

MIT Graduate Labor Economics 14.662 Spring 2009
Lecture Note #7: Wage Density Decompositions

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1 INTRODUCTION

The models we have studied to date are competitive; they assume a free market in equilibrium with no distortions. This is a baseline assumption but of course an exceedingly strong one. There are numerous ‘institutional’ (or non-competitive) forces acting on the labor market: labor unions, wage mandates, product and labor market regulations, taxes and subsidies, and social norms and strictures. These can also affect the wage structure.

Two institutions that have received considerable attention in the United States are labor unions and the federal minimum wage. These institutions and their close relatives are likely to be quite important in many countries. This section of the class examines both institutional forces. The leading papers on these topics are (unfortunately) exclusively based on U.S. data.

The question we explore is how does the minimum wage and/or unionization affect the *shape of the wage distribution* including:

- Overall earnings inequality
- Residual earnings inequality
- Inequality between observably different demographic groups:

The potential importance of this set of topics was not fully appreciated prior to the work by DiNardo, Fortin and Lemieux (DFL, 1996). A glance at the plots of the distribution of wages by gender from their paper—particularly the piling up of women’s wages at the minimum wage threshold—makes the case that the minimum wage *must be* important for the wage distribution, particularly for women. But developing a counterfactual is intrinsically difficult. The minimum wage—and similarly labor unions—could affect the wage distribution by:

1. Displacing low wage workers.
2. Boosting wages of workers who were below the minimum to the minimum
3. Inducing wages in the ‘uncovered’ sector to either rise or to fall

4. Causing spillover effects on the wages of workers who are close substitutes to minimum wage workers
5. Causing spill-overs higher up in the overall wage distribution

An overarching problem in this literature is one of developing counterfactual wage densities, that is an estimate of the entire *distribution* of earnings under another minimum wage or union regime. There are few experiments to work with here, and, moreover this is a general equilibrium problem. So, identification will be tough. A related conceptual problem is whether we should treat the minimum wage or union penetration as an exogenous forces, or alternatively as equilibrium outcomes of market forces and political economy.

In this set of lectures, we will study both the substantive topic of how institutions affect the wage structure and the methodological topic of how to decompose wage densities.

2 DI NARDO, FORTIN AND LEMIEUX (1996): LABOR MARKET INSTITUTIONS AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF WAGES

Before beginning on the DFL paper, a few tools to familiarize yourself with.

2.1 OAXACA DECOMPOSITION

The Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition is a canonical tool for separating the influences of quantities and prices on an observed mean difference. For example, if we want to decompose the ‘gender gap,’ we can write the wages of males and females as:

$$W_M = \bar{X}_M \beta_M \tag{1}$$

$$W_F = \bar{X}_F \beta_F \tag{2}$$

where \bar{X}_M are average demographic characteristics of males (age, education, marital status) and β_M is a vector of ‘returns’ to these characteristics (and similarly for women).

One can rewrite the gender gap in a variety of ways, including:

$$W_M - W_F = (\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_F) \cdot \frac{1}{2}(\beta_M + \beta_F) + (\beta_M - \beta_F) \cdot \frac{1}{2}(\bar{X}_M + \bar{X}_F), \tag{3}$$

$$W_M - W_F = (\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_F)\beta_M + (\beta_M - \beta_F)\bar{X}_M + (\bar{X}_F - \bar{X}_M)(\beta_M - \beta_F), \quad (4)$$

$$\text{and } W_M - W_F = (\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_F)\beta_F + (\beta_M - \beta_F)\bar{X}_F + (\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_F)(\beta_M - \beta_F). \quad (5)$$

Each of these decompositions, divides the observed gender wage gap into a component due to differences in quantities between the genders (the X 's) and differences in ‘returns’ between the genders (the β 's) and, in the latter two equations, an ‘interaction’ term.

There are three important things to observe about this decomposition:

1. It is a ‘sequential’ decomposition, meaning that the order of the decomposition (or more specifically, the choice of weights) will affect the conclusions. This point is easiest to see by drawing a figure of mean wages by gender against education where $X_M > X_F$ and $\beta_M > \beta_F$. The conclusion about what share of the gap is due to differences in mean education and what share is due to differences in returns will depend on which of the three decompositions above is applied. There is no ‘correct’ answer, and the choice is generally not innocuous.
2. The Oaxaca technique is useful for decomposing mean differences. It is not applicable to decomposing densities or differences between densities as formulated above.
3. This technique is intrinsically a partial equilibrium approach. The implicit question the Oaxaca decomposition answers is: what would the gap have been if (a) quantities did not differ between the genders but prices did or (b) prices did not differ but quantities did? These questions implicitly assume that changing the quantity available of something (education in this example) has no effect on its price (that is, the β 's are independent of the X 's). Whether this is a reasonable assumption (or even a useful first order approximation) will depend upon the setting. I would argue that for most of the applications considered below, this is *not* a reasonable assumption.

2.2 KERNEL DENSITY ESTIMATION

A kernel density estimator is an empirical analog to a probability density function. The exact empirical analog of the PDF is simply the conventional histogram. What the kernel density

estimator adds to the histogram is smoothing. So, a kernel density estimate of a distribution of earnings might be calculated as follows:

$$\hat{f}_h(w) = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{\phi_i}{h} K\left(\frac{w - w_i}{h}\right),$$

where the w_i are wage observations, the $\phi_1 \dots \phi_n$ are weights with $\sum_i \phi_i = 1$, and $K(\cdot)$ is a kernel density function, normally a Gaussian distribution, and h is the chosen bandwidth, which is effectively the interval of smoothing around any observation. The kernel estimator smooths over nearby neighbors of each observation w_i to estimate the density of w at each given point. The kernel function (normally) accords greater weight to the nearest neighbors of w_i and less weight to more distant neighbors.

2.3 GENERALIZATION OF THE OAXACA APPROACH

The Oaxaca decomposition was developed to analyze counterfactual differences in mean earnings. DFL's paper is about estimating and analyzing counterfactual earnings *distributions*. Their technique, a generalization of the Oaxaca distribution, does exactly this. This paper has been influential for three reasons:

1. It first called attention to the possible importance of the minimum wage for the shape of the earnings distribution.
2. It is methodologically elegant, and the methodology can be applied in other settings.
3. Even beyond applicability, the methodology also gets 'extra credit' for cleverness. It's nearly impossible to overstate the value that economists ascribe to cleverness. (Like most obsessions, this one is not altogether healthy.)
 - DFL view each wage observation in a given distribution as a vector composed of the wage itself, a set of individual attributes, and a time subscript. $w_i \equiv (w_i, z, t)$.
 - They express the observed distribution of wages at time $f_t(w)$ as a joint distribution of wages and attributes conditional on time t_w , $f(w, z | t_w; m_t)$, integrated over the distribution of individual attributes $F(z | t_z)$ at date t_z . In this notation, m_t refers to the minimum wage prevailing at time t .

