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**UNCERTAINTY, INSURANCE
AND THE DIVISION OF LABOR**

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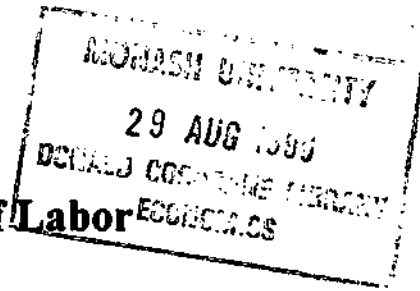
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DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

SEMINAR PAPERS

Uncertainty, Insurance and the Division of Labor



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The first draft

Abstract : This paper provides a general equilibrium model to explore the relationships between transaction risks, transportation costs and division of labor. It is shown that insurance against transaction risks will change the extent of the market, the level of specialization, productivity and the level of division of labor.

1. Introduction

Arrow (1965) pointed out that the existence of insurance is one of the basic need for developing the theory of uncertainty. Risk-averse individuals can be better off by paying a fixed premium to the insurance organization which assumes the risk. Arrow also points out the mere trading of risks is only part of the story of insurance. Another important part is that the possibility of shifting risks by insurance permits individuals to engage in risky activities which they would not otherwise undertake. The example gave by Arrow is that insurance can enhance the productivity by encouraging risky research projects. In this paper we will explain how insurance can increase the productivity by encouraging risk-averse individuals to undertake risky transaction activities.

In Section 2 we will develop a general equilibrium model specifying the relations between transaction risks and the division of labor. It is assumed that the production exhibits increasing returns and economies of specialization. The level of division of labor is determined by the tradeoff between economies of specialization and transaction costs which consist of transportation costs and risks. We will prove that the insurance against transaction risks can enhance the level of specialization and the productivity by increasing the extent of the market and the level of division of labor.

2. Uncertainty and division of labor: a general equilibrium approach

Consider an economy with M ex ante identical risk-averse consumer-producers and m consumer goods. Each consumer good can either be purchased in the market or self-provided. For the i th type of consumer good, denoted as good i , the self-provided amount is x_i , and the amount sold and purchased in the market are x_i^s and x_i^d , respectively. In purchasing good i , a fraction $1 - k_i$ of any shipment of purchase disappears in transportation, and the amount an individual obtains from the purchase is $k_i x_i^d$. The total amount consumed of good i is $x_i + k_i x_i^d$.

We assume that, in trading good i , there are two possible outcomes for the transportation efficiency coefficient k_i : a high level, denoted as k_H , and a low level, denoted as k_L , of transportation efficiency, where $1 \geq k_H > k_L \geq 0$; the probabilities

for k_H and k_L are θ and $1-\theta$, respectively, where $\theta \in (0,1)$. Therefore, there exists uncertainty in the trading activities. Each individual is assumed to have an identical Cobb-Douglas utility function, given by

$$(1) \quad u = \prod_{i=1}^m (x_i + k_i x_i^d)^{1/\rho}, \quad \rho > 1, \quad k_i \in (k_H, k_L)$$

The system of production is specified as

$$(2) \quad x_i + x_i^s = l_i - \alpha, \quad \alpha \in (0,1), \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, m$$

$$\sum_{i=1}^m l_i = 1, \quad l_i \in [0,1)$$

where $x_i + x_i^s$ is the output level of good i ; l_i , representing the individual's level of specialization in producing good i , is the labor allocated at producing good i ; parameter α is a fixed learning or training cost, representing the degree of economies of specialization. This system of production functions and endowment constraints displays economies of specialization since the labor productivity increases with an individual's level of specialization.

The budget constraint (trade balance) is given by

$$(3) \quad \sum_{i=1}^m (p_i x_i^s) = \sum_{i=1}^m (p_i x_i^d)$$

where p_i is the price of good i .

As in Yang and Shi (1992), a Walrasian regime or a multilateral bargaining game is assumed. The following lemma has been established by Yang and Shi (1992) and Wen (1994).

Lemma 1

According to the Kuhn-Tucker conditions, for an individual's optimum decision, an individual sells at most one good and does not buy and sell or self-provide the same good.

