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Advice, Social Learning, and the Evolution of Conventions

As societies progress, old generations of social agents die and are replaced by new ones. This book explores what happens in this transition as the old guard instructs the new arrivals about the wisdom of their ways. Do new entrants listen and follow the advice of their elders or dismiss it? Is intergenerational advice welfare-improving or can it be destructive? Does such advice enhance the stability of social conventions or disrupt it? Using the concept of an intergenerational game and the tools of game theory and experimental economics, this study delves into the process of social learning created by intergenerational advice passed from generation to generation. This book presents a unique theoretical and empirical study of the dynamics of social conventions not offered elsewhere.

ANDREW SCHOTTER is professor of economics and Director of the Center for Experimental Social Science at New York University.

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Advice, Social Learning, and the Evolution of Conventions

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To Marcy and Ross for being good people

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Preface

I have always admired scholars with research agendas. I am frequently in awe of scientists running labs whose web pages spell out their research agenda and describe what research they have done in the past and what they will be doing in the foreseeable future. It all seems so logical and well thought out.

I have been too insecure as a scholar to put all my scholarly eggs in one agenda basket and hence I never thought of myself as a person with an agenda. I wrote across many different topics. However, one day I looked back at a set of papers I wrote over the years and, lo and behold, I did have an agenda, I just did not realize it.

This agenda started when, not heeding the advice of the profession that young economists don't write books, I published *The Economic Theory of Social Institutions* (Cambridge University Press, 1981). In an article-driven profession, writing a book before one has tenure is a risky (suicidal?) endeavor, and I was told just that.

That book is a book about the emergence of economic institutions defined as conventions of behavior developed to solve a set of societal problems (more about this in the Introduction in Chapter 1). In some sense one might consider this book a sequel in that it asks not how conventions emerge but rather how they evolve over time and get transmogrified or transformed by a process of social learning via intergenerational advice. In between these two books is a set of about twelve papers investigating this theme and its consequences. So in retrospect this is the agenda I have engaged in, but I assure you that it was not a conscious choice. It just happened and was camouflaged by a set of other papers on topics that were very different.

I was fortunate in this endeavor in having a set of co-authors who took parts of this journey with me, starting with my papers

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with Barry Sopher. Barry was foolish enough to think that our intergenerational setup was potentially interesting and we wrote a number of papers together. Then came collaborations with Ananish Chaudhuri, Raghuram Iyengar, Tingting Ding, Shachar Kariv, Yaw Nyarko, Bogachan Çelen, Elizabeth Potamites, and Andrew McClellan, many of whom incorporated the intergenerational-game approach into topics of their interest. These co-authors all made this work enjoyable and productive. I am in their debt.

I'd also like to thank the National Science Foundation (NSF) for a number of grants that allowed me to conduct this research. In this connection, I especially want to thank Catherine Eckel, who helped me get my first NSF grant on this topic (with Barry Sopher) in 1997 when she was serving as Program Director. Without those funds I suspect I never would have started on this path. I was also lucky to receive two later grants from the NSF to pursue this research further. In addition, I owe a great deal to the support of the Center for Experimental Social Science (CESS) at New York University (NYU) which has provided logistical support for a lot of this research and to Anwar Ruff for his programming assistance and support. Let me also thank Phillip Good, who shepherded this book through the editorial process at Cambridge University Press and always offered good and supportive advice, and Geoff Amor, who painstakingly copy-edited the entire manuscript and rid it of many of the inconsistencies I had introduced into it over the months of writing.

Finally, in addition to my co-authors, I owe a great debt to three talented graduate students at NYU, Alexander (Sasha) Dorofeev, Mauricio Almeida Couri Ribeiro, and Sam Kapon, who painstakingly read every chapter of the book and gave me comments and advice. It's rare that writing a book makes one feel younger, but my experience with Sasha, Mauricio, and Sam did just that, because when I read their comments on my chapters and discussed those with them, I was immediately transported back to my graduate student days getting feedback from experienced scholars. Their

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comments were mature way beyond their years and picked out many of the faults in my earlier drafts. It was a role reversal that was both embarrassing and refreshing. I enjoyed it but was glad to have a number of years of accomplishments under my belt in order to absorb their pointed criticisms. Finally, let me thank Pujita Sunder, who carefully read many chapters and whose eye caught and corrected many stylistic mistakes, my colleague Guillaume Fréchette, who commented on some of the chapters and whose wise counsel I seek for whatever I attempt to do, and Georg Weizsäcker, who was willing to spend some of his sabbatical leave at NYU looking over some of what I have written here.

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