- Putting these pieces together, DFL write the conditional density of wages at t as:

$$f_t(w) = \int_{z \in \Omega_z} dF(w, z | t_{w,z} = t_i; m_t). \quad (6)$$

- The expression above describes the marginal density of wages at t by writing the joint density of wages and attributes z , integrating out the distribution of attributes, and conditioning on the time period and minimum wage level. Note that Ω_z is the domain of individual attributes and t will correspond to one of two points in time, 1979 and 1988.
- Rewriting (6) and applying the law of iterated expectations gives:

$$f_t(w) = \int_{z \in \Omega_z} f(w|z, t_w = t; m_t) dF(z|t_z = t) \equiv f(w; t_w = t, t_z = t, m_t)$$

- Here, the distribution of w is expressed conditional on z and the distribution of z is expressed conditional on t . Iterating expectations allows us to condition on additional variables such as t_z and then integrate them out again. Nothing is gained (so far) from this, but the value of conditioning will be apparent in a moment.
- Attending to notation here is important. $f(w; t_w = 88, t_z = 88, m_{88})$ refers to the observed distribution of wages in 1988, that is the wage distribution conditional on the distribution of z 's prevailing in 1988, the level of the minimum wage in 1988, and the prices associated with characteristics z in 1988 ($t_w = 88$ refers to the price level).
- By contrast, $f(w; t_w = 88, t_z = 79, m_{88})$ refers to the counterfactual distribution of wages in 1988 with the distribution of z 's at its 1979 level, but prices and minimum wages at their 1988 levels.
- Under the *strong* assumption that the 1988 structure of wages does not depend on the distribution of z 's, the hypothetical density $f(w; t_w = 88, t_z = 79, m_{88})$ can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} f(w; t_w = 88, t_z = 79, m_{88}) &= \int f(w|z, t_w = 88; m_{88}) dF(z|t_z = 79) \\ &= \int f(w|z, t_w = 88; m_{88}) \psi_z(z) dF(z|t_z = 88), \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

where the ‘reweighting’ function $\psi_z(z)$ is a function that maps the 1979 distribution of z 's into the 1988 distribution.

- The reweighting function is defined as

$$\psi_z(z) = \frac{dF(z|t_z = 79)}{dF(z|t_z = 88)}. \quad (8)$$

- This expression is simply the ratio of probability mass at each point z in the year 1979 relative to 1988. Hence, $\psi_z(z)$ reweights the 1988 density so that observations that were relatively more likely in 1979 than 1988 are weighted up and observations that are relatively less likely are weighted down.
- Notice that this reweighting is non-parametric (so far); we are not specifying the function that maps z 's into w 's. We are simply reweighting the observed joint density of z 's and w 's.

2.4 THE CLEVER PART

- As a conceptual matter, $\psi_z(z)$ is straightforward to implement. As an empirical matter, it is not.
- Notice that $\psi_z(z) = dF(z|t_z = 79)/dF(z|t_z = 88)$ is a high dimensional object to estimate because z exists in \mathfrak{R}^k where k is the number of items in the vector of characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education, race, union status, etc.).
- So, estimating ψ_z in (8) would be fraught with imprecision (in finite data, there will likely be probability mass zero in the numerator or denominator for some values of z). DFL solve this implementation problem by a clever application of Bayes’ rule.
- A quick reminder on Bayes’ rule:

$$P(A|B) = \frac{P(B|A) \cdot P(A)}{\sum_i P(B|Z_i) \cdot P(Z_i)}. \quad (9)$$

- Bayes' rule calculates the posterior probability of event A given an observation of B and *prior* knowledge of the joint distribution of B and other events Z (one of which is A). Intuitively, we are given some event B and we want to know how likely it is that some other event A occurred given B . The answer is simply the ratio of the probability of the joint occurrence of A and B to the total occurrences of B , which is the expression above.
- Applying this method to the DFL problem, we get:

$$P(z|t_z = 79) = \frac{P(t_z = 79|z) \cdot dF(z)}{\int_z P(t_z = 79|z) \cdot dF(z)}, \quad (10)$$

and

$$P(z|t_z = 88) = \frac{P(t_z = 88|z) \cdot dF(z)}{\int_z P(t_z = 88|z) \cdot dF(z)}. \quad (11)$$

Hence,

$$\hat{\psi}_z = \frac{P(t_z = 79|z)}{P(t_z = 88|z)} \cdot \frac{P(t_z = 88)}{P(t_z = 79)}. \quad (12)$$

- Unlike (8), equation (12) can be readily estimated. There are three steps:

1. Pool data from both years of the sample, 1979 and 1988.
2. Estimate a probit model for

$$P(t_z = t|z) = P(\varepsilon > -\beta H(z)) = 1 - \Phi(-\beta H(z)),$$

which is simply the likelihood that an observation is from year t given z .

3. Use estimates of $1 - \Phi(-\beta H(z))$ to form $\hat{\psi}_z$ for each observation.

- The subtlety here is that DFL are conceptualizing time as part of the state space.
- By estimating time as a function of the z 's (i.e., whether a given observation i is from 1988 or 1979 based on its z 's), DFL use Bayes' rule to invert the high dimensional problem in (6) into a unidimensional problem.

- By the way, this reweighting transformation using the probit model is parametric (that is, the probit model assumes a functional form). The entire DFL method is therefore called ‘semi-parametric’ because of the parametric reweighting approach.
- Of course, one can always make a ‘non-parametric’ by using a flexible functional form and ‘promising’ to make it more flexible if more data were to arrive.
- As you have observed, there is an important underlying assumption that DFL underscore in the text:

“Calling the counterfactual density $f(w; t_w = 88, t_z = 79, m_{88})$ the ‘density that would have prevailed if individual attributes had remained at their 1979 level’ is a misuse of language. This density should rather be called the “density that would have prevailed if individual attributes had remained at their 1979 level *and* workers had been paid according to the wage schedule observed in 1988,” since we ignore the impact of changes in the distribution of z on the structure of wages in general equilibrium.”

- Hence, the DFL approach is the exact analog of the Oaxaca approach. It holds prices at their 1988 levels while imposing the 1979 distribution of quantities to simulate a counterfactual wage distribution. This allows DFL to account for the impact of changing z 's and changing t_z in their decomposition.