Taking Lemma 1 into account and signifying the utility of a person selling good i by u_i , the decision problem for an individual selling good i is given by

$$\begin{aligned}
 (4) \quad \text{Max: } & Eu_i = E\{[x_i \prod_{r \in R} (k_r x_r^d) \prod_{j \in J} (x_j)]^{1/\rho}\} \\
 \text{s.t. } & x_i + x_i^s = l_i - \alpha, \quad x_j = l_j - \alpha, \quad \forall j \in J \quad (\text{production function}) \\
 & l_i + \sum_{j \in J} l_j = 1 \quad (\text{endowment constraint}) \\
 & p_i x_i^s = \sum_{r \in R} (p_r x_r^d) \quad (\text{budget constraint})
 \end{aligned}$$

where R , consisting of $n-1$ elements, is the set of goods the individual buys in the market; J , consisting of $m-n$ elements, is the set of goods the individual self-provides. n is the number of goods traded by the individual.

Assume that the individuals in this economy can purchase insurance against the uncertainty involved in transaction. For transporting good r , an individual can purchase insurance that will pay him $c_r x_r^d$ in the event of low transportation efficiency, i.e., if the amount of $k_L x_r^d$ is received. The premium he has to pay for $c_r x_r^d$ of insurance coverage is $\pi_r x_r^d$. By the symmetry assumption in this model, we can obtain $\pi_r = \pi$ and $c_r = c$ for all $r \in R$, and the expected utility for a person selling good i can be rewritten as follows

$$\begin{aligned}
 (5) \quad Eu_i &= W^{1/\rho} [\theta^{n-1} (k_H - \pi)^{(n-1)/\rho} + C_1^{n-1} \theta^{n-2} (1-\theta) (k_H - \pi)^{(n-2)/\rho} (k_L - \pi + c)^{1/\rho} \\
 &\quad + \dots + C_{n-1}^{n-1} (1-\theta)^{n-1} (k_L - \pi + c)^{(n-1)/\rho}] \\
 &= W^{1/\rho} [\theta (k_H - \pi)^{1/\rho} + (1-\theta) (k_L - \pi + c)^{1/\rho}]^{n-1}
 \end{aligned}$$

where $W = x_i (x_r^d)^{n-1} (x_j)^{m-n}$. Following Kreps [1990, Ch.3], we describe an insurance contract as follows

$$(6) \quad \beta = \theta\pi / [(1-\theta)(c-\pi)]$$

where β , characterizing the insurance contract, is no less than unity. The expected payout $(1-\theta)c$ equals the premium π if $\beta = 1$; the expected payout is less than the premium if $\beta > 1$. The insurance contract can be said to be *actuarially fair* if $\beta = 1$ and be *actuarially unfair* if $\beta > 1$. Given two insurance contracts β_a and β_b , we say that contract β_a is *more unfair* than β_b if $\beta_a > \beta_b$.¹ Given an insurance contract β , inserting (6) into (5) and solving for the optimum problem with respect to π , we can obtain the optimum premium and outcomes, given by

$$(7) \quad \pi = (1-\theta)(k_H - \beta^{\rho/(\rho-1)}k_L) / (1-\theta + \beta^{1/(\rho-1)}\theta),$$

$$k_H - \pi = \beta^{1/(\rho-1)}[\theta k_H + \beta(1-\theta)k_L] / (1-\theta + \beta^{1/(\rho-1)}\theta) = \beta^{\rho/(\rho-1)}(k_L + c - \pi)$$

Note that the insurance contract β must satisfy $(k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho} \geq \beta \geq 1$, since $\pi \geq 0$ and $d\pi/d\beta < 0$. People will purchase no insurance as $\pi = 0$, $\beta \geq (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}$, purchase partial insurance as $\pi > 0$, $(k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho} > \beta > 1$, and purchase full insurance as $\pi = (1-\theta)(k_H - k_L)$, $\beta = 1$. The decision problem for the individual selling good i then becomes

$$(8) \quad \text{Max: } Eu_i = [x_i(x_r^d)^{n-1}(x_j)^{m-n}]^{1/\rho} [\Omega(\beta, \theta, k_H, k_L)]^{(n-1)/\rho},$$

