ASHLEY POPLE

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29 March 2018

NBER
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear NBER Selection Committee:

Application to the NBER Entrepreneurship Research Boot Camp 2018

The NBER Entrepreneurship Research Boot Camp provides the perfect opportunity to explore the literature on entrepreneurship broadly, while engaging with experienced researchers and other talented graduate students. The intensive workshop will be hugely beneficial in understanding the frontier of this literature and how I can best fill gaps with my own research. I will be working intimately with the largest entrepreneurship programme in Colombia throughout my PhD in Economics at the University of Oxford. We wish to understand how belief formation and updating impacts entrepreneurial outcomes. In addition to critically analyzing research, I also look forward to engaging with other PhD students with shared interests. In support of my application, please find enclosed the following documentation:

1. Curriculum vitae
2. Motivational essay

My supervisor, Professor Stefan Dercon (University of Oxford), has independently submitted a letter of recommendation.

Given the pertinence of the Boot Camp to my research on entrepreneurs and my potential contribution to the workshop, I believe that I make for a good fit. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Ashley Pople

Ashley Pople

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Education

2016–2019 **DPhil in Economics**, *University of Oxford*
Rhodes Scholar
Supervision: Stefan Dercon
Research interests: development, behavioural (belief updating), entrepreneurship, urban spatial

Primary grant holder:
- Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Research Accelerator Grant for project on belief formation promoting empowerment amongst low-income female entrepreneurs in Zambia
- IPA Peace & Recovery grant for RCT on learning among conflict-affected entrepreneurs in Colombia

Reading groups:
- Oxford Firms, Labour and Organisations (OxFLO)
- Machine Learning for Economists

PRS Qualifying exams:
- Econometrics
- Advanced Econometrics I
- Urban Spatial Economics
- Public Economics

Audited: Behavioural Economics; Theory-Based Empirical Analysis; Development Economics

2015–2016 **MSc in Economics for Development**, *University of Oxford*, *first class*
Rhodes Scholar
George Webb Medley Prize *proxime accessit* for Best Overall Performance in the MSc
Thesis on crowding out of private transfers by state pension awarded second-highest distinction
Coursework: Microeconomics; Macroeconomics; Quantitative Methods; Development Economics

2014 **BCom Honours in Economics**, *University of Cape Town*, *first class*
National Research Foundation Honours, David Pitman and Sheila Van Der Horst Scholarships for academic merit
Bain & Company Award for first place in BCom Honours in Economics stream
Thesis on detrimental ranking of poor households under National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) awarded distinction

2011–2013 **BCom Politics, Philosophy & Economics**, *University of Cape Town*, *first class*
Three UCT Commerce Scholarships and Dean's Merit List for annual GPA of over 80%
Hirsch Zitron, Genesis and ERSA Prizes awarded for 1st place (among 600) in third year economics

2010 **National Senior Certificate**, *St Cyprian's School*
All distinctions with overall average of 91%
Dux Award in recognition of highest aggregate in the grade at preliminary exams

Experience

Employment

Aug–Sept 2016 **Research Associate**, J-PAL Africa, Johannesburg
Evaluated solutions measuring hard and soft skills to overcome information asymmetries between young workers and firms in ongoing trial with World Bank & Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator

Feb–May 2015 **Junior Research Analyst**, Laterite, Kigali, Rwanda
Managed an endline impact evaluation of a DFID-funded