2.5 ACCOUNTING FOR UNIONIZATION AND MINIMUM WAGES

In the case of unionization and minimum wages, there is not a natural analogy to the Oaxaca approach. These outcomes are not (wholly) individual characteristics that are ‘priced’ by the market. Rather they potentially spillover across the distribution.

To incorporate them into the framework, DFL take two different approaches. In the first, they treat unionization as a wholly individual trait, in the second, they treat the minimum wage as a distributional characteristic.

2.5.1 UNIONS

To treat unionization as an individual characteristic, the following assumptions are needed:

1. There is no non-random selection of union status by ability. Hence, the observed union wage effect from a cross-sectional regression corresponds to the true causal effect.
2. There are no general equilibrium impacts of unionization on the wage distribution for non-members—union-threat effects, employment effects, spillover effects.

These assumptions allow DFL to “Estimate the density of wages that would have prevailed if unionization had remained at its 1979 level and workers were paid according to the union and non-union wage schedules observed in 1988 [or 1979].” In short, unionization is simply treated as a z variable.

2.5.2 MINIMUM WAGES

The assumptions required to form a counterfactual minimum wage estimate are (even) more stringent:

1. Minimum wages have no spillover effects on the distribution of wages above the minimum. This is a conservative assumption since any spillover effects (which are plausible slightly higher in the distribution) would *augment* the impact of the minimum wage.
2. The shape of the conditional density of wages at or below the minimum depends only upon the real minimum.
3. The minimum wage has no impact on employment probabilities, hence there is no need to develop counterfactual wage densities for workers who lose employment due to imposition of a binding minimum. This assumption is also conservative since removal of low wage observations from the distribution (due to job loss) would tend to further decrease inequality.

These assumption allow DFL to ‘graft’ the lower tail of the earnings distribution below the minimum wage (e.g., from 1979) directly onto another era’s wage distribution (e.g., 1989) when imposing the counterfactual minimum wage. This is not entirely satisfactory, but it is difficult to improve upon. The net results are visible in DFL Figure 3. Note that the apparent spill-overs just to the right of the minimum wage in the counterfactual density (Panel C) are an artifact of the kernel density estimator which smooths over the discontinuity.

2.5.3 ACCOUNTING FOR SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Supply and demand is notably absent from the analysis so far. DFL do the following:

- Create 32 education-experience-gender cells n_j
- Calculate changes in log relative supply in each $\Delta\hat{n}_j$
- Estimate changes in log relative demand within each cell $\Delta\hat{d}_j$ using a ‘fixed coefficients manpower requirements index reflecting between sector shifts in relative labor demand’ (this is essentially an industry shift measure).
- Calculate the implied changes in wages $\Delta\hat{w}_j$ in each cell based assuming that $\sigma = 1.7$. (Note that the CES form implies that the elasticity of substitution among *all* cells is equal to σ).

Hence, in DFL’s notation:

$$f(w|z, t_{w=88}; m_{88}; d_{79}; n_{79}) = f(w - \Delta\hat{w}_j|z, t_{w=88}; m_{88}; d_{88}; n_{88}). \quad (13)$$

- DFL is the only paper in this entire wage-density decomposition literature that takes supply and demand seriously. This is much to the paper’s credit. Subsequent authors (including these same authors writing at later dates) have not revisited this step.

2.6 RESULTS

The easiest way to see the results of the DFL analysis is to study Figures 6 and 7. Rather than giving the actual and counterfactual PDFs, these figures plot the *differences* between

the 1979 and 1988 densities (note: the integral of each figure must therefore be zero). The successive panels of the figure show the remaining differences in densities after applying each of the counterfactual calculations: the minimum wage, unionization, individual attributes, and supply and demand. If the final density difference was completely flat and lay on the x -axis, it would indicate that the model explained all observed changes in wage distributions.

Three observations:

- After applying these counterfactuals, much growth in inequality remains, particularly in the upper tail of the distribution (this is seen by the extra mass above the x -axis at the right hand tail and the missing mass in the middle).
- The exercise appears to have much more explanatory power for earnings inequality among women than men. This is not surprising because the minimum wage had been much more binding for women who compose a disproportionate share of the lower tail of the wage distribution.
- Because the decomposition is ‘sequential,’ the choice of the ordering of factors is *not* innocuous. For example, by placing supply and demand last in the decomposition, DFL give it less weight. By comparing Tables III and V of their paper, you can see that the importance of some factors more than doubles if their contributions are calculated first rather than last. As above, no sequence is ‘correct.’ DFL’s choice of sequence is probably not accidental.

Some key results of DFL for Males:

	Measure	Change	MinWg	Unions	X’s	S&D	Unexplained
MinWg 1st	90-10	0.195	25.3%	10.7%	20.7%	20.7%	22.6%
S&D 1st			16.0%	24.1%	4.8%	32.6%	
MinWg 1st	50-10	0.076	65.7%	-25.6%	49.7%	10.9%	-0.7%
S&D 1st			43.5%	-5.5%	26.9%	33.9%	

Key results of DFL for females:

	Measure	Change	MinWg	Unions	X's	S&D	Unexplained
MinWg 1st	90-10	0.328	45.1%	1.3%	25.6%	11.1%	16.9%
S&D 1st			41.6%	0%	14.6%	26.8%	
MinWg 1st	50-10	0.243	61.7%	-4.1%	32.1%	-4.5%	14.8%
S&D 1st			56.5%	-3.0%	18.7%	13.0%	

A fair reading of these results suggests three conclusions:

- The decline in the U.S. minimum wage has probably been quite important to the growth of earnings inequality in the lower tail of the distribution for females.
- The impacts of minimum wages on male earnings inequality are less significant, though not trivial at the bottom of the distribution.
- For males, supply and demand are likely to have been quite important to the growth of earnings inequality.

How convincing is this analysis? Many would criticize this approach for applying a partial equilibrium analysis to a general equilibrium problem. In addition, an open question for this type of analysis is the conceptual problem of how economists should view the exogeneity/endogeneity of labor market institutions. (The DFL approach takes them as exogenous.)

Despite these limitations—and most papers have some—the DFL approach was original, clever and productive in causing economists to take the minimum wage more seriously as an explanation for rising wage inequality. Several years later, David Lee's (1999) paper offered a potentially more compelling empirical case for its importance.

We will discuss the Lee paper in a subsequent lecture. Before we do, we will detour into two alternative approaches to wage density decomposition.

3 DECOMPOSING WAGE DENSITIES: SOME TECHNIQUES AND RESULTS

The DiNardo, Fortin and Lemieux 1996 paper presents one clever approach to decomposing wage densities. But there are a number of alternatives. We will spend some time on these alternatives because they are now widely used.

