Curriculum Vitae
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Lucas C. Coffman
Boston College Economics
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EDUCATION

Harvard University, Ph.D., Business Economics, 2010
Case Western Reserve University, B.A., Mathematics, Economics, '04

PRINCIPAL EMPLOYMENT

01/20 – present	Assistant Professor of Economics, Boston College
07/16 – 12/19	Visiting Associate Professor of Economics, Harvard University
08/10 – 06/16	Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Ohio State University
08/14 – 07/15	Visiting Assistant Professor of Economics, Stanford University
08/11 – 03/12	Visiting Assistant Professor of Economics, Yale School of Management

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Experimental Economics, Behavioral Economics, Development Economics

TEACHING

As Instructor
PhD Experimental Economics: Boston College, Harvard Business School, Ohio State
Undergraduate Experimental Economics: Boston College, Harvard University, Ohio State
PhD and Undergrad Research Methods in Behavioral & Experimental Econ: Ohio State
MBA Answering Questions using Experiments: Yale School of Management

As assistant, both at Harvard
Experimental Economics, Ph.D.-level, for Alvin Roth
Policy Applications of Psychology & Economics, Undergraduate-level, for Sendhil Mullainathan

PUBLICATIONS, most recent first

"Pathways of Persuasion" (unformatted, ungated version)
Games and Economic Behavior, November 2020, 124: 239-253
With Paul Niehaus

While economic theories of persuasion emphasize the role of self-interest, others emphasize other-regard. To study these pathways, we introduce a simple experimental framework where sellers use free-form conversation to convince buyers to raise their valuations for objects. We find sellers more frequently target buyers' self-interest, and changes in self-interest explain more variation in persuasion overall. Additionally, sellers' gains along one pathway come at a considerable cost along the other. However, when sellers target other-regard, they are at their most persuasive.

Expectations Do Not Affect Punishment (unformatted free version)
The Journal of the Economic Science Association, December 2019, 5: 182—196.

Expectations-based reference dependence has been shown to be important across a variety of contexts in Psychology and Economics. Do expectations play a role in moral judgment? The higher our beliefs are relative to an outcome, do we punish more harshly? This paper reports a series of experiments investigating the hypothesis that expectations as reference points per se affect punishment. The experimental design varies the expectation the Punisher holds just before she learns what actually occurred. In tandem with the manipulation, expectations are shown to vary significantly and substantially. However, punishment does not respond to these exogenous changes in expectations. After 17 sessions, 295 Punishers, and six experimental setups, expectations are shown not to affect punishment in any systematic way.

"Liquidity Affects Job Choice: Evidence from Teach For America"
The Quarterly Journal of Economics, November 2019, 134(4): 2203—2236.
With John Conlon, Clayton Featherstone, and Judd Kessler

Can access to a few hundred dollars of liquidity affect the career choice of a recent college graduate? In a three-year field experiment with Teach For America (TFA), a prestigious teacher placement program, we randomly increase the financial packages offered to nearly 7,300 potential teachers who requested support for the transition into teaching. The first two years of the experiment reveal that while most applicants do not respond to a marginal \$600 of grants or loans, those in the worst financial position respond by joining TFA at higher rates. We continue the experiment into the third year and self-replicate our results. For the highest need applicants, an extra \$600 in loans, \$600 in grants, and \$1,200 in grants increase the likelihood of joining TFA by 12.2, 11.4, and 17.1 percentage points (or 20.0%, 18.7%, and 28.1%), respectively. Additional grant and loan dollars are equally effective, suggesting a liquidity mechanism. A follow-up survey bolsters the liquidity story and also shows that those pulled into teaching would have otherwise worked in private sector firms.

"Moral Perceptions of Advised Actions" (unformatted free version)
Management Science, August 2019, 65(8): 3449—3947
With Alexander Gotthard-Real

Can an organization avoid blame for an unpopular action by hiring an adviser to advise them to do it? We present experimental evidence suggesting this is the case -- advice to be selfish substantially decreases punishment of being selfish. Further, this result is true despite advisers' misaligned incentives, known to all: Through a relational contract, advisers are incentivized to tell the decision-makers what they want to hear. In follow-up treatments, we show advice does not decrease punishment solely by affecting beliefs of how necessary the selfish action was. Finally, in treatments where advisers are available, selfish decision-makers act more selfishly.

