

Interview with Lena Edlund



Lena Edlund (Columbia University, PhD from Stockholm) was the COSME invited speaker at the Simposio de Análisis Económico 2013. She kindly answered our questions for this Newsletter.

Question: Hi Lena, thanks for agreeing to this interview. We would like to start with a couple of questions regarding your career and your research. How did you decide to become an economist?

Answer: When I was an undergraduate student, Economics was the only topic that grabbed me.

Sweden is a very normative place, or at least it was to me back in the day, and Economics is positive. I found the separation of how things works from how they ought to work very refreshing.

Q: What are your most and least favorite parts of your job as a research economist?

A: My most favorite part is hypothesis formulation and then working through the implications or, in case of empirical work, seeing if the hypothesized is borne out in data.

Least favorite is when your paper is rejected, again and again.

Q: What do you consider your best work and why?

A: I think my paper (with Evelyn Korn) “A theory of prostitution” is my best paper. It is actually a theory of marriage, but that title was taken. But, as Barbara Bush tartly remarked to the question on which of her children she was most proud of, “I love all my children equally.”

Q: Now we would like to know about your experience regarding gender composition in the profession. In the departments where you have worked, what was the representation of women among the faculty?

A: There were a number of tenured women professors, and the year I was hired, I was one of four women hired as assistant professors (as well as two men).

Q: Do you think gender plays a role, either in terms of how well you work with different colleagues (coauthors), or in terms of the recognition of your work (or in any other dimension)?

A: Probably, but so do other traits. At this point, I think a critical mass has been reached, a woman professor is not the unicorn creature she used to be.

Q: Did you have any female mentors or role models? How about male mentors?

A: Yes, both male and female. My PhD advisor, Tore Ellingsen, was extremely helpful and at a time when I needed a lot of help. Janet Currie, chair of the Economics department when I was up for tenure, was also incredibly supportive.

Q: Are you a mentor to junior women economists? Do you consider this important? What is the gender composition of the PhD students you have advised so far?

A: The closest I get to “mentoring” is that I work with women students and I have more women co-authors than men co-authors.

Q: What advice would you give to research economists starting their career, particularly women?

A: Start early, have kids late.

Get started young. I took a year off during grad school to work, against everybody’s advice. They were right. Not a good idea.

Wait to have kids until tenure. Again not an advice I followed.

Get a supportive husband (here I have been lucky).

Q: Now a couple of policy questions. What do you think about department policies that extend the tenure clock to women or both men and women when they have children?

A: I think it is actually a good idea, despite the moral hazard. Given publication lead times, more time helps drown out noise. I think women will be at a disadvantage if it is about the hours put in. The profession rewards originality and the more time on the clock, the more time to show you’re not just a flash in the pan.

Q: How about the introduction of gender quotas in different university committees and associations?

A: Obviously it can be a problem if committees that govern promotions or allocation of research funds are all male. A problem for women though is that women researchers get overburdened by committee work so I think a balance has to be struck.

Q: Finally, what do you think are the most interesting questions still to be answered regarding the economic behaviors of men versus women?

A: Yes, there has to be, but don’t ask me what they are.