3.1 THE JUHN, MURPHY AND PIERCE (1993) DECOMPOSITION

JMP’s highly cited 1993 paper set out to summarize the rising dispersion of earnings in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s. JMP wanted a tool for describing the components of wage density changes that could be attributed to measured prices, measured quantities and residuals (which they referred to as unmeasured prices and quantities). Figure 1 of their paper reminds you of the dramatic wage structure changes that motivate their work.

The technique that JMP developed, the “full distribution accounting method” features both good ideas and important limitations. This technique has been widely applied since the publication of their paper and so is worth spending a few minutes on.

The wage equation in time t can be written as:

$$Y_{it} = X_{it}\beta_t + u_{it}. \quad (14)$$

Write u_{it} as,

$$u_{it} = F^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it}). \quad (15)$$

where $F^{-1}(\cdot|X_{it})$ is the inverse cumulative distribution of wage residuals conditional on X_{it} , and θ_{it} is i ’s percentile rank in the residual distribution. Notice that both θ_{it} and $F(\cdot|X_{it})$ will depend upon the conditioning variables X .

In this framework, changes in inequality over time come from three sources: (1) changes in the distribution of observable individual characteristics, X , (2) changes in the returns to those observable characteristics, β ; and (3) changes in the distribution of residuals $F(\theta|X)$.

If we define $\bar{\beta}$ as the average price of observables over some time interval and $\bar{F}(\cdot|X_{it})$ as the average cumulative distribution of residuals, then we can write the *difference* in inequality between the current period and the ‘average’ periods as:

$$Y_{it} = X_{it}\bar{\beta} + X_{it}(\beta_t - \bar{\beta}) + \bar{F}^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it}) + [F_t^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it}) - \bar{F}^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it})]. \quad (16)$$

This equation potentially allows us to simulate counterfactual distributions by varying prices, quantities or the residual distribution.

For example, if we wanted to calculate the counterfactual distribution of wages holding fixed observable prices and the residual distribution at their averages and varying only the

distribution of X 's, we could calculate:

$$Y_{it}(1) = X_{it}\bar{\beta} + \bar{F}^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it}). \quad (17)$$

If we want to allow observable quantities and prices to vary with time, we can write:

$$Y_{it}(2) = X_{it}\beta_t + \bar{F}^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it}). \quad (18)$$

Finally, if we want to allow quantities, observable prices and unobservables to move simultaneously, we end up with:

$$Y_{it}(3) = X_{it}\beta_t + F^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it}) = Y_{it}. \quad (19)$$

Using this accounting scheme, JMP propose the following decomposition:

1. $Y_{it}(1) - \bar{Y}_i$ is the component of the difference in inequality between t and the average period due to changing quantities.
2. $Y_{it}(2) - (Y_{it}(1) - \bar{Y}_i)$ is the marginal contribution of changing prices..
3. $Y_{it}(3) - Y_{it}(2)$ is the marginal contribution of changing residuals.

Notice that

$$[Y_{it}(3) - Y_{it}(2)] + [Y_{it}(2) - [Y_{it}(1) - \bar{Y}_i]] + [Y_{it}(1) - \bar{Y}_i] = Y_{it}(3) = Y_{it} \quad (20)$$

so adding the pieces together recovers the actual distribution of wages in period t . This is of course an identity.

More specifically, JMP perform their estimation in there steps:

1. To obtain the effect of quantities only, JMP predict wages for all workers in the sample in year t using the average coefficient vector $\bar{\beta}$, and computing a residual for each worker based on his rank in year t 's residual wage distribution and applying the average cumulative residual distribution over the full sample.
2. To obtain the marginal effect of quantities, they repeat this procedure, now using the coefficient vector β_t but retaining the average residual distribution.

3. Finally, the third component is simply calculated as the difference between the actual wage distribution in year t and the counterfactual in step (2). Thus, notice that the residual component is itself calculated as a residual. As discussed below, this reflects a shortcoming of the procedure: the subcomponents don't necessarily add to the whole (despite equation (20)).

Like the Oaxaca-Blinder and DFL's decompositions, the JMP decomposition is sequential. Depending on the order of the decomposition, one will generally attribute different shares to quantities, prices, and residuals. For example, Goldin and Margo (1992 *QJE*) find that the sequence of the decomposition is substantively important for decomposing the components of changing inequality in the 1940s.

A key virtue of the JMP decomposition is that can be applied to any wage quantity (i.e., the 10th, 50th, or 90th) percentile. Hence, like DFL – and unlike Oaxaca-Blinder – the JMP decomposition can ostensibly be used to simulate entire counterfactual distributions.

An interesting conceptual/rhetorical point here is that JMP are purportedly decomposing the residual into two pieces: a 'location' parameter and a 'scale' parameter – that is, a residual rank, and corresponding residual wage. This is clever but is only strictly correct under unappealing assumptions, specifically that residuals are exclusively accounted for by unmeasured prices and quantities, rather than measurement error and luck, and that a person's rank in the residual distribution is invariant to the set of conditioning X 's. Without this strong 'single index' interpretation of the wage residual, a person's rank in the residual distribution, θ_{it} , is not necessarily indicative of their 'unmeasured quantity of skill' (with $F^{-1}(\theta_{it}|X_{it})$ giving its price).

The JMP methodology has two main shortcomings. The first is that the OLS wage regression at the heart of the JMP technique provides a model for the conditional mean of the wage distribution and its results do not extend naturally to wage quantiles. For example, there is no presumption that $F_t(50) = 0$, and so it need not be the case that $\bar{y}_t = \bar{X}'_t\beta_t + F_t(50)$. However, it will be the case that $\bar{y}_t = \bar{X}'_t\beta_t + E[F_t(\cdot)]$. So, in practice, this inconsistency may not be substantively important (though it's certainly inelegant).

A more significant shortcoming is that the components of the JMP counterfactual decomposition need not sum to the total observed change. Specifically, adjusting the wage distribution in period t for the change in each of the three accounting components (prices, quantities, residuals) between periods t and τ will not generally recover the observed wage distribution in period τ . The reason is that knowledge of the marginal distributions of $X'\beta$ and $F(\theta)$ is not generally sufficient to characterize the marginal distribution of $w = X'\beta + F(\theta)$. Since $X'\beta$ and $F(\theta)$ are random variables, the distribution of their sum $g(w = X'\beta + F(\theta))$, depends on both their variances and covariance (i.e., their joint distribution). This covariance is not accounted for by the JMP decomposition unless $F(\theta)$ is allowed to depend explicitly on X .

