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Essays on gender, housing, and peers

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Essays on gender, housing, and peers

Negar Khaliliaraghi

Lund
Economic
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Essays on gender, housing, and peers

Essays on gender, housing, and peers

by Negar Khaliliaraghi



LUND
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Thesis advisors: Petter Lundborg, Therese Nilsson, Ana Rodríguez-González

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| Abstract <p>This thesis consists of three self-contained papers that use methods in applied-microeconometrics to study questions involving gender, housing, and peers.</p> <p>In the first paper, we examine whether gender gaps in labor market outcomes are driven by differences in productivity. Using the as-if random allocation of job seekers to caseworkers at the Swedish Employment Agency, we are able to calculate productivity levels without bias from task assignment. The results show that women are as productive as men and earn comparable wages. However, the gender gap in promotions persists, despite women having the same productivity as men. Moreover, female caseworkers tend to manage fewer job seekers and work fewer hours, which explains most of the observed earnings gap.</p> <p>The second paper aims to explore how housing affordability and stability affect academic success. To identify causal effects, I use a lottery-based allocation system in Sweden that randomizes the timing of access to affordable student housing. The results show that early access to these housing units improves grades and class rank. The effects are larger for the sample of international students. Survey data suggest that these students are less likely to work, have shorter commutes, and have greater housing stability, which may help explain the positive impact on education.</p> <p>In the third paper we study long-term impacts of early exposure to peers from different backgrounds. Leveraging comprehensive Danish register data, this study examines how higher exposure to non-Western peers in childcare centers influences the educational and crime outcomes of native Danish children in their adolescent. We use the as-if random variation in peer composition across entry-year cohorts, within childcare centers to causally estimate the effects. Our findings show that exposure to a higher share of non-Western peers negatively affects Danish and mathematics test scores and the probability of choosing the academic track in high school. We find no evidence of effects on criminal outcomes.</p> | | |
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Abstract

This thesis consists of three self-contained papers that use methods in applied microeconometrics to study questions involving gender, housing, and peers.

In the first paper, we examine whether gender gaps in labor market outcomes are driven by differences in productivity. Using the as-if random allocation of job seekers to caseworkers at the Swedish Employment Agency, we are able to calculate productivity levels without bias from task assignment. The results show that women are as productive as men and earn comparable wages. However, the gender gap in promotions persists, despite women having the same productivity as men. Moreover, female caseworkers tend to manage fewer job seekers and work fewer hours, which explains most of the observed earnings gap.

The second paper aims to explore how housing affordability and stability affect academic success. To identify causal effects, I use a lottery-based allocation system in Sweden that randomizes the timing of access to affordable student housing. The results show that early access to these housing units improves grades and class rank. Survey data suggest that these students are less likely to work and have shorter commutes, which may help explain the positive impact on education.

In the third paper we study long-term impacts of early exposure to peers from different backgrounds. Leveraging comprehensive Danish register data, this study examines how higher exposure to non-Western peers in childcare centers influences the educational and crime outcomes of native Danish children in their adolescent. We use the as-if random variation in peer composition across entry-year cohorts, within childcare centers to causally estimate the effects. Our findings show that exposure to a higher share of non-Western peers negatively affects Danish and mathematics test scores and the probability of choosing the academic track in high school. We find no evidence of effects on criminal outcomes.

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¹Very well-deserved though, might I add.

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Lund, March 2025
Negar

Introduction



Introduction

Gender, housing, and peers

Why do some people receive higher earnings, get better education, and move up the career ladder while others do not? What role do external factors play in shaping our outcomes? Answering these questions is important for understanding the sources of economic inequality. Economic success is shaped by more than just our ability and effort. An individual's economic outcomes are influenced by many other factors, like who their parents are, which school they went to, what they studied at university, whether they have a child, and so on. Empirical studies in economics have documented the influence of these external factors on several aspects of our lives.

This thesis explores three dimensions that potentially impact our economic outcomes, either directly or indirectly: *gender*, *housing*, and *peers*. My choice of research is driven by my interest in understanding what shapes who we are, what we do, and the opportunities we have.

