

## Research Statement

My research focuses on experimental work. Specifically, I often use experiments to try and test claims related to the field of Law and Economics. The use of instruments such as “stealing games” have provided unique insights into pro-social and anti-social behavior as well as the effectiveness of deterrence schemes and general public policy. An example that was particularly inspirational for my academic work were the insights of Khadjavi (2014) which showed how having a formal system for punishing bad actors may deactivate pro-social emotions and behavioral inclinations that can disincentivize actions like stealing. I look to utilize these tools in a similar way in my studies to garner other important insights.

However, I’ve noticed a trend in the studies that use these types of games that I find troubling. Namely, the way we speak about the decisions respondents make in these experiments is often very different from how these choices are presented to them. The majority of these papers attempt to use “neutral” language meant to foster a lab environment that is “context-free.” This is consistently the case in studies that use stealing games as they describe the act of stealing as “transferring money from the other player’s account to your own.”

The justification for doing this is based on legitimate concerns about not wanting to unintentionally introduce bias into the decisions of respondents. Presenting an action as “stealing” may give it negative moral connotations and dissuade respondents from choosing to do it.

Yet, draining this action of its moral character may defeat the purpose of the experiment. Studying crime necessitates understanding why individuals may choose to take immoral actions to benefit themselves. Additionally, we cannot be sure that actions taken in this “neutral” environment are similarly indicative of real world behaviors for all groups. There’s reason to believe White and Black Americans have very different perceptions of and relationships with the police and other government institutions. Thus, it’s logical to assume that whether or not they are mentioned in our presentation of the game and the decisions available to respondents can potentially have very different effects on a White or Black respondents. With this in mind, how can we be certain that our approach is not unintentionally tailored more to one group than the other?

In my job market paper, I designed an experimental test of framing to see if these concerns had merit. Its results do indeed suggest that what we call “context-free” may not actually carry the same meaning for all groups. Whilst the willingness to steal reported for White respondents reflected a unique behavioral response to all frames, the willingness to steal of Black respondents in a “context-free” environment appeared to mirror their decisions in a game of explicit chance held in a casino rather than their much more reticent actions in the frame that explicitly mentioned the possibility of repercussions from the police. This should give pause to anyone looking to conduct

experimental studies regarding Law and Economics and suggests that norms about experimental design in this field may need to be re-examined.

I believe the best solution to this problem is for experimental economists to embrace context. We should try to ensure that the way we speak about respondent behavior is congruent with how said respondents are actually approaching the decisions they are presented with. Presenting stealing as stealing makes it less likely that respondents will be confused about how they should feel in making a decision or taking an action. In turn, this makes it less likely that some groups will be less likely to understand because the presentation of their choices was not tailored to them.

Additionally, the incorporation of more perspectives and a diverse range of new perspectives will further allow us to identify possible blindspots within our research norms. This is not just important for considering how current experimental tests may be more tailored to White Americans than other racial, but considering the robustness of claims as a whole. I believe replications should be more prioritized within the literature as having fresh eyes look at the results of experiments can help combat possible confirmation bias. This is why I have personally engaged in several myself, such as the one I am co-authoring with Nathan Fiala. I've additionally found that experiments using online surveys can be an excellent complement to in-person experiments, especially in cases where conducting these studies in person requires smaller samples of convenience. Both approaches have their benefits and drawbacks and it makes sense to incorporate each into a hybrid approach that can lean on the strengths of both.

Ultimately, I believe lab-based experiments are a valuable complement to empirical investigations of behavior. This is especially true in instances where the true motivations that may inform actions may be concealed or misidentified by too hasty an analysis of empirical data. Behavioral research can be useful for identifying the influence of considerations such as fairness that remain hard to tackle with a traditional theoretical approach. At the same time, it is important to understand the limitations of these experimental tools as well as when and how to use them properly as their role in the economic literature continues to evolve. My work is largely motivated by a want to help refine these tools through examinations of experimental procedure, and looking for blindspots in conventional approaches touted by the literature. In the future, I look to design an experiment to see if investment into compliance is heterogeneous across identity groups in interactions with police, as it is massively pertinent to the theoretical results I have previously explored with colleagues that may complicate the identification of racial bias in policing. Yet, doing so will require that I delve much deeper into experimental design to ensure the behaviors I look at are properly indicative of real world behaviors for all groups.