"The Size of the LGBT Population and the Magnitude of Anti-Gay Sentiment are Substantially Underestimated"
Management Science, October 2017, 63(10): 3168—3186.
With Katherine Coffman and Keith M Marzilli-Ericson

We demonstrate widely-used measures of the LGBT population and anti-gay sentiment are misestimated, likely substantially. We experimentally compare standard methodology of questioning about sexual identity and anti-gay sentiment (direct questions, privacy, and anonymity) to a "veiled" methodology that precludes inference about an individual but provides population estimates. The veiled method increased self-reports of non-heterosexual identity by 65 percent, same-sex sexual experiences by 59 percent. Self-reports of *anti*-gay sentiment also rose substantially (e.g. discomfort with a gay manager). Most existing data on sensitive behaviors and beliefs rely on self-reports, but our results show respondents may lie even with privacy and anonymity.

"Assessing the Rate of Replications in Economics"
American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings, May 2017, 107(5): 27—31.
With James Berry, Rania Gihleb, Douglas Hanley, and Alistair J Wilson

We assess the rate of replication for empirical papers in the 2010 American Economic Review. Across seventy empirical papers, we find that 29 percent have one or more citation that partially replicates the original result. While only a minority of papers has a published replication, a majority (sixty percent) have either a replication, robustness test or an extension. Surveying authors within the literature we find substantial uncertainty over the number of extant replications.

"A Proposal for Promoting and Incentivizing Replications"
American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings, May 2017, 107(5): 41—45.
With Muriel Niederle and Alistair J Wilson

We make a two-pronged proposal to (i) strengthen the incentivizes for replication work and (ii) better organize and draw attention to the replications that are conducted. First we propose that top journals publish short "replication reports." These reports could summarize novel work replicating an existing high-impact paper, or they could highlight a replication result embedded in a wider-scope published paper. Second, we suggest incentivizing replications with the currency of our profession: citations. Enforcing a norm of citing replication work alongside the original would provide incentives for replications to both authors and journals.

"Can Subtle Provision of Social Information Affect What Job You Choose (and Keep)? Experimental Evidence from Teach For America"
American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, January 2017, 9(1): 96—117.
With Clayton Featherstone and Judd Kessler

It has been well documented that information about the actions of others can affect small-stakes decisions. We show that a subtle provision of such social information can also influence a very high-stakes decision: whether to take (and keep) a job as a public school teacher. In an experiment involving thousands of admits to Teach For America (TFA), those provided with data about the high matriculation rate in the previous year are more likely to accept the job. Moreover, this effect persists into the second semester of teaching, even though one-sixth of those in the control group who initially accepted the job have left TFA by then. As expected, the effects are stronger for those more marginal in their decision to join TFA. Our results suggest that social information can have a powerful effect on high-stakes behavior and should be considered as a potential tool for policy.

"Intermediaries in Fundraising Inhibit Quality-Driven Charitable Donations"
Economic Inquiry, January 2017, 55(1): 409—424.

Charitable donations are frequently raised by an intermediary: a fundraiser (that is not the charity) solicits and accepts donations and subsequently sends the proceeds to the charity -- e.g. a workplace campaign for United Way or a 5km walk for Susan G. Komen. Such fundraisers can greatly increase donations received by a given charity, but how do they affect what types of charities we support? This paper shows having funds raised by an intermediary can make donors insensitive to charity quality: Unattractive charities can receive the same financial support as attractive charities. In a series of experiments, when donations are framed as going directly, attractive charities receive larger (between 68% and 91% larger average donation across studies) and more (between 19% and 25% higher likelihood of receiving a gift across studies) contributions relative to unattractive charities; however, when donations for the same charities are collected by (meaningless) intermediaries running fundraising campaigns, donations become statistically indistinguishable across charities. The intermediary fundraiser does not affect donor recall of charity identity or evaluation of charity quality. Follow-up experiments suggest information overload in the intermediary fundraiser context clouds the judgment of the donor. Simply put, intermediaries in fundraising do not preclude acquiring information about charities, but the complexity provided by the nature of the transaction all but precludes using it.

"Pre-Analysis Plans Have Limited Upside especially where Replications are Feasible"
Journal of Economic Perspectives, July 2015, 29(3): 81—98.
With Muriel Niederle

How and when do pre-analysis plans, hypothesis registries, and replications help us know what we know and what we don't know? A few simple models suggest the following take-aways: (i) Pre-analysis plans are most valuable for hypotheses that will not be tested multiple times and when the pre-analysis plans effectively eliminate researcher bias (not just reduce it), (ii) Pre-analysis plans can be valuable for replication efforts, and (iii) very few replications, typically three to five, are required to achieve precise, correct beliefs about the hypothesis, even with modestly biased replication attempts.

