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Fashions, framing and expertise: ethical hazards for economists

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ABSTRACT

Compared to other social sciences, it appears economists enjoy overwhelming influence in policy debates. What are the ethical concerns that should bear upon the exercise of such voice? Two forms of conflict of interest are explored here: funding sources may undermine objectivity in framing the research agenda as well as through the better-known route of influencing research outcomes. What questions get asked or ignored, and the methodological approach that economists choose, may be influenced by funders. Considerations of personal advancement may influence how, when and what research is disseminated. The absence of debate on accountability of economists-as-advisors is worrying. Self-regulatory processes are needed so that power is exercised with greater responsibility.

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Several economists have been concerned with the question of ethics among economists. These concerns have been raised in the context of their role as advisors and their research. As researchers, the issues that have been discussed include methodology (e.g. when it involves human subjects), informed consent and evidence of conflict of interest arising from funding sources. As advisors, their impact on policy, outreach activities (its form, extent and so on), their ability to remain independent, etc. have received attention.

This short paper lists further worries confronting research and outreach activities of economists that have arisen in the course of my own work, all of it in India. I have encountered these issues in the course of professional activities (such as peer review for academic journals, evaluation of research proposals, examination of theses, etc.). The work has involved a fair dose of policy-oriented work, or, 'research for action' (Drèze 2017). This has taken the form of using research, especially field studies, to inform public debates on social policy issues (Drèze and Khera 2017).

Though the discussion here is entirely on issues emanating from research in India, certain dimensions are of global interest: these questions likely confront those in other disciplines, they confront researchers across the world, whenever people (not just academics, but also politicians, activists and others) get involved in policy making processes which affect other people's lives. (For instance, see Benatar (2002) on medical research, Slater (2012) on government policies regarding 'impact', Hall and Martin (2019) on research misconduct in business schools, and so on.)

In this paper, I draw primarily on my involvement in a public debate on Aadhaar, India's controversial digital ID programme. The idea behind Aadhaar was to provide each Indian resident a unique number, the uniqueness of which is guaranteed by biometric identification (and demographic details if need be). Over 800 million Indian residents were enrolled into the database by 2015. Initially, Aadhaar was projected as a *voluntary* facility for all residents, but from 2012 onwards it increasingly became compulsory for a range of welfare benefits and government services (e.g. marriage registration).

Proponents of Aadhaar compare it to the Social Security Number (SSN) in the United States. As with the SSN, there are serious privacy concerns with Aadhaar in India. Though the right to privacy is recognised as a constitutional right in India, unrestrained use of Aadhaar has proliferated serious concerns related to profiling, tracking and mass surveillance. To make matters worse, the mandatory requirement of Aadhaar for welfare benefits has meant that it is undermining the right to life also. Denial of benefits can arise from not producing the Aadhaar number, not submitting it to the relevant welfare registry or failing biometric authentication in cases where that has been made compulsory. Over 2017–2018, over 30 hunger deaths were precipitated by loss of access to meagre but life-saving welfare benefits, which in turn was due to Aadhaar being made mandatory (Khera 2019).

In the early years of the Aadhaar debate, to the extent that economists paid attention to the project, their main contribution was to help create elite consensus in favour of the programme. Economists within government (for instance, the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, the Chief Economic Advisor, the Reserve Bank of India, etc.) and 'independent' academics parroted the same line (illustrative examples of such interventions include Roy Chaudhuri and Somanathan (2011), Banerjee (2013), Pahwa (2015) and Tiwari (2018)). The most glaring example was the attribution of huge savings to the exchequer, accruing from Aadhaar-integration, based on dubious estimates (George and Subramanian 2015; World Bank 2016). According to these 'estimates' the savings could be made because Aadhaar-integration enabled the detection of duplicates and 'ghosts' on the welfare rolls. In fact, it turned out that when people failed to link Aadhaar to the relevant registry, they were deleted as 'ghosts' or 'duplicates' (Khera 2019). These claims went largely unchallenged, and, to make matters worse, they were amplified by some (e.g. the then World Bank Chief Economist). Even after the savings estimates were discredited, neither were they acknowledged as a mistake nor were they retracted (Drèze and Khera 2018). I will return to Aadhaar shortly.

