

Interview with Erica Field

By Nancy Rose, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Erica Field is the winner of the 2010 Elaine Bennett Research Prize. She is an associate professor of economics at Duke University.

*When did you realize “I want to be an economist!”? What led you to that decision?*

My junior year in college. Ever since my first semester in college I knew I wanted to do academic research. I was excited by topics in the areas of gender studies and social policy, and so I was taking a lot of interdisciplinary courses along with the standard economics sequence. Interdisciplinary classes such as gender studies fueled my interest in becoming an economist by providing a constant source of provocative social questions but also convincing me of the importance of acquiring and utilizing rigorous analytical tools from economics. There was an “A-ha” moment when I realized how useful economics was for putting structure on the kind of questions that came up in these courses. It was really an intellectually thrilling year that I will never forget, that actually inspired a lot of my current research. For instance, in a women’s studies class called “Gender and Technology,” I wrote a term paper about how the introduction of credit cards and joint checking accounts gave women financial leverage in the household. My analytical skills were pretty primitive at that stage, but it was very exciting for me to think about these kinds of issues through the lens of economics (which is actually now quite standard).

*Let’s talk about your research. While you work in development economics, you’ve got a pretty diverse set of projects—across questions, countries, and empirical approaches. What are some of the common linkages, or reasons for the diversity?*

My research interests, without a doubt, cover a very broad range of topics, and the topics I study tend to be all over the map, both literally and figuratively. What I love about economics, and one of the reasons I became an economist, is that it allows me work on a wide variety of subjects, so I pick questions that I find interesting, and I suppose that I have a wide set of interests. There are a few themes in my research, however. My research can, for the most part, be classified into four topics of interest within the field: property rights and housing policy; health and development; marriage and family law; and financial markets for the poor.

One important unifying theme throughout much of my research is gender. People often ask me why gender is such a central topic in the field of development, and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that gender roles, among a lot of other things, change rather dramatically with economic development. This sheds an interesting light on debates about sources of gender differences in social roles and the causes and consequences of gender divisions in home and work life. I am also interested in science and medicine, so some of what I strive for in my health research is using tools developed largely in the field of applied econometrics to better answer simple science and health questions that, for ethical or practical reasons, cannot be answered clearly using the standard scientific method.

*Do you have a favorite among all those papers, and why that one?*

One of my favorite papers examined the impact of iodine deficiency on the “cognitive capital” of at-risk populations by evaluating the long-run effect on children’s schooling of a natural experiment in maternal iodine supplementation. The results provide some of the first rigorous evidence of large cognitive effects in humans of in utero iodine deficiency, which had long been

suspected based on animal studies but not demonstrated clearly in human populations in the medical and public health literatures. One of the most interesting aspects of the paper is that our findings also indicated that fetal iodine deficiency is particularly detrimental to female schooling. This was interesting to me from a scientific perspective, but also as an economist because it challenges the notion that gender differences in schooling outcomes observed in much of the developing world are driven purely by traditional gender roles and institutions. The findings imply, more generally, that schooling outcomes might to some extent reflect underlying differences in rates of learning disability due to ecological conditions. This paper was very rewarding for me because it satisfied my intellectual curiosity about how micronutrients affect human intelligence, had immediate policy relevance, and stimulated my interest in related topics about gender differences in schooling.

*One of the hardest parts in the transition from student to researcher is finding a good researchable question to start working on. Any advice on that for new researchers just starting their careers? What's worked for you?*

Yes! This is definitely one of the most challenging moments in the academic career: when you finally land your first job after toiling away for years on the job market paper and then realize that you are now expected to keep producing that kind of paper but at a much higher frequency! I remember very clearly the first time I gave a talk as an assistant professor – probably weeks into the job – when someone asked me about my research interests. When I started talking about my dissertation, they cut me off, saying, “But what are you working on NOW?”

I think the best advice I can give is, don't be afraid to start working on a research question just because you don't see immediately how you are going to answer it. You generally have to dig into a topic before you can discover how best to approach it. In terms of coming up with topics, another piece of advice that someone gave me early on was not to shy away from a question or area that interests you just because others are working on the same topic. There are usually many different angles to a good topic or research question, and, aside from that, in empirical work, replication is always useful!

Also, don't be shy about approaching people to collaborate. One of the best things about transitioning from grad school is that you are no longer expected to produce most of your work by yourself, and co-authorship is much more fun. So one way to get started on new topics after grad school is to approach people working on closely-related themes and find a question at the intersection of your two areas.

*What part of your job really excites you?*

Mainly, I love the detective work of research. I love reading and hearing about things and then thinking hard about how I could actually answer that question with the perfect data – and then pushing that a step further and thinking about how I might be able to answer the question with much less than perfect data. I like the satisfaction of having the tools to answer questions that I think are important, and the flexibility as an economist to switch topics quickly as new interesting questions arise. I also love that research is – or at least can be – collaborative. It is much more fun to work with your friends to tackle research questions. In my line of research, we are usually working with pretty big teams of traditional and field-based research assistants and project managers, so it is really a group effort. I also love doing field work, although it is much harder to travel for extensive periods of time now that I have kids. Even when I am working on research questions that don't involve traditional fieldwork, I find it very insightful to spend time in the country talking to people about the questions I am investigating.

*Is there a part you wish you could do away with?*

The marketing component. As a wise senior colleague warned me when I started this job, as academics we are basically self-employed. That is not to say that I don't truly appreciate the opportunity to share and discuss my research with economists all over the globe, but there is a certain element of self-promotion that is necessary/expected in the job that, for someone who selected academics as a means of acquiring the perfect behind-the-scenes job, is frustrating. I don't see a way to improve the technology, but that doesn't make it any more enjoyable.

*Do you have any advice for young women researchers—and young researchers in general—but particularly women?*

I think the best advice is, don't shy away from asking big questions. I think women especially need to be reminded of this because we tend more than men to lack the confidence to attack the really big questions and focus instead on things that we know we can answer, which are often less interesting.

A related piece of advice, given to me by a successful female economist when I landed the job at Harvard, was, "You just have to put yourself out there," meaning (I think), don't be shy, don't be scared of expressing your opinions. The smartest women I know are still worse at this than the smartest men I know. I find it fascinating and don't know why women are more conservative in expressing their opinions, but casual empiricism tells me that this is an important difference in success rates, so I think it is good advice, but hard to follow.

*Any final thoughts?*

Young researchers should join a community. I am especially lucky to have been a part of, pretty much since I started my career, the very dynamic research environment for development economists that has been created by the establishment of organizations like the Poverty Action Lab at MIT and Innovations for Poverty Action at Yale and visionaries like Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee and Dean Karlan, who have really built this new community of development research from which I have benefitted enormously. Having a smaller community is also invaluable. Find a co-author or two that you love working with, and stick with questions that you find truly interesting. Working with friends makes the job much more fun and makes it easier to handle the inevitable frustrations of having to promote and publish your work.