"The Schooling Decision: Family Preferences, Intergenerational Conflict, and Moral Hazard in the Brazilian *Favelas*"
Journal of Political Economy, June 2012, 120(3): 359—397. (Lead article)
with Leonardo Bursztyn

This paper experimentally analyzes the schooling decisions of poor households in urban Brazil. We elicit parents' choices between monthly government transfers conditional on their adolescent child attending school and guaranteed, unconditional transfers of varying sizes. In the baseline treatment, an overwhelming majority of parents prefer conditional transfers to larger unconditional transfers. However, few parents prefer conditional payments if they are offered text message notifications whenever their child misses school. These findings suggest important intergenerational conflicts in these schooling decisions, a lack of parental control and observability of school attendance, and an additional rationale for conditional cash transfer programs—the monitoring they provide.

"Intermediation Reduces Punishment (and Reward)"
American Economic Journal: Microeconomics, 3(November 2011): 77—106.

This paper investigates how punishment changes when a transgressor does not directly interact with the injured party. In a laboratory experiment, third party punishment for keeping money at the expense of a poorer player is shown to decrease when an intermediary actor is included in the transaction. This is true (i) for completely passive intermediaries and (ii) even though intermediation can only decrease the payout of the poorest player and hurt equity. Thus current theories of fairness would incorrectly predict intermediation increases or does not affect punishment. Follow-up treatments provide evidence that intermediation reduces punishment predominately because when an intermediary is used, the selfish player does not directly interact with the poorer player; the direct link has been severed. As a result, in treatments when intermediaries are available, and principals can distance themselves from an outcome, punishment is almost entirely ineffective in moderating self-interest, and the poorest players are far worse off than when no intermediary is allowed. This paper also investigates moral decision-making and indirectness in a charity-reward domain. Consistent with the laboratory results, a framed field experiment shows rewards of a charitable behavior (donating mosquito nets) to decrease when the saliency of an intermediary (a charity) is increased. Together, the results show that moral decision-making is not always well predicted by the *overall* fairness of an act but rather by the fairness of the consequences that *follow directly* from an act. The implications of these results are that allowing indirect actions, perhaps through agents, suppliers, arm's-length transactions etc. may lead to increased anti-social behavior.

WORKING PAPERS

"A Model of Informational Nudges"

With Clayton Featherstone and Judd Kessler

Nudge-style interventions are popular, but they are often criticized for being atheoretical. We present a model of information nudges (i.e., providing a noisy signal about the utility of taking an action) based on Bayesian updating in a setting of binary choice. We use reduced-form and structural methods to conduct a meta-analysis of 67 information interventions and find that the sign and magnitude of the treatment effect varies in exactly the way our model predicts: treatment effects of nudges are more likely to be negative in settings when agents are unlikely to take the action in the absence of the nudge. Additionally, as we look across settings with higher and higher rates of taking the action in the absence of the nudge, the treatment effect starts out negative, becomes positive, peaks, and declines back to zero, producing a negative hump shape followed by a positive hump shape. From the theory and meta-analysis, we provide guidance for practitioners about the environments in which information nudges will positively affect a desired behavior and those in which they may backfire.

"Informing Students about Schooling: An At-Scale Experiment in the Dominican Republic"

With Jim Berry, Daniel Morales, and Christopher Neilson

We conduct an at-scale evaluation of interventions that present accurate, clear information on the potential benefits and costs of schooling to 7th to 12th grade students in the Dominican Republic. The two-year evaluation includes 1,812 schools in middle school, 75 percent of all public middle schools in the country, and 678 schools at the high school level, 65 percent of all public high schools. The broadest intervention consists of four 15-minute videos that discuss the benefits and costs of additional schooling, watched by classes altogether. We vary whether these videos present the benefits qualitatively -- e.g. schooling may increase wages -- or quantitatively -- for example, wage averages and distributions at different levels of schooling -- allowing us to isolate the impact of providing concrete, numerical information on the value of schooling. We also conduct one-on-one interviews through a novel tablet application, both with parents and children (about 7,000 students total). Half of these interviewees also watch a short video with quantitative information. To understand the mechanics behind our results, as well as the schooling decision in general, we conducted surveys to 80,000 students across our sample. We created a panel series of surveys covering roughly 38,000 of these students to measure beliefs of the potential value of education and students' educational plans.

"The Economics of Mind-Wandering"

With Hannu Kivimäki and Ian Krajbich

This project asks fundamental economic questions about when our minds veer off task, ie mind-wandering. Does mind-wandering respond to costs and benefits? Does it matter if the mind-wandering is intentional or unintentional? And does the answer change if the costs and benefits are intrinsic or extrinsic to the task?

"Work-Leisure Cue Interference"
With Hannu Kivimäki

Our minds take cues from the environment to know what the set of potential tasks are. If the cues are associated with interfering tasks, say work and fun, one's mind will have a harder time staying on task. This set of experiments aims to pin down what these cues are – visual, geographic, temporal – and how to manage them to increase ability to stay on task, whether work or play.

