

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation



Latin American Studies Association



EXPERIMENTS FOR EXPORT?

BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

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A coin flip does not mean the same thing to a person who believes that supernatural forces determine the course of events.¹

Why do people trust or distrust others? Are people selfish or do they consider others' well-being? How can scarce resources be shared effectively? What induces people to behave fairly? Social scientists have long used behavioral experiments to understand these and other collective action problems. Yet, despite the chronic distrust, inequalities, and social inefficiencies in the region, Latin Americanists have largely ignored these methods. In recent years, researchers have poured vast resources energy into public opinion surveys, ethnographies, and qualitative studies of social preferences and political attitudes in Latin America. But key questions of causality remain elusive. Experimental methods have the potential to bring answers to some the region's most vexing questions.

This conference and the resulting papers, presentations, and conversations aim to foment discussion about the theoretical and methodological challenges and payoffs of comparative experimental studies in Latin America. In the process, we seek to foster collaboration by connecting Latin Americanists with scholars who focus on other regions and/or who employ distinct theoretical and methodological toolkits.

BACKGROUND & GOALS

¹ Cárdenas, J.C. and Carpenter, J. 2008. Behavioural Development Economics: Lessons from Field Labs in the Developing World. *Journal of Development Studies* 44(3):311-338.

The wave of behavioral experiment research that hit the social sciences in the late 1970s flowed from the theoretical groundwork laid down by vigorous multidisciplinary collaboration in the 1940s-1960s. This interdisciplinary initiative was validated when its pioneers, Vernon Smith and Daniel Kahneman, won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics. In the past several decades, behavioral experiments have become increasingly mainstream in economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology. Yet despite their applicability to an array of social, political, and economic dilemmas common to Latin America, they are rarely used in comparative culture research.

Experimental methods may indeed grant us real purchase on the pressing problems. An initial set of hurdles that must be cleared involve the exigencies of conducting comparative experimental research in Latin America, including context-specific sensitivity and complex logistics. Hence we need to learn more about when and where they can be most effective.

Thus we seek to start a dialogue on the potential theoretical benefits, methodological challenges, and practical considerations of conducting behavioral experiments in Latin America by linking with experts in other geographic regions and disciplines where these methods have been field-tested more thoroughly. Accordingly, the conference has the interrelated goals of (1) integrating state-of-the-art behavioral theories and methodological approaches into social science focused on Latin America, (2) incorporating the analytical perspectives of researchers whose primary area of research is outside the region into debates apropos to Latin America, and (3) thereby challenging the conventional approaches to studying political and social culture in the region.

With the support of the Latin American Studies Association, the Mellon Foundation, and Georgia State University we are holding a two-day workshop in Atlanta, GA focused on the importance, challenges, drawbacks, and potential of comparative experimental research. The workshop will be composed of several panels with papers and discussions focusing on both theoretical and methodological issues around comparative behavior experimental research as well as recent empirical work from Latin America and other regions of the world. We are encouraging an informal approach to the presentations with the goal of encouraging and fostering robust discussion among the participants. Overall, we hope the workshop will expand the consideration, use, and quality of experimental tools in comparative social science and providing opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-regional collaboration.

CONFERENCE ORGANIZATION

The conference will take place Friday, April 20 and Saturday, April 21 on the campus of Georgia State University. Some invitees will present papers while others will serve as discussants. We anticipate presentations on the following broad themes:

Theme 1: Behavioral Experiments in Comparative Perspective

What is the value added of behavioral experiments for comparative studies? What is the value of comparing experimental behavior across different populations, societies, and polities? What validity issues, and methodological problems should be considered?

Theme 2: Recent Experimental Work in Latin America

We are interested recent, ongoing, or unpublished research that employs experimental methods to address problems and puzzles in the Latin American context. Such methods include but are not limited to behavioral experiments, field experiments, various natural experiments, and survey-based experiments.

Theme 3: Conducting Experiments in Developing Contexts

What unique challenges face researchers interested in conducting experiments in less developed contexts? These include but are not limited to local norms of research, numeracy, literacy, culture, researcher effects, and other pitfalls. What tools and methods have been or might be developed to overcome or cope with them? Can technology be part of the solution?

Theme 4: The Limits of Taking the Lab to the Field

Moving from a well controlled environment to less ideal research conditions can be a major hurdle to traditional lab-based experiments. Moreover, questions of external validity can plague even the most well conceived experiment. What other, perhaps less publicized, issues surround taking the lab to the field?

Theme 5: Using Behavioral Experiments to Understand Politics

Experimental economists and social psychologists have created myriad games to test and refine fundamental behavioral assumptions undergirding central behavioral theories and models. How might these games be adapted to address important questions about political behavior and social preferences in Latin America, the developing world more generally, and in new, established and/or non-democratic regimes?