A central theme of this thesis is understanding the factors that affect the formation and accumulation of human capital. Human capital refers to the stock of skills and knowledge that individuals have, which affect their productivity in the labor market. Human capital formation describes the process through which investments in people (e.g., education, training, health) improve these skills and impact future earnings. Economists have emphasized the crucial role of human capital in driving economic growth and development (Becker; 1992). Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin and her coauthor Lawrence Katz underline the importance of human capital in their book *The Race Between Education and Technology* by stating:

“That the twentieth century was both the American Century and

the Human Capital Century is no accident. Economic growth in the modern period requires educated workers, managers, entrepreneurs, and citizens. Modern technologies must be invented, innovated, put in place, and maintained. They must have capable workers at the helm.”

Building on this foundation, the first chapter of this thesis examines the existence of gender differences in productivity, a topic that has been widely emphasized in discussions regarding labor market outcomes. There is a persistent gender gap in earnings, promotions, and career advancement, often referred to as the “glass ceiling” (Bertrand et al.; 2010; Blau and Kahn; 2017). Although the role of the level of education as a key driver of gender differences in human capital has diminished, since women are better educated than ever, there are several reasons why gender gaps in productivity at work could still arise. Bearing the main burden of household work, motherhood, and working fewer hours are all factors that can play a role in creating a gender gap in productivity and, consequently, labor market outcomes.

Looking at factors that can act as barriers to human capital accumulation, the second chapter of this thesis examines how access to stable and affordable housing influences students’ academic performance. The university years are a critical period for the accumulation of human capital, but students facing housing insecurity may struggle to concentrate in class, participate in academic activities, or build strong professional and social networks. The lack of affordable housing options can force students to take on additional work to pay higher rent, take longer commutes, or live in overcrowded conditions with unstable rental agreements, all of which can disrupt their studies. If lack of access to stable and affordable housing negatively affects academic achievement, it also impacts long-term human capital accumulation and decreases future earnings. In this chapter, by investigating this relationship, I shed light on the role of housing affordability and stability in shaping educational outcomes.

The third chapter of this thesis examines whether the characteristics of childhood peers affect an individual’s educational outcomes in the long run. Early childhood is a crucial period for development, and as children enter childcare centers, they begin to interact with peers in structured environments that influence their learning and social skills. Although peer effects have been widely studied in schools and neighborhoods, we know less about how childhood exposure to peers from different backgrounds and levels of skills affects long-term academic performance. My coauthor and I explore whether children exposed to a higher share of non-Western peers, who are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, show differences in their educational outcomes, such as their mathematics and language test scores. This chapter examines how early

peer interactions, both directly and through their impact on the childcare environment and available resources, shape the formation of human capital.

Another common theme across all three chapters is the methodology and research designs. One of the main goals of each chapters was to identify causal relationships that have policy implications. In order to reliably claim causality, we need to go beyond correlations and find settings in which the actual effect can be teased out from other spurious relationships. The “credibility revolution” in empirical economics has transformed how researchers identify cause and effect. To quote Angrist and Pischke (2010) on the credibility revolution in empirical microeconomics: “the primary engine driving improvement has been a focus on the quality of empirical research designs.” The ideal setting or the gold standard for identifying causal relationships is a randomized controlled trial (RCT). In RCTs, individuals are randomly divided into treatment or control groups. As a result, any differences in their outcomes can be attributed to the presence of the treatment. In other words, the treatment *causes* the observed differences. However, conducting RCTs is not always feasible. In these situations, economists rely on natural experiments or quasi-experimental designs, where events and policies in real-world settings resemble RCTs and satisfy its randomization criteria. The exogenous variation present in these designs ensures that the differences in outcomes between these two groups reflect the effect of the treatment. This shift toward good research designs, in addition to access to better data and advances in econometric methods, has improved the credibility of empirical findings in economics in recent decades. In this thesis, I employ reliable research designs and rich data from Sweden and Denmark to uncover causal relationships that could inform policy.

Summary and contributions of the thesis

This section provides detailed summaries of the chapters contained in this thesis and their respective contributions.

Paper I: Gender Gaps in Productivity, Wages, and Promotions: Evidence from a Random Task Allocation Policy

Despite the progress women have made in the labor market over the last half century, gender gaps in earnings remain prevalent (Goldin; 2014; Cortes and Pan; 2020). In this paper, which is coauthored with Petter Lundborg and Johan Vikström, we investigate the long-standing question of whether pay and promo-

tion differences between men and women are driven by productivity differences. There are several reasons why there may be a gender gap in productivity. Women are usually responsible for a bigger share of tasks in the household which can affect their productivity at work. They are also more prone to loss of human capital after motherhood as they tend to work fewer hours and travel less. As a result, employers may invest less in their training and assign them to less attractive tasks where there is less room to grow and learn.