$$\Omega(\beta, \theta, k_H, k_L) = \beta^{-1}(1-\theta + \beta^{1/(\rho-1)}\theta)^{\rho-1}[\theta k_H + \beta(1-\theta)k_L]$$

$$\text{s.t. } x_i + x_i^s = l_i - \alpha, \quad x_j = l_j - \alpha, \quad \forall j \in J;$$

$$l_i + \sum_{j \in J} l_j = 1, \quad p_i x_i^s = \sum_{r \in R} (p_r x_r^d)$$

The first-order conditions of this decision problem yield the optimum values of l_i , l_j , x_i , x_i^s , x_j , x_r^d and n as functions of relative prices of all trade goods. The optimum

¹ It is easy to see that, given a level of premium, the difference between the premium and expected payout increases with β .

x_i^s and x_i^d represent individual's demand and supply functions, respectively. Inserting the optimum values of decision variables into the expected utility function produces an indirect expected utility function. The $n-1$ expected utility equation conditions for $n-1$ types of individuals selling different goods determine $n-1$ relative prices of n traded goods. The $n-1$ market clearing conditions determine $n-1$ relative numbers of individuals selling n traded goods

$$(9) \quad p_i/p_s = 1, \quad M_i/M_s = 1, \quad \forall i, s = 1, \dots, n$$

where M_i is the number of individuals selling good i , and M_s the number of individuals selling good s . The other market clearing condition is not independent of (9) due to Walras' law. Inserting the equilibrium relative prices into the first-order conditions for the maximization problem yields the equilibrium values for all decision variables, given by

$$(10) \quad l_i = [n + \alpha(n^2 - mn + m - n)]/m, \quad l_j = [1 + \alpha(n-1)]/m,$$

$$x_i = x_i^d = x_j = [1 - \alpha(1 + m - n)]/m,$$

$$n = (1 - 1/\alpha) + m\{1 - 1/\ln[\Omega(\beta, \theta, k_H, k_L)]\},$$

$$Eu = \{[1 - \alpha(1 + m - n)]/m\}^{m/\rho} [\Omega(\beta, \theta, k_H, k_L)]^{(n-1)/\rho}$$

where n , representing the level of division of labor, is the number of traded goods in the equilibrium. The comparative statics of this equilibrium are given by (11) and (12)

$$(11) \quad dn/d\theta > 0, \quad dn/dk_s > 0, \quad dl_i/d\theta > 0, \quad dl_i/dk_s > 0$$

$$d[M(1-1/n)x_i^d]/d\theta > 0, \quad d[M(1-1/n)x_i^d]/dk_s > 0,$$

$$dEu/d\theta > 0, \quad dEu/dk_s > 0, \quad s = K, H$$

$$(12) \quad dn/d\beta < 0, \quad dl_i/d\beta < 0, \quad d[M(1-1/n)x_i^d]/d\beta < 0,$$

$$dEu/d\beta < 0 \quad \text{iff} \quad (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho} > \beta$$

where $M(1-1/n)x_i^d$ is the aggregate demand of good i and represents the extent of the market. Note that there will be no insurance contract if $\beta \geq (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}$. From (11) and (12) we can derive the following proposition.

Proposition 1

- (1) The level of division of labor, the level of specialization, the extent of the market, productivity and percapita expected real income increase as transportation efficiency is improved or the probability for high transportation losses declines.
- (2) If there is an insurance contract in the equilibrium, the level of division of labor, the level of specialization, the extent of the market, productivity and percapita expected real income will be less if the insurance contract is more unfair.

Insurance and division of labor

In the following two subsections we will discuss the interaction between insurance, risk aversion and division of labor. By applying the approach used above, we can obtain the equilibrium value of the number of traded goods when there is no insurance contract available, denoted as n_A , given by

$$(13) \quad n_A = (1 - 1/\alpha) + m\{1 - 1/\{\rho \ln[\theta k_H^{1/\rho} + (1 - \theta)k_L^{1/\rho}]\}\}$$

Note that $\Omega(\beta = (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}) = [\theta k_H^{1/\rho} + (1 - \theta)k_L^{1/\rho}]^\rho$ and $n(\beta = (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}) = n_A$, where $n(\beta)$ is the equilibrium value of the number of traded goods when the insurance contract is β . We say that an insurance contract is *feasible* if $(k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho} > \beta$, and the following proposition can thus be established.