1. Fashion

The first set of issues regarding the ethics of economists pertain to what gets studied and what methodological tools are used to study them.

1.1. Research motivation

What problems do empirical economists study and what motivates them to work on those issues, rather than others? In formulating a research agenda, there appears to be some disconnect between academic research and what might appear to be relevant problems viewed from the point of view of the people. Another dimension that merits probing is

the extent to which the privileged (social and economic) background of most academics skews research agendas away from important questions. In India, the exclusion of disadvantaged communities from academia is well recognised (Aggarwal, Drèze, and Gupta 2015). Upper caste, and possibly upper class, (predominantly male) persons dominate academic spaces. Our lived experiences are often completely disconnected from the daily economic and social struggles of the people we study. For instance, if everyone used the same public services (be it schooling or health or public transport), question of accountability of government nurses, doctors and teachers, might have been asked more often, and approached differently than they are currently. Social distance and economic inequality mean that a natural wellspring of research questions cannot be accessed by many academics.

In the Aadhaar debate the skew has been very evident. As mentioned earlier, most economists (and other academics), to the extent that they paid any attention to Aadhaar in the early years, were instrumental in cementing an elite consensus for the project, rather than thinking critically about the possible fallout, say, of its application in welfare programmes. A recent study is illustrative. The study analysed data from a government portal on the use of Aadhaar in the Public Distribution System (PDS), a welfare intervention aimed at providing subsidised food, in Delhi. The researchers used data publicly available, but these data do not allow meaningful questions that would allow a fuller understanding of the use of Aadhaar in the PDS to be answered. For instance, data on time taken for biometric authentication are reported, and that becomes the centre piece of the findings. Yet, we know from other reports that the real bottleneck is to get to the stage of biometric authentication (e.g. a connection to the server may take time). The study does analyse data on the number of times the machines lost connection to the server, but this key aspect of the research is side-lined, both in the policy brief and the news report (Singh 2018). The researchers end up presenting a distorted view of the situation.

1.2. Research methodology

A related issue is what counts as evidence and whether that should be the only or most important guiding force for policy making (Drèze 2018). A privileged background means not having a well of lived experiences of social and economic disadvantage to draw from. Economists are, therefore, compelled to rely (too heavily) on published work, drawn from professional journals alone, to formulate their research agenda. Apart from a pre-existing divergence between social needs and academic work in the literature, there is a huge premium on, say, establishing causality in empirical work. Not only is there a danger of a narrowing view of 'evidence', but also of 'rigour'. Within empirical work in economics, an emphasis on causality has meant that, at different points of time, different methodological approaches have been privileged over others. In recent years, primary data (collected by professional agencies) has gained currency because it facilitates technique, but fieldwork – which may facilitate understanding – remains undervalued.

Causality, in turn, can only be established if certain methodologically 'rigorous' tools are employed. Given that publications in professional journals are a matter of survival in academia, some may 'reverse engineer' their research agenda along these lines: given the data availability, what are the questions that can be answered, such that disciplinary

requirements of methodological rigour can be satisfied. As Deaton (2007) put it, 'students no longer look for a thesis topic, but for an instrument.' This sometimes results in useful questions being asked, but not always.

The Economist has commented on the economists' herd mentality, noting that certain regression techniques become 'fads' (2016). It cautions that 'fashions and fads are distorting economics, by nudging the profession towards asking particular questions, and hiding bigger ones from view.' The concern here is whether instead of using an ever-expanding range of tools and evidence, empirical economics is getting methodologically narrower. The question of research methodology has come in for a fair bit of discussion in the context of the growing use of randomised control trials (RCTs) by development economists (Cartwright and Deaton 2018). Further, a special issue of *Social Science and Medicine* (2018), dedicated to RCTs, discussed a wide range of ethical concerns.

2. Funding

There are several sources of funding for research: government, industry, donor organisations (bilateral, multilateral etc.); and more recently, the importance of philanthropies has grown. That funding sources raise issues related to conflict of interest has been discussed, but funding may compromise research through framing, methodology, presentation of results, etc.

Maintaining independence of the research agenda, method and findings can be a challenge no matter what the source of funding is. Two examples below (government- and philanthropy- sponsored research) highlight some of the questions that arise with sponsored research. 'Sponsored' research here refers to research where funders reach out to interested parties to conduct research on a specific topic of pecuniary interest to the funder. This is only one sense in which sponsored research is different from 'independent research' (where researchers are likely to submit proposals in response to publicly issued calls).