Does it? In the paper, JMP denote $F_t^{-1}(\theta)$ as depending explicitly on X (e.g., $F^{-1}(\theta|X)$). But, as noted by Lemieux 2002, it is unclear how the dependency of the residual distribution on X is implemented in practice. Because X contains continuous covariates, there are essentially an unlimited number of conditional distributions of the residual. In most subsequent implementations of the JMP decomposition (see especially Blau and Khan, 1994), researchers have used an unconditional residual distribution, $F_t^{-1}(\theta)$.

There is one special case, however, where the marginal distribution of w is recoverable from the marginal distributions of $X'\beta$ and $F(\theta)$. This is when these marginal distributions are independent. Under classical OLS assumptions – in particular, a normally distributed, homoskedastic error term – this independence condition will hold. But this is extremely restrictive. In practice, residual wage dispersion does appear to vary significantly with education and experience, a point made forcefully by Lemieux 2004.

The key results of the JMP decomposition are found in Table 4 of the paper. For the period of immediate interest in their paper, 1979 - 1988:

1. About 40 percent of the growth of 90/10 inequality occurs above the median (90/50) and 60 percent below the median (50/10).
2. Changes in quantities (X 's) play almost no role in the growth of inequality.
3. But changes in prices do. Observed prices play an equally large role above and below the median, and account for about 55 percent of the total growth in inequality.

4. The residual (‘unobserved quantities and prices’) accounts for the other 45 percent. Of that component, 75 percent of the growth in the residual is found below the median.

Another interesting finding is that while the ‘observed price’ components do not contribute to rising inequality until the 1980s, residual inequality starts to rise sharply in the 1970s (see Figure 7). But, as has been later demonstrated by other researchers, this difference in the timing of residual versus between-group inequality is not present in all data sets. The CPS May/ORG data do not show strong growth in residual inequality until the 1980s. The CPS March data, which JMP use, do. It also appears from subsequent analysis that JMP overstate the magnitude of the rise in residual inequality in the March during the 1970s.

The uncertainty about the basic facts surrounding the timing of residual inequality has generated significant controversy in the U.S. inequality literature. Some see the purported rise in residual inequality in the 1970s as evidence of some form of SBTC in this decade. Those who believe that residual inequality started rising in the 1980s, coincident with the rise in between-group inequality, tend to believe that all of the rise in inequality is due to a single phenomenon. This controversy remains active. I will not devote class time to it.

3.2 COMPARISON OF JMP AND DFL

The JMP tool does two things that DFL does not do:

First, JMP explicitly models the role of ‘residual prices and quantities.’ In contrast, DFL’s wage density technique does not distinguish between between-group and residual prices. However, Lemieux 2002 proposes a simple extension whereby the DFL technique is applied to the residual wage distribution (estimated using an OLS model) after the between group effects have been purged via OLS.

Second, whereas JMP permits one to vary either quantities or prices to simulate counterfactuals, The DFL technique is only about varying quantities (the price component is built into $f(w|z, t_w = t; m_t)$). However, a recent paper by McCrary, Levinsohn and Leibbrandt proposes a simple extension to DFL to separate the role of quantities and prices in influencing the shape of the wage distribution.

Alongside these virtues, the JMP approach has two weaknesses. First, it does not ‘add up’ – the sum of components need not equal the total change. And moreover, JMP is conceptually not very clean because it uses an OLS regression, a model of the conditional mean, to do quantile analysis. (The DFL model is also a strange hybrid of parametric and non-parametric tools, i.e., the logit or probit reweighting equation married to the non-parametric wage distribution). And this conceptual flaw is exacerbated if one additionally uses OLS regressions to generate the wage residuals for the DFL residual reweighting (as proposed by Lemieux 2002).

It would be desirable to have a unified model that features the strengths of JMP (explicit decomposition of wage distribution into quantities, between-group prices and residuals) and the strengths of DFL (adds up; conceptually almost-kosher). One such approach is described below.

4 WAGE DENSITY DECOMPOSITION: A QUANTILE REGRESSION APPROACH

We’ll now consider an approach to wage density decomposition based on quantile regressions. This approach was proposed by Machado and Mata (*Journal of Applied Econometrics*, 2005) and slightly extended by Autor, Katz and Kearney (2005b).

4.1 QUANTILE REGRESSION BASICS

Let $Q_\theta(w|X)$ for $\theta \in (0, 1)$ denote the θ^{th} quantile of the distribution of the log wage given the vector of covariates. We model these conditional quantiles as

$$Q_\theta(w|X) = X'\beta(\theta), \tag{21}$$

where X is a $k \times 1$ vector of covariates and $\beta(\theta)$ is a conformable vector of quantile regression (QR) coefficients. For given $\theta \in (0, 1)$, $\beta(\theta)$ can be estimated by minimizing in β ,

$$n^{-1} \sum_{i=1}^n \rho_\theta(w_i - X_i'\beta) \tag{22}$$

with

$$\rho_\theta(\mu) = \begin{cases} \theta\mu & \text{for } \mu \geq 0 \\ (\theta - 1)\mu & \text{for } \mu < 0 \end{cases} . \tag{23}$$

The latter expression is referred to as the “check function” because the weight applied to μ will be shaped like a ‘check’ with the inflection point at $w_i - X_i'\beta = 0$.

This expression often looks mysterious at first, but it is simple to demonstrate to yourself that it works. For example, consider the sequence [0, 11, 23, 27, 40, 50, 60]. What’s the median? By inspection, it’s 27. Now, plug in above. Note that there are no X ’s here, we are just estimating the constant in expression (22). So, we have:

$$\begin{aligned} z &= \frac{1}{7} \cdot \left\{ \begin{array}{l} -.5 [(0 - 27) + (11 - 27) + (23 - 27) + (27 - 27)] \\ +.5 [(40 - 27) + (50 - 27) + (60 - 27)] \end{array} \right\} \\ &= \frac{1}{7} \cdot [-.5(-27 - 16 - 4) + .5(13 + 23 + 33)] = \frac{1}{7} \cdot 58 \end{aligned}$$

Try adjusting $\hat{\beta}$ upward or downward from 27. You will quickly discover that you cannot do better than $\hat{\beta} = 27$. (Easiest to use a spreadsheet and replace the if...then expression in equation (23) with the absolute value operator, though this only works for the median.)

Now, try something counterintuitive. Add a second zero to the bottom of the sequence and a very large positive number to the top of the sequence (say 10,000). Intuition might suggest that this would increase $\hat{\beta}$ to > 27 . But that is not the case. Because you are minimizing the sum of absolute deviations $\sum \rho_\theta(w_i - X_i'\beta)$, you do not gain by moving $\hat{\beta}$ towards the extremes; you pay with deviations from the opposite end.