Proposition 2

An feasible insurance contract, either actuarially fair or unfair, will increase the level of division of labor, the level of specialization, the extent of the market, productivity and percapita expected real income.

Proof If the insurance contract is actuarially fair, i.e., $\beta = 1$, people will take full insurance; and the equilibrium value of the number of traded goods, denoted as n_F , is given by

$$(14) \quad n_F = (1 - 1/\alpha) + m\{1 - 1/\ln[\theta k_H + (1 - \theta)k_L]\}$$

It is straightforward to see that $n_F > n_A$. If the insurance contract is feasible but actuarially unfair, i.e., $(k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho} > \beta > 1$, people will choose partial insurance and the equilibrium value of the number of traded goods will be greater than n_A since $n(\beta)$ is a monotonous decreasing function of β and $n(\beta = 1) = n_F > n(\beta = (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}) = n_A$. The remaining part of the proposition can then be established. *Q.E.D.*

Risk aversion and division of labor

For investigating the relationship between risk aversion and division of labor, first we establish the following lemma.

Lemma 2

Considering the uncertainty in the trading activities, an individual will be risk averse if $\rho > 1$ and his degree of risk aversion will increase with ρ .

Proof Having taken into account of Lemma 1, we can rewrite the utility function of an individual selling good i as

$$(15) \quad u_i = (x_i \prod_{r \in R} x_r^d \prod_{j \in J} x_j)^{1/\rho} (\prod_{r \in R} k_r)^{1/\rho}$$

where $\prod_{r \in R} k_r$ can be viewed as a random variable with a binomial distribution as we have shown in (5). It is straightforward to see that u_i is a strictly concave function of $\prod_{r \in R} k_r$ if $\rho > 1$. By applying Arrow-Pratt measure of risk aversion, we can easily prove that the degree of risk aversion increased with ρ . *Q.E.D.*

Therefore, the parameter ρ can represent the degree of risk aversion. Considering there is no insurance contract available and differentiating n_A with respect to ρ , we can obtain $dn_A/d\rho < 0$; the proof for $dn_A/d\rho < 0$ is provided in Appendix 1. $dn_A/d\rho < 0$ implies that the level of division of labor will decrease with the degree of risk aversion if there is no insurance contract available. The effect of risk-aversion on the level of division of labor, if people can purchase insurance to against risks, is not clear; the level of division of labor will not be affected by the degree of risk-aversion if people can purchase full insurance. However, it is easy to see that people can accept a more unfair insurance contract if they are more risk-averse by simply noting that the upper bound of β , $(k_H/k_L)^{1-1/\rho}$, increased with ρ . We can then establish the following proposition.

Proposition 3

If the insurance is unavailable, the level of specialization and division of labor, the extent of the market and productivity will decrease with the degree of risk aversion. People can accept a more unfair insurance contract if they are more risk averse.

The determination of the equilibrium insurance contract

In this subsection we will discuss how the market sort out the insurance contract. First we assume the insurance industry is in perfect competition and there is a fixed management cost, denoted as δ , for the insurance company to pay per contract. In equilibrium, the perfect competition will force the expected profit of the insurance industry to zero, and the insurance contract will be determined by

$$(16) \quad \begin{aligned} \delta &= (1 - 1/\beta)\theta\pi \\ &= \theta(1 - \theta)(1 - 1/\beta)(k_H - \beta^{\rho/(\rho-1)}k_L)/(1 - \theta + \beta^{1/(\rho-1)}\theta) \end{aligned}$$

where $\beta \in [1, (k_H/k_L)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}]$. Define $f(\beta) = (k_H - \beta^{\rho/(\rho-1)}k_L)/(1 - \theta + \beta^{1/(\rho-1)}\theta)$, $g(\beta) = 1 - 1/\beta$, $h(\beta) = f(\beta)g(\beta)$ and we can rewrite (16) as

$$(17) \quad h(\beta) = f(\beta)g(\beta) = \delta/[\theta(1 - \theta)], \quad df(\beta)/d\beta < 0, \quad dg(\beta)/d\beta > 0$$

We can then establish the following proposition.