2.1. Framing effects

Omidyar Network (ON), a philanthropy, funds 'for-profit' as well as 'not-for-profit' activities. Until the Aadhaar debate started raging in India, its not-for-profit grants seemed focussed on education, governance, enabling diversity in the digital world (e.g. through languages) etc. What is ON's interest in Aadhaar? Omidyar Network is a self-styled 'philanthropic investment firm', that has committed several billion dollars in financial inclusion (Solidsky 2016), including in India. By their own admission, ON sees great potential (see their publications such as 'Credit Disrupted', *Why We Invested: Digital Identity Research Initiative* and 'Smartphones plus Aadhaar: Tipping point for Impact Investing in India'). Digital IDs, such as Aadhaar, are supposed to play a pivotal role in the fintech sector. The possible issues with ON funding for Aadhaar can be discerned from Bruck (2006) and Giridhardas (2018).

ON is now funding more than USD 2 million worth of (not-for-profit) research on Aadhaar in India through a handful of organisations. The main fundees for research on Aadhaar in India are Indian School of Business, IDInsight, Caribou Digital and more recently, National Institute of Public Finance and Public Policy; ID4D based at the World

Bank also received a similar grant (\$2,000,000 in 2017). Their funding for Aadhaar related research is what I term 'sponsored' research. The suggestion here is not that investing in fintech is wrong per se, but that the harms from these technologies are getting better documented now (think of the recent Cambridge Analytica-Facebook scandal). Yet ON's research agenda shows little or no regard for these concerns, as far as I can see. The blinders are coming from their prior investments in this sector.

This background is likely to affect the research agenda of the organisations sponsored by them. The research coming out of the ON-funded groups illustrates that research funded by philanthropies can also compromise independence. An important way in which this happens is by influencing the framing of the research. For instance, research on integration of Aadhaar with the Public Distribution System (PDS) is a recurring topic in ON-funded research. This is because Aadhaar is compulsory to access subsidised food supplied from the PDS. This research ought to have started by looking at what ails the PDS, what the possible fixes could be and to what extent Aadhaar can play a role. Ignoring some of the existing work on these issues, the enquiry undertaken by ON-funded groups betrays a certain eagerness to find a positive role for Aadhaar. Logically, they ought to start with the question, 'Is there a role for Aadhaar?' and then going to, 'What role can it play?' and then, 'How can it be done better?' Instead, the first two are entirely ignored, proceeding directly to the third. People were asked whether they support mandatory use of Aadhaar, or whether (in a yes/no format) there are any perceived benefits from it. These questions would have been more interesting (or, at all interesting) if they had been accompanied by, 'What do people think mandatory requirement is achieving, and *what* are the perceived benefits from it?' These nuances are important because the role of propaganda in creating elite consensus for the project is well documented (Khera 2017).

Similarly, if someone asked me to work on financial inclusion (one of the topics studied by the ON funded group), I would note that there *is* a dearth of physical access to banking in rural areas, but I would have been as likely to explore opening more bank branches and more bank counters in existing branches as a solution, as I would banking correspondents or mobile banking. The former options are not explored at all. This is what the 'framing' issue is. These are just two small examples of how sponsored research tilts the research agenda and affects the framing of the debate.

The problem is not limited to funding by philanthropies. In response to a Parliamentary committee recommendation, the Planning Commission approached a research institute, the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP), to carry out a cost benefit analysis of Aadhaar. It was made clear to the research group that conducted the analysis that what was required was a result that would situate the Aadhaar project in a positive light. The analysis prepared by NIPFP fulfilled this request at the cost of doing a fair study (Khera 2013). (Interestingly, this same group has now received funding from Omidyar Network. It appears that ON has a penchant for spotting such organisations.)

Similarly, it is often the case that when the government funds research, findings that are contrary to the political stance of the day may be suppressed, ignored or worse, whereas those that are favourable are used in a propagandist manner. For instance, the Food ministry commissioned an independent research group to study the Public Distribution System. The report on the government website suppresses many of the improvements recorded, which are only available in the 'interim' report submitted by the researchers.