Beyond understanding the linear programming problem, you should be pictorially clear on what a quantile regression is estimating, as well as the correct interpretation of $\beta(\theta)$. For example, et’s say that X is a dummy variable indicating college versus high-school attendance and the outcome variable is earnings. You estimate a quantile regression for $\beta(50)$. The correct interpretation of $\hat{\beta}(\theta)$ is generally *not* the effect of college attendance on the 50th percentile wage earner. Rather, it is the effect of college attendance on the 50th percentile of the wage distribution. The former interpretation requires an additional ‘rank invariance’ assumption: the 50th percentile college earner would also have been the 50th percentile high school earner (i.e., the treatment preserves rank orderings). This is a very strong and generally untestable assumption (notably, it is an assumption in the JMP decomposition). Many users of quantile regressions mistakenly interpret their results using an implicit rank invariance assumption.

4.2 A QUANTILE MODEL OF WAGE INEQUALITY: ESTIMATION FOR GIVEN X

As discussed by Machado and Mata, if equation (21) is correctly specified, the conditional quantile process – that is, $Q_\theta(w|X)$ as a function of $\theta \in (0, 1)$ – provides a full characterization of the conditional distribution of wages given X . Realizations of w_i given X_i can be viewed as independent draws from the function $X_i'\beta(\theta)$ where the random variable θ is uniformly distributed on the open interval $\theta \in (0, 1)$.

Let us say we have accurately fit the conditional quantile function $Q_\theta(w|X)$ at a sufficiently large number of points θ . We can use the estimated parameters $\hat{\beta}(\theta)$ to simulate the conditional distribution of w given X . Here, we use the probability integral transformation:

Definition 1 *If U is a uniform random variable on $[0, 1]$, then $F^{-1}(U)$ has the density $F(\cdot)$. Thus, if $\theta_1, \theta_2, \dots, \theta_j$ are drawn from a uniform $(0, 1)$ distribution, the corresponding j estimates of the conditional quantiles of wages at X , $\hat{w} \equiv \{X_i'\hat{\beta}(\theta_i)\}_{i=1}^j$, constitute a random sample from the (estimated) conditional distribution of wages given X .*

This simulation procedure characterizes the conditional quantiles of the w for given X . It does not provide the *marginal density* of w . This is because the marginal density depends upon both the conditional quantile function, $\hat{\beta}(\theta)$, and the distribution of the covariates $g(X)$. (For simplicity, we will treat $g(X)$ as known rather than estimated).

Getting the model right may also be important. The conditional quantile model will hold *exactly* in a case where both location and scale depend linearly on the covariates (for example in the classical location shift model where $w = X_i'\beta + \varepsilon$ and ε is a normal, iid error term). In more general cases, the conditional quantile model may provide a reasonable approximation to the true conditional quantile, and this approximation can generally be improved by specifying flexible functions of X when estimating $\beta(\theta)$.

4.3 ESTIMATING THE MARGINAL DENSITY OF w USING THE QUANTILE MODEL

To generate a random sample from marginal density of w , we can draw rows of data X_i from $g(X)$ and, for each row, draw a random θ_j from the uniform $(0, 1)$ distribution. We then form

$\hat{w}_i = X_i' \hat{\beta}(\theta_j)$, which is a draw from the wage density implied by the model. By repeating this procedure, we can draw an arbitrarily large random sample from the desired distribution. This procedure – successively drawing from $g(X)$ and θ to form \hat{w}_i – is equivalent to numerically integrating the estimated conditional quantile function $\hat{Q}_\theta(w|X)$ over the distribution of X and to θ form

$$f(\hat{w}) = \int \int_{X,\theta} \hat{Q}_\theta(w|X) dX d\theta$$

This decomposition has two useful properties. First, the conditional quantile model partitions the observed wage distribution into ‘price’ and ‘quantity’ components. [But it is worthwhile to ask what these ‘prices’ mean.] This is similar to a standard Oaxaca-Blinder procedure using OLS regression coefficients, with the key difference that the OLS model only characterizes the central tendency of the data (i.e., the conditional mean function, describing ‘between-group’ inequality). By contrast, the conditional quantile model characterizes both the central tendency of the data (in this case, the median) and the dispersion of the outcome variable conditional on X , i.e., the wage ‘residuals.’ This feature is critical for estimating the impact of composition on the shape of the residual wage distribution.

Second, under the standard—but unappealing—wage decomposition assumption that aggregate skill supplies do not affect aggregate skill prices, we can use the conditional quantile model to simulate the impact of changing composition or prices on distribution of wages. In particular, by applying the labor force composition data $g_t(X)$ from a given time period to the price matrix $\hat{\beta}_\tau(X)$ from any other time period τ , we can simulate the counterfactual distribution of wages that would prevail if labor force composition were given as in time period t and labor market prices were given as in time period τ . Note that because the $\hat{\beta}_\tau(X)$ matrix describes the conditional distribution of wages for given values of X , this simulation captures the effects of composition on both between-group and residual inequality.

4.4 EXTENSION TO RESIDUAL INEQUALITY

While Machado-Mata do not extend their approach to estimating counterfactual measures of *residual* inequality, this extension is straightforward (Autor, Katz, Kearney 2004 make this

extension, as does Melly 2005).

Define the coefficient vector $\hat{\beta}(50)$ as the measure of ‘between-group’ inequality, denoted as $\hat{\beta}^b \equiv \hat{\beta}(50)$. $\hat{\beta}^b$ serves a role akin to $\hat{\beta}_{OLS}$ in a conventional Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition. In the standard application, $\hat{\beta}_{OLS}$ provides a measure of between-group inequality; it estimates the central tendency of the data conditional on X . In the quantile application, the central tendency measure is the conditional median, estimated by $\hat{\beta}^b$.

Following this logic, define a measure of within-group inequality as the difference between the estimated coefficient vector $\hat{\beta}(\theta)$ and the median coefficient vector $\hat{\beta}^b$:

$$\hat{\beta}^w(\theta) \equiv \left[\hat{\beta}(\theta) - \hat{\beta}^b \right] \text{ for } \theta \in (0, 1). \quad (24)$$

By construction, $\hat{\beta}^w(50) = 0$. Hence, the residual quantile coefficient matrix is purged of ‘between-group’ inequality, and measures the expected dispersion of w at any given value of X , holding the conditional median at zero. By applying the coefficient matrix $\hat{\beta}^w(\theta)$ to the distribution of covariates, $g(X)$, one can calculate the (estimated) dispersion of w that is exclusively attributable to residual inequality. If, for example, $\hat{\beta}(\theta) = \hat{\beta}^b \forall \theta$, then residual inequality is zero in this model.