"Noticing when We Discriminate"
With Katherine Coffman, Joshua Schwartzstein, and Ryan Westphal

Are we aware when implicit discrimination affects our behavior? Does raising awareness increase regulation of these subconscious tendencies?

"A Theory of Conspiracy Ideation"
With Ryan Oprea

Current models of conspiracy belief formation, all outside of Economics, fail to explain the most extreme beliefs and behaviors. We propose a new model that predicts even extreme beliefs. We test the comparative statics of who is susceptible and to what.

"Working Memory Gating and Decision-Making"
With Ryan Oprea

We make better decisions in simpler problems. We propose, and show, that one driver of simplicity is whether making good decisions requires deciding what data go into working memory – i.e. input gating – or what behavior to choose based on what is in working memory – i.e. output gating.

"Unawareness of Inattention"
With Ryan Oprea and Hannu Kivimäki

Can we learn the costs of inattention if that learning process requires attention in the first place? This project explores this nefarious paradox, its consequences, and beliefs thereof.

"Does Liquidity Affect Job Choice in the Long Run? Evidence from Teach for America"
With John J Conlon, Clayton Featherstone, Judd Kessler, and Jessica Mixon

Tracking TFA admits from the experiment in "Does Liquidity Affect Job Choice" (via TFA administrative data as well as data pulled from social media) we answer the question of whether a few hundred dollars in cash-on-hand can be the difference of whether someone is a teacher five years or more into the future. To answer this question, we look to two sources of data. First, sufficient time has passed since our first field experiment that we can check to see who remained a teacher at the conclusion of their two-year stint with tfa. Second, we can track subjects even beyond their two-year stints with tfa by finding them via professional and social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter. Although arduous, we find we are able to track the vast majority of out subjects in this way. Preliminary results suggest that the effects of our intervention stretch even to four years after initial treatment.

BOOK CHAPTERS

"Intermediation and Diffusion of Responsibility in Negotiation: A Case of Bounded Ethicality"
in Handbook of Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, Oxford Press
With Neeru Paharia, Harvard Safra Institute, and Max Bazerman, Harvard Business School

NEWS COVERAGE

Press for Coffman, Coffman & Ericson (2017):
The Atlantic, LA Times, Time, Pew Research, Slate, Psychology Today, Bloomberg (by Cass Sunstein), NPR Los Angeles, Freakonomics

Wall Street Journal "Why the NFL Draft Drives Economists Crazy," Sports Section, by Reed Albergotti, April 22, 2010.

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2014-2016 USAID $1.26M grant for Belief Formation of the Returns to Schooling
2013 Research Grant from Fundación INICIA (Dominican Republic), $100,000
2012 Behavioral Decision Making Initiative Grant (Ohio State)
2011 International Growth Centre Grant (LSE and Oxford)
2009 Harvard University Dissertation Completion Fellowship
2006, 2009 Harvard University Paul Warburg Funds, Research Award
2008 Harvard Program on Negotiation, Next Generation Grant

ADVISING

Graduate Students
2022: Andrew Copland (Boston College)
2018: Tanushree Jhunjhunwala, Ohio State (committee)
2017: Siqi Pan, Ohio State (committee)
2016: Anthony Bradfield, Ohio State (committee), Arjun Sengupta, Ohio State (primary)
2015: Alexander Gotthard-Real, Ohio State (committee), Dimitry Mezhvinsky, Ohio State (committee)

Undergraduate Students, and those later applying to graduate studies
2022: Lurein Perera, Boston College (letter writer)
2021: Yuqian Zhang, Boston College (letter writer, law schools)
2020: Madison Singell, HBS RA (letter writer)
2017: Eric Spurlino, Ohio State
2016: John Conlon, Ohio State (honors, primary adviser), Luke Fesko, Ohio State (honors, co-primary adviser)
2014: Tomás Moreno-Vazquez, Ohio State (honors, committee), Terry Pack, Ohio State (letter writer), William Biscarri, Ohio State (letter writer), Haochi Zhang, Ohio State (letter writer), Kabir Narang, Ohio State (letter writer)

Research Assistants
2019: Sam Pertl, Harvard (letter writer for Masters 2019 and PhD 2021)
2018: Olivia Bordeu, JPAL (letter writer)
2015: Marialejandra Guzmán Cruz, JPAL (letter writer for Masters in 2015 and PhD in 2021)
2014: Monroe Gamble, Missouri (letter writer), Sruthi Chandrasekharan, JPAL (letter writer)