We don't know, but it is possible that government funding through its councils of research (e.g. for social science or scientific research) affords more independence.

2.2. Effect on methodology and presentation

Framing effects and inadequate domain expertise also affect the methodology. Exclusion from welfare was one of the highlights of the findings of the *State of Aadhaar Report 2017-18*, one of the flagship ON-funded research reports (Abraham et al. 2018). If it aimed to document exclusion from welfare due to Aadhaar, the sampling design used was totally inappropriate. The use of voter lists means that some fraction of the respondents would have been beneficiaries, of which a smaller proportion still would have faced issues. It would have made sense to start with lists of beneficiaries.

Moreover, their findings on exclusion were that while Aadhaar contributes to exclusion (e.g. through biometric authentication failures), the significant sources of exclusion are unrelated to Aadhaar (e.g. meagre welfare budgets are noted). The headline finding in the ON-funded study reports this as 'Exclusion from food ration (PDS) due to Aadhaar-related factors is significant, but lower than non-Aadhaar factors'. Someone with domain knowledge would have presented the findings quite differently: that there were pre-existing sources of exclusion which Aadhaar cannot fix (e.g. meagre budgets), and the use of Aadhaar has *added* a new source of exclusion, making matters worse. In the government's narrative, erroneous exclusions are also passed off as savings.

3. Expertise

Sometimes, the emphasis on technique has meant that context has taken a backseat. Some researchers even claim that they need not know about the ground realities of the programmes they evaluate and study with secondary data. This echoes Kitchin (2014) who states 'the idea that data can speak for themselves suggests that anyone with a reasonable understanding of statistics should be able to interpret them without context or domain-specific knowledge. This is a conceit voiced by some data and computer scientists and other scientists, such as physicists, all of whom have become active in practising social science and humanities research.'

This danger – of a lack of domain-specific knowledge – is exacerbated perhaps when sponsors shop around for researchers, look for 'professional' data analytic companies, or good 'brands' where the required expertise may or may not exist. Studying the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), one researcher associated with Omidyar Network funded Aadhaar research claimed, 'But in order to test the hypothesis, we don't need to understand NREGA at all' (personal communication).

3.1. Outreach, impact, accountability

Economists are often asked to comment on various policy issues (i.e. don the hat of a public intellectual), even when that may not be their core area of work. For those economists who choose to play that role, it is their duty to put their weight behind the struggles of underdogs (Hirschman 1981). Even otherwise, there are certain ethical concerns that 'economists as public intellectuals' cannot ignore. DeMartino (2013) is concerned about

the power of economists to impact the lives of others, without adequate accountability mechanisms being in place. Atkinson (2011) points to the tendency among economists to be ‘uncharacteristically shy’ about discussing their own behaviour.

Tirole (2017) writes about the dilemmas of economists as public intellectuals (70–79). He advises restraint (when, how and how much should economists intervene in public debates and policy making?) in performing the role of the public intellectual. A Nobel laureate himself, he labelled the propensity of economists to offer comment outside their own area of expertise, the ‘Nobel Prize Syndrome’ (73). For instance, two laureates’ endorsements of Aadhaar – quite likely based on hearing only one side of the debate and on discredited savings estimates from the World Bank – are repeatedly played back in Indian public debates and used by the government to defend the programme in Court. The question is: where should we draw the line, given the risks associated with getting it wrong?

It is worth mentioning that these tentative attempts at shining the light on complex issues is almost completely at odds with the argument advanced by Duflo (2017). Her exhortation to economists to take charge of policy making is contrary to the caution and introspection that others have advocated. She seems to suggest that economists are better placed to deal with policy questions because ‘citizens are humans, with conflicting objectives, limited information sets, limited attention and limited willpower’, because ‘policymakers love a free lunch’, and apart from being humans who share all the human characteristics described above, government workers’ ‘incentives are not necessarily to work very hard or in the best interests of the citizens they serve’ (Duflo 2017, 11). Given that hers is an influential voice in the field, the need for such a discussion is ever more urgent (see Drèze 2017 and 2018 for instance).

