor labor standards and low wages, and a narrow focus on low priced products sold in protected domestic markets. Over the next two decades, processors in both industries devised and diffused new business strategies and production models that modernized the industries’ technologies and work organization, raised labor standards and wages, and repositioned them as formidable competitors in international markets.

I argue that two ideologies commonly associated with the revolutionary insurgencies of 1970s and 1980s Guatemala and Nicaragua supplied the materials for the new organizational models in these agro-industries. They guided two teams of ideological carriers, the Apostles of Development in Guatemala and the Cooperative Brigadistas in Nicaragua, as they created and diffused these organizational transformations. While a number of authors similarly argue that ideologies “matter” for industrial transformation and economic development, few examine the mechanisms through which they shape developmental trajectories. In contrast to these studies, this dissertation relies upon extensive field research and process-tracing to reveal how the Apostles of Development in Guatemala and Cooperative Brigadistas in Nicaragua distilled the content of their ideologies into the particular organizational innovations. The proposed explanation deploys a staged causal model that highlights the role of two intervening variables in shaping the ideological carriers’ ideologically-guided actions: (a) their particular interpretations of these ideologies, and (b) their shared professional backgrounds. The former impelled them to pursue a narrow range of prioritized moral imperatives and aspirations within the body of their ideology. The latter, in turn, directed their actions toward the business realm and supplied the necessary skills, tools and procedures to enact their ideological principles.

TITLE:

“Working with Your Hands: Essays on Craft Occupations in India” – Aruna Ranganathan (2014)

Committee:

Paul Osterman (co-chair), Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan (co-chair), Susan Silbey, Tavneet Suri

Abstract:

This thesis contains three essays on craft occupations in India. In the first essay, "Professionalization and Market Closure: The Case of Plumbing In India" I study the professionalization of plumbing in India. Professionalization has long been understood as a process of establishing market closure and monopoly control over work; however, in this article I present a case in which professionalization erodes rather than establishes occupational closure. I demonstrate how the Indian Plumbing Association (IPA), a newly formed organization of internationally trained plumbing contractors and consultants, has used the rhetoric and structures of professionalization to threaten pre-existing ethnicity-based closure enjoyed by traditional plumbers from the eastern state of Orissa. By employing a discourse of professionalism and by instituting codes, training, and certification programs, professionalization in this case has undermined Orissan plumbers by changing the basis of plumbing knowledge and opening entry to outsiders. I conclude by suggesting that professionalization is a modern trope that does not necessarily imply monopoly benefits and higher job quality for all members of an occupational group.

In the second essay, “The Price is Right? Ethnographic and Field-Experimental Evidence of Price-Setting from the Sale of Handicraft Products in Southern India” I investigate price-setting behavior among craft artisans in

India. Scholars of economic sociology have shown that sellers often vary prices among different buyers for short-term monetary gains or long-term relational gains, but they have failed to consider how sellers' relationship with their products can affect their price-setting behavior even in the absence of such gains. This paper, by studying how artisans and traders in a wood and lacquerware cluster in India vary prices across buyers, demonstrates the importance of product attachment in understanding price discrimination. Drawing on a field audit study where trained buyers purchase identical products from artisans and traders, the paper documents that artisans often charge significantly lower prices to discerning buyers who are likely to care for their products beyond the point of sale, even if these buyers are wealthy, in contrast to traders who price in accordance with buyers' willingness-to-pay. These findings are consistent with ethnographic evidence documenting artisans' and traders' varying attachment to their products as indicated by their investment in the products, meaning ascribed to the products and internal standards for the products. By introducing the idea of product attachment, this paper contributes to our understanding of price-setting and economic decision-making more broadly, while also offering a unique methodological model that combines experimental and ethnographic research.

In the third essay, "Export-Oriented Industrialization and Technological Frames of Government Officials, Workers and Capitalists: Evidence from a Mechanization Project in India" I study a case of a failed export-oriented industrialization project. Export-oriented industrialization (EOI) is a common strategy for economic development in developing economies that can be achieved by increasing exports in large manufacturing sectors or smaller-scale, cluster-based industries. A key component of the EOI strategy, whether in the context of large- or small-scale production, is technological upgrading of manufacturing practices to facilitate exports and boost worker earnings. While the literature has recognized the salience of technological upgrading, it has focused predominantly on successful cases, thus overlooking problems in the implementation and adoption of such technology that could impede exports. In this paper, I draw on an ineffective export-driven mechanization initiative in a handicraft cluster in southern India to illustrate how key stakeholders might adopt incompatible "technological frames" in making sense of new technology, thus hindering the expansion of exports. I describe how government officials in this case viewed the technology brought into the sector through the frame of "status," workers perceived the technology using a "creative control" frame, whereas capitalists saw the same technology as being a source of "profits." These mismatched frames led to discordant actions by the stakeholders, resulting in limited adoption of the technology, weak exports and little improvements in worker earnings. By highlighting a key condition under which export-driven technology projects might fail, namely when key stakeholders' technological frames are misaligned, this paper draws important implications for the many developing economies using EOI as their primary industrialization strategy.