To summarize, the (correctly specified) conditional quantile model provides a complete characterization of the distribution of w as a function of three components: the distribution of covariates, $g(X)$, the vector of between-group prices, $\hat{\beta}^b$, and the matrix of within-group (residual) prices $\hat{\beta}^w$. We write $f_t(\hat{w}_t) \equiv f\left(g_t(X), \hat{\beta}_t^b, \hat{\beta}_t^w\right)$

4.5 IMPLEMENTATION

This procedure is implemented in three steps.

1. Estimate quantile coefficient vectors for each time period. For example, AKK use the May/MORG March samples to estimate a standard Mincer wage model fit using quantile rather than OLS regressions. For each sample, year, and gender, they estimate models for quantiles,

$$[0.1, 0.3, \dots, 99.7, 99.9]$$

at intervals of one-fifth of a centile, with one additional model fit for the median (quantile 50.0). These QR coefficients, $\hat{\beta}(\theta)$, provide the ‘prices’ for the simulation exercise. Here, $\hat{\beta}(\theta)$ is a $k \times m$ matrix of quantile regression coefficients, where k is the number of elements in X and m is the number of quantiles (501) estimated in θ .

2. Calculate the residual price vector $\hat{\beta}_t^w$ using equation (24). This yields $\hat{\beta}_t^b$, a $k \times 1$ vector of between-group prices, and $\hat{\beta}_t^w$, a $k \times (m - 1)$ matrix of ‘within-group prices.’
3. Draw simulated data from the distribution $f(g_t(X), \hat{\beta}_t^b, \hat{\beta}_t^w)$ by applying the price matrices $\hat{\beta}_t^b, \hat{\beta}_t^w$ to the rows of $g_t(X)$.

Before applying the technique to simulate counterfactual distributions, AKK check the performance of the model for replicating observed (actual) distributions of overall and residual inequality. AKK apply the QR coefficients $\hat{\beta}_t^b, \hat{\beta}_t^w$ to the quantity series, $g_t(X)$ from the contemporaneous time period to generate simulated wage distributions. The simulated series are shown in Appendix Figure 1 of their paper. If the QR model were a perfect fit to the conditional wage distributions, these series would exactly overlap one another. In practice, the discrepancy between the actual statistic and the model-based simulations is small enough to be undetectable in most cases.

To benchmark the performance of the quantile simulation procedure for *residual* wage inequality, AKK compare simulated and actual 90/10 residual wage dispersion by year and gender (Appendix Figure 2). The series labeled ‘Observed Median Reg Residual’ is formed from median regressions of log hourly earnings on the covariates above. The series ‘Simulated Median Reg Residual’ presents the corresponding statistics for the simulated series formed using $\hat{\beta}_t^w$ and $g_t(X)$. Since almost all prior residual decompositions analyze OLS regression residuals, AKK also plot 90/10 residual inequality for an identically specified OLS model.

As is apparent from Appendix Figure 2, OLS and Median Regression residuals have nearly identical dispersion in the AKK application. This indicates that the distinction between mean and median regression is not substantively import for interpreting these residual decomposition results. As is the case for the overall inequality series, the simulated residual series fit the observed data quite closely.

4.6 QUANTILE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE JMP AND DFL MODELS

The quantile approach nests both the JMP and DFL models.

4.6.1 QUANTILE IMPLEMENTATION OF JMP

As before, write the observed distribution of wages at time t as a function of three components: the distribution of worker characteristics, $g_t(X)$, the between-group prices β_t^b for those characteristics, and the within-group prices for those characteristics β_t^w , (suppressing “hats” on the estimated vectors).

The observed change in inequality between any two periods, t and τ , can be decomposed into three components using the following sequential decomposition. Let $\Delta Q_\theta = Q_\theta(f_\tau(w)) - Q_\theta(f_t(w))$ equal the observed change in the θ^{th} wage quantile between periods t and τ . Define

$$\Delta Q_\theta^X = Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_t^b, \beta_t^w)) - Q_\theta(f(g_t(X), \beta_t^b, \beta_t^w)),$$

as the contribution of changing quantities (labor force composition) to ΔQ_θ . Define

$$\Delta Q_\theta^b = Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_\tau^b, \beta_t^w)) - Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_t^b, \beta_t^w))$$

as the marginal contribution of changing between-group prices to ΔQ_θ . And, finally define

$$\Delta Q_\theta^w = Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_\tau^b, \beta_\tau^w)) - Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_\tau^b, \beta_t^w))$$

as the marginal contribution of changing within-group prices to ΔQ_θ .

Notice that this decomposition sums to the total observed change: $\Delta Q_\theta^X + \Delta Q_\theta^b + \Delta Q_\theta^w = \Delta Q_\theta$. This is an important advantage over the JMP procedure, in which the ‘residual price and quantity component’ must be estimated as a remainder term after the other two components are calculated.

4.6.2 QUANTILE IMPLEMENTATION OF DFL

Interestingly, the notation above makes it apparent that the DFL procedure is simply the first step of the JMP decomposition above. In particular,

$$\Delta Q_\theta^{DFL} = Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_t^b, \beta_t^w)) - Q_\theta(f(g_t(X), \beta_t^b, \beta_t^w)) = \Delta Q_\theta^X.$$

Why does DFL only do Step 1? Because the DFL procedure simply reweights the function mapping X 's to w 's (given by β_t^b, β_t^w in our QR model) using the change in the density of X 's between t and τ ($g_t(X)$ to $g_\tau(X)$). Since DFL do not explicitly model 'prices' (β_t^b, β_t^w in the quantile model), they do not take Steps 2 and 3 where these prices are varied.

Similarly, the Lemieux (2004) procedure for reweighting residual densities can be written as

$$\Delta Q_\theta^L = Q_\theta(f(g_\tau(X), \beta_t^b = 0, \beta_t^w)) - Q_\theta(f(g_t(X), \beta_t^b = 0, \beta_t^w)) = \Delta Q_\theta^X.$$

Unlike the quantile approach, Lemieux estimates β_t^w using OLS. But this difference is unlikely to be important.

And finally, the McCrary, Levinsohn and Leibbrandt extension of DFL to prices actually aggregates steps two and three or our quantile JMP decomposition:

$$\Delta Q_\theta^{MLL} = Q_\theta(f(g_t(X), \beta_\tau^b, \beta_\tau^w)) - Q_\theta(f(g_t(X), \beta_t^b, \beta_t^w)).$$

The MLL approach to obtaining $\beta_\tau^b, \beta_\tau^w$ is actually rather subtle. It amounts to using the DFL Bayesian technique for wages rather than covariates. That is, to form their reweighting function for quantities, DFL model time as a function of the X 's. To form their reweighting function for *prices*, MLL model time as a function of the X 's *and* w 's. Again, this does not differ substantively from the quantile approach above for obtaining prices. It should also be readily feasible to extend the MLL tool to separately account for between-group and residual prices (right now, MLL do all 'prices' at once).