Consider this example: An unpublished paper (funded by Omidyar Network) was covered by two national dailies, with a misleading headline *and* they had got the details wrong. Though the authors quoted in the media report protest that they were misquoted, no correction was carried. (That the report was carried by two national dailies, suggests that it may have been based on a press release issued by the research group.) As it happens, not only are the results questionable, the portrayal by the journalists was plain wrong (see Dhorajiwala, Somanchi, and Narayanan 2018). This example raises two questions:

Timing: One source of tension in getting involved in public debates is that carefully designed studies take time to implement and for results to emerge. Public discussion and debate moves much faster. Given the urgency, there are situations when researchers feel they cannot wait for results to emerge. (In the frantic scramble, an unanswered question is which ‘rigorous’ studies get amplified, and become ‘public knowledge’, and which get ignored. A Planning Commission study of the PDS pertaining to the period 1997–2001 continues to be cited, even though it is woefully outdated, because its message of a dysfunctional PDS suits certain commentators.) In the case of the unpublished paper reported in national dailies (mentioned above), the release of the findings was timed to coincide with an ON-funded conference on Aadhaar, possibly in an effort to create an interest in the conference.

Controlling the message: Academics may lose control over the key message in the process of dissemination. Careful briefing may not be enough to ensure that the media coverage reflects the correct message. A common trick that the media use is ‘headline

baiting' (a provocative headline that grabs people's attention, even if the headline is unfaithful to the findings). For instance, a study of the impact of biometric smartcards has often passed in media as an 'Aadhaar' success story, even though it has nothing to do with Aadhaar. Another example is the reporting of an *estimate of potential savings* in the headline 'Aadhaar ID saving Indian govt about \$1 billion per annum: World Bank'.

Moreover, policy impact has become an important parameter for evaluating academic research over the past few years (The Conversation 2014). Academics in universities are encouraged to demonstrate, and are evaluated for, policy impact of their research. Among the parameters that may be used to measure impact is inclusion on government committees, dissemination through workshops, conferences and media. (For instance, the University of Oxford now has a web page which helps journalists 'Find an expert'.) This raises two ethical concerns – conflict of interest and accountability.

Careerism: Conflict of interest issues have received some attention in the context of funding and research results but there is another form of conflict which is discussed less, related to career advancement. There are clear dangers in getting involved – co-optation by government, which compromises independence, is certainly very important. Such incentives may also have framing effects and associated problems. If the advice given is tailored to what the government wants to hear, the chances of career advancement are higher. An individual may also take the edge off the message, not necessarily for personal advancement (opportunism), but strategically for the advancement of the policy proposal (as a bargaining strategy). The line between co-optation and cooperation is easily blurred, while the one between cooperation and confrontation is hard to draw.

Accountability: Another concern is accountability when there is public involvement. Economists are especially vulnerable to this, given that policy makers rely much more on economists compared with other social scientists (DeMartino 2013). Who is to be held responsible when our policy advice or interventions make things worse? (With the recent rise of randomised control trials methodology (RCTs), where real people are directly affected, it is crucial to discuss this as well. This raises questions about Institutional Review Board approvals for such RCTs.) In the case of politicians and bureaucrats, there are well-established (if woefully inadequate) channels of maintaining accountability (e.g. elections). There are none to hold economists accountable in case of lapses.

4. Concluding remarks

Hirschman (1981) discusses whether 'late blooming of moral emphasis' is a professional trait and the 'existential incompatibility between morality and moralising, on the one hand, and analytical-scientific activity, on the other' (296). Given the disproportionate (and growing?) weight that economists enjoy in public policy, the sorts of issues highlighted here need urgent attention from those with the appropriate toolkit to answer them. Related to this, but not discussed here is the question of the relationship and power asymmetry between the researchers and the researched.

Institutional responses may be required – e.g. the temptation to 'reverse engineer' research agendas is related to publication pressures that come from the way incentives in universities are structured. After emphasising publications as a metric of productivity, 'impact' is becoming important in the evaluation of academics, again with some perverse or unintended outcomes. There is already work on what issues need to be addressed (e.g.

Hausman and McPherson 1997) and how one might go about it (e.g. Tirole 2017 suggests some ways to proceed in these tricky situations).

The advent of Big Data and its rising influence in policy analysis in the past decade or so has already led to a conversation about ethics (boyd and Crawford 2012). It is time – at the very least – to ask why economists have, by and large, escaped these difficult discussions.

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