However, there are several reasons why our understanding of the role of productivity differences in gender gaps is still limited. First, productivity is complicated to measure as it is often not directly observed. Second, task assignments in the workplace are not always random. If women are more often assigned to more demanding tasks, observed productivity may reflect task difficulty rather than true productivity. Even when men and women perform similar tasks, productivity assessments may be influenced by subjective biases and different standards for each gender (Goldin and Rouse; 2000; Blau and Devaro; 2007; Card et al.; 2019). By leveraging productivity data from a setting where similar tasks are randomly assigned to employees, we overcome these challenges. At the Swedish Employment Agency, job seekers were assigned to different caseworkers based on their dates of birth which ensures randomness in task assignment. This allows us to address potential biases in task allocation and also measure each caseworker’s productivity based on the time it takes for their assigned job seekers to find employment.

Our results show small differences in productivity between female and male caseworkers, with women, if anything, being slightly more productive, which challenges some recent studies (Azmat and Ferrer; 2017; Cook et al.; 2020; Bolotnyy and Emanuel; 2022). We also find that controlling for education, parenthood, and tenure does not meaningfully affect the productivity gap. In addition, female caseworkers earn about 7% less than male caseworkers annually. This gap likely reflects the gender gap in hours worked. Furthermore, we find that female caseworkers are significantly less likely to get promoted.

These findings offer new insights into gender pay gaps among high-skilled workers. Similar evidence of earnings and promotion gaps exists in professions such as law, medicine, and academia (Goldin and Katz; 2016; Azmat and Ferrer; 2017; Sarsons et al.; 2021). Our study contributes to the small literature on gender productivity differences in high-skilled settings by leveraging a random task allocation and an objective measure of productivity. We also add to the literature on gender promotion gaps. Despite similar productivity levels, male caseworkers are significantly more likely to get promoted, which rules out objective productivity differences as an explanation.

Paper II: Housing by Chance: The Academic Impacts of Lottery-Based Access to Student Accommodation

Housing (un)affordability is a global problem with harmful consequences for the economy, including rising income and social inequality, limitations in labor mobility, and potential negative effects on economic growth (UN Habitat; 2015; Glaeser and Gyourko; 2018; Hsieh and Moretti; 2019; Dustmann et al.; 2022). Meanwhile, the demand for accommodation among university students is increasing as more students than ever attend university to pursue higher education. This has left students facing housing shortages and high rents in many cities where there is a large population of students (The Guardian; 2023).

To help students find affordable accommodations, many universities either directly offer units off- and on-campus or do so via agreements with private companies. These units are often more affordable than comparable units available on the private housing market, and many university students are eligible to apply for them. However, there is almost no causal evidence on how gaining access to student housing affects students' outcomes. A key challenge is that access to student housing and the timing of this access is often not random but rather based on explicit criteria and characteristics. Simply comparing outcomes between students who live in student housing and those who either do not or move in later during the academic year fails to yield causal estimates, as these students may systematically differ in terms of unobservable characteristics.

In this paper, I evaluate the impact of early access to affordable student housing on educational achievement. To identify a causal effect, I use a student housing lottery in Sweden that randomized the probability of gaining access to affordable student accommodation at the beginning of the academic year among newly admitted students. The lottery ensures that the variation in the time to receive accommodation is independent of other factors that may affect students' educational outcomes. Any differences in educational outcomes among lottery participants can therefore be attributed to when and whether they secured student housing.

I compare the outcomes of students who receive this type of accommodation before the academic year begins with those who receive housing later or not at all. I use an instrumental variable approach, using lottery rank as an instrument for earlier access to student housing. A better rank increases a student's priority and, consequently, their probability of securing housing sooner. The housing units offered through this lottery are not only close to the university but also relatively more affordable than comparable options on the private market. The results show that early access to affordable student housing signi-

ificantly improves academic performance. Students who obtain housing before the semester starts achieve higher grades and are 33% more likely to rank in the top 5% of their class. These effects persist into the second semester, though their magnitude decreases over time. The positive impact is particularly strong among international students. I also conduct a survey to explore potential mechanisms behind these results. The survey data reveal that students with university housing are less likely to be employed, which may have allowed them to allocate more time to their studies. They are also more likely to live in the city and have shorter commutes, potentially increasing class attendance. Moreover, they experience greater housing stability, benefiting from longer, legally protected, and more flexible rental contracts.

