

Economics in the Laboratory.

A Case Study on Epistemic Practices and Valuations in Experimental Economics

Helene Sorgner

Abstract

Economics has traditionally been a non-experimental science. During the last three decades, experimental and behavioural economics have emerged as two sub disciplines in which laboratory experiments play a central role. My inquiry was guided by an interest in how economists appropriate the method of laboratory experiments, and how they evaluate the use of this method when reflecting on their research. I conducted six semi-structured interviews with researchers in different career stages working at the *Vienna Center for Experimental Economics*. Additionally, I assisted in running experiments and collected observational field notes at the laboratory.

Reconstructing my respondents' epistemic practices, I argue that they use laboratory experiments as a means of producing behaviour in conditions that closely resemble those described by theoretical models. This resemblance is achieved with a series of reductions, where the "economic fundamentals" of a situation are identified, modelled, and then implemented as an experimental design by removing all context-specific connotations. I also observed a tension between approaches that focus on testing and developing theory, and approaches that focus on producing and observing behavioural phenomena that deviate from the predictions of standard theory.

Analysing my respondents' evaluative practices, I found that experimenters articulate a range of motivations and divergent conceptions of the purpose of experimentation. These correspond to different views on the methodology that best serves these purposes. However, the concern of getting one's research published in high-ranking journals informed a number of practical decisions throughout the research process. I suggest that the centrality of journal publications for the evaluation of contemporary academic science is one reason why my respondents described a theory-centred approach as dominant. My focus on epistemic and evaluative practices in experimental economics therefore reveals how research practices and conceptions of good methodology are embedded in institutionalised logics of valuating and promoting research.