4.6.3 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE QUANTILE DECOMPOSITION RELATIVE TO OTHER APPROACHES

An advantage of the QR approach is that it nests JMP, DFL, and all extensions to DFL that have been recently proposed. I would also argue that it handles each of these cases somewhat more transparently than the competing techniques.

A second virtue of QR is that procedure explicitly models the separate roles of quantities, and between- and within-group prices to overall inequality. That is, DFL and extensions never explicitly estimate prices, although these prices are implicit in the tool. By contrast, JMP do estimate prices (both observed and unobserved). But in practice, their residual pricing function

does not quite work as advertised unless one conditions the residual distribution ($F_t(\theta|X_{it})$) very finely on all combinations of X' s.

A third virtue of QR is that it satisfies the adding-up property. That is, if the QR model fits the data well, the sum of the components of the decomposition will add up to the total. (Of course, it is still a sequential decomposition; the order of operations matters.)

Finally, unlike JMP and extensions, QR provides a consistent treatment of between- and within-group prices (there is no ‘hybridization’ of OLS and logit/probit models).

The QR decomposition has two notable disadvantages.

First, it is parametric. The precision of the simulation will depend on the fit of the QR model which in turn depends on the characteristics of the data and the richness of the QR model. By contrast, the DFL procedure and its extensions never actually parameterize the conditional distribution of wages, $F(w|X)$. Hence, the treatment of $F(w|X)$ in DFL is fully non-parametric. Notably, DFL must parameterize the reweighting function (through the probit/logit). I’ve never seen any work documenting the amount of slippage induced by that process. It is possible that DFL provides a more precise fit to the distribution than the fully parametric QR model. (It would be nice to test this).

Second, the QR model is computationally intensive. Consider that one must estimate ~ 100 – 500 QR models for each data set, save a large matrix of parameters, and then draw large amounts of data from $g(X)$ and θ to calculate \hat{w} and form counterfactual distributions. Given current computational resources, this is typically burdensome.

5 APPLICATION OF QUANTILE DECOMPOSITION TO U.S. WAGE STRUCTURE 1973 - 2003: LEMIEUX 2006 AND AUTOR, KATZ AND KEARNEY 2005

The 2006 *AER* paper by Lemieux on your syllabus proposes a novel explanation for rising residual wage inequality in the U.S. “Using data from the May and Outgoing Rotation Group (ORG) supplements of the CPS, this paper shows that a large fraction of the growth in residual wage inequality between 1973 and 2003 is due to *spurious* [emphasis Autor’s] composition effects. These composition effects are linked to the secular increase in the level of experience and education of the workforce, two factors associated with higher within-group wage dispersion.

Once these factors are corrected for, I find that residual wage inequality only accounts for a small share of the overall growth in wage inequality. Furthermore, all of the growth in residual wage inequality occurs during the 1980s.”

The Autor, Katz, Kearney 2005 paper (“Rising Wage Inequality: The Role of Composition and Prices”) is in large part a comment on Lemieux 2004. So, it should be stressed that the important insight that changing labor force composition has contributed to the observed rise of residual inequality is due to Lemieux.

Viewing the same facts, AKK reach quite different conclusions from Lemieux. In particular, they do not concur that “Furthermore, all of the growth in residual wage inequality occurs during the 1980s.” Why?

There are two main substantive differences between Lemieux and AKK. First, Lemieux does not (for the most part) distinguish between movements in upper and lower tail residual inequality. Instead, he looks only at the sum of the two (the 90/10 – or the variance of wage residuals, which obviously doesn’t distinguish between the upper and lower tail). Why is that problematic? As discussed in class, upper and lower tail inequality only move in tandem from 1979 to 1986. After 1986, they diverge radically, with lower-tail inequality flattening and then compressing and upper-tail inequality rising steadily to the present. Hence, analyzing only the *aggregate* trend in the two may provide an incomplete picture.

In particular, Lemieux finds that the rising education and experience of the labor force can mechanically explain the plateauing of residual inequality during the 1990s. But this inference appears to aggregate over two countervailing forces. The first is the contraction in lower-tail inequality in the 1990s (which as shown above) appears ‘due to’ compressing residual ‘prices’ buffered by changing composition. The second is the rise in upper-tail inequality, which appears entirely explained by price changes. Because composition over-explains the former phenomenon and under-explains the latter, it is technically accurate to say that composition can “fully explain” the aggregate trend in residual inequality during the 1990s. But when upper and lower-tail inequality are considered separately – as seems appropriate given their substantial divergence in the last decade – composition does not appear a satisfying explanation for either.

The second main difference with Lemieux (much less important) turns on an issue posed by

all sequential decompositions—namely, that the order of operations matters. Lemieux chooses to focus on counterfactual residual inequality trends that hold labor force composition constant at the 1973 level while varying ‘prices’ over 1973 to 2003. Alternatively, one could have held composition at 1988, 2003, or any other intervening year. As the AKK figures show, this choice matters. Holding composition at the initial 1973 level maximizes the inference that residual inequality fell after 1988. Why? Because the 1973 labor force overrepresents high school dropouts and high school graduates and underrepresents college grads relative to the labor force of the next three decades. Now, recall that the *compression* of inequality after 1987 is greatest for less educated workers and the *expansion* greatest for more educated workers. Hence, holding composition at the 1973 level maximizes the representation of groups experiencing wage compression and minimizes the representation of groups experiencing wage expansion. As shown in the AKK figures, Lemieux’s choice of weights does matter for his conclusions.

[A final point of contrast is that Lemieux’s decomposition focuses only on residual inequality. A potential disadvantage of this approach is that the allocation of wage variation into ‘between-group’ and ‘residual’ components is inherently arbitrary; it depends upon which X ’s are included in the conditioning set. By contrast, the sum of between and within-group inequality is invariant to the conditioning set – since it is equal to observed inequality. For this reason, it may be generally more useful to analyze ‘between-group’ and ‘residual’ inequality jointly.]

6 CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the DFL, JMP, and MM wage density decomposition approaches to analyzing counterfactuals can only be slightly convincing at best given that they apply partial equilibrium tools to analysis of general equilibrium problems. Nevertheless, these techniques are widely used, and it is worthwhile to understand them.