Compared to findings in studies on effects of interventions such as financial aid, targeted academic support, and faculty-student engagement, the effects observed in this study are substantial in magnitude (Angrist et al.; 2009; Carrell and Kurlaender; 2023; Murphy and Wyness; 2023). While some universities provide affordable student housing, its impact on academic achievement has been largely unexamined. This study highlights the causal role of housing affordability in human capital development and, by extension, long-term economic and labor market outcomes.

Paper III: Playmates and Pathways: Long-Run Impacts of Exposure to Immigrants in Childcare

Early childhood is a critical period in human development when skills, attitudes, and behaviors begin to form. Children are particularly malleable at this stage, and interventions during this period can have lasting effects into adulthood (Phillips and Shonkoff; 2000; Knudsen; 2004; Cunha et al.; 2006; Currie and Almond; 2011). Childcare centers play a key role in fostering both cognitive and non-cognitive skills and are often the first setting where children socialize with peers. In these environments, they form friendships, engage in group activities, and interact with others, making peer composition a potentially important factor in shaping their development. While both childhood environment and peer influences have been extensively studied as separate factors affecting individual outcomes, little is known about the long-term effects of early childhood peer interactions. These early interactions likely contribute to the long-term developmental impacts often associated with attending childcare centers (Currie; 2001; Blau and Currie; 2006; Felfe and Lalive; 2018). They also help us improve our understanding of the developmental process during these early ages.

This paper aims to shed light on early childhood peer effects by examining the impact of exposure to peers from non-Western countries on native children in Denmark. We focus on how early interactions with these peers influence long-term educational and criminal outcomes measured when children are 15-16 years old. This exposure may play a crucial role in shaping outcomes, as non-Western peers often come from different cultures, speak different languages, have different skill levels, and are raised by parents who usually differ from native parents in terms of education, income, and other important characteristics. For example, language skills, which are developed in early childhood, can be influenced by exposure to peers with a different mother tongue. To study the effects of non-Western peers on native children’s long-term outcomes, we leverage granular data from Denmark to identify children of different ethnic backgrounds who attended childcare centers between 2001 and 2007 and track their outcomes into adulthood. To address potential endogeneity, we exploit as-if random variation in peer composition within childcare centers and across cohorts entering the system for the first time (Hoxby; 2000). The analysis examines both the overall effects of peers in childcare centers and the peers within the same age group as native children. Additionally, it explores whether these effects vary by peer gender and makes a distinction between same-sex and opposite-sex interactions.

The findings reveal that exposure to non-Western peers in childcare negatively affects native children’s math and Danish test scores. These effects are primarily driven by peers in the same age group, with the strongest impact stemming from interactions with non-Western boys. Additionally, children exposed to a higher share of non-Western immigrants are less likely to choose an academic track in high school. The negative effects become significantly larger when the share of immigrant peers exceeds 40%. This suggests that policymakers could improve overall outcomes by reconsidering the allocation of children across childcare centers. While peer composition influences educational outcomes, its impact on criminal behavior in this context is minimal. Exploring potential mechanisms, we rule out the lower socioeconomic status and higher parental criminality of non-Western peers as primary drivers of these effects. Moreover, exposure to a higher share of non-Western peers in childcare may increase the likelihood of continued exposure later in school, which could amplify the observed negative effects. However, we do not find evidence that exposure to non-Western peers in 9th grade negatively affects educational outcomes.

Our contribution to the literature falls into two main categories. First, due to the scarcity of childcare-specific data, little is known about how early peer interactions in childcare centers influence long-term outcomes. Most previous research has focused on school, neighborhood, or residential peers (Lavy and Schlosser; 2011; Sacerdote; 2011; Lavy et al.; 2012). We provide novel and rare

evidence on the role of childcare peers in shaping later outcomes. Second, this study contributes to the growing literature on the long-term effects of exposure to peers with a foreign background. What distinguishes our work is its focus on early childhood and our ability to track children through age 16. This extended time frame allows us to examine both educational and behavioral outcomes, including youth crime, while exploring the underlying mechanisms over a longer horizon.

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