Proposition 4

There exists no insurance contract in the economy if the management cost is too high. For a given positive management cost, there exists at most one partial insurance contract in equilibrium if the insurance industry is in perfect competition. If there exist a partial insurance contract for a given positive management cost, the level of division of labor and specialization, the extent of the market, productivity and percapita real income will increase as the management cost in the insurance market decrease.

Proof To prove this proposition, it suffices to establish the following three claims.

Claim 1: No feasible insurance contract can produce non-negative expected profit if the management cost exceeds some threshold.

Claim 2: Given a positive management cost, only partial insurance contracts can produce non-negative expected profit; if there exist more than one insurance contract that satisfy the zero-profit condition, in equilibrium there exists only one insurance contract that will favor the insurance buyers most.

Claim 3: If there exists an equilibrium insurance contract for a given level of management cost, there exists an equilibrium insurance contract for any lower level of management cost; the equilibrium insurance contract with the lower level of management cost will be more fair than the contract with the higher level of management cost.

For establishing claim 1, we only have to prove that $h(\beta)$ has an upper-bound. Since $0 < f(\beta) \leq k_H - k_L$ and $0 \leq g(\beta) < 1 - (k_L/k_H)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}$, it is easy to see that $0 \leq h(\beta) < [1 - (k_L/k_H)^{(\rho-1)/\rho}](k_H - k_L)$.

The first part of claim 2 is a restatement that the expected payout equals premium in full insurance, which leaves nothing to cover the positive management cost. The reason for the second part of claim 2 is easy to see: if there are more than one contract generating the same profit level, competition will force the insurance company to choose the contract that attracts buyers most; or he will lose all the buyers to other insurance companies. We can see that such a contract must exist since the insurance contract has a lower-bound, i.e., full insurance.

To prove claim 3, first we must prove that $h(\beta)$ is a continuous function of β ; that holds since $f(\beta)$ and $g(\beta)$ are both continuous function of β . Assume that the equilibrium insurance contract is $\bar{\beta}$ when the management cost is $\bar{\delta}$. Given any $\delta \in [0, \bar{\delta})$, there exists at least one contract $\beta \in [1, \bar{\beta})$ that satisfies $h(\beta) = \delta/[\theta(1-\theta)]$ since $h(\beta = 1) = 0$ and $h(\beta)$ is a continuous function of β . Since there exists some contract $\beta \in [1, \bar{\beta})$ that satisfies $h(\beta) = \delta/[\theta(1-\theta)]$, we know that any contract $\beta > \bar{\beta}$ that also satisfies $h(\beta) = \delta/[\theta(1-\theta)]$ will not be the equilibrium

insurance contract due to competition. By claim 2, we know that there exists only one equilibrium insurance contract that is less than $\bar{\beta}$. *Q.E.D.*

Appendix 1: Proof of $dn_A/d\rho < 0$.

From (13) we can derive that $dn_A/d\rho < 0$ if and only if

$$(A1) \quad [\theta k_H^{\nu\rho} + (1-\theta)k_L^{\nu\rho}] \ln[\theta k_H^{\nu\rho} + (1-\theta)k_L^{\nu\rho}] < [\theta k_H^{\nu\rho} \ln k_H^{\nu\rho} + (1-\theta)k_L^{\nu\rho} \ln k_L^{\nu\rho}]$$

Let $k_L = ak_H$, $a \in (0,1)$, and (A1) is satisfied if and only if

$$(A2) \quad [\theta + (1-\theta)a^{\nu\rho}] \ln[\theta + (1-\theta)a^{\nu\rho}] - (1-\theta)a^{\nu\rho} \ln a^{\nu\rho} < 0$$

Denoting the left-hand side of (A2) as $\Psi(\theta, \rho, a)$, we can obtain $\lim_{a \rightarrow 1} \Psi = 0$ and $\lim_{a \rightarrow 0} \Psi = \theta \ln \theta < 0$. $dn_A/d\rho > 0$ is thus established since $\Psi(\theta, \rho, a)$ is an increasing function of a and $\Psi < 0$ for $a \in (0,1)$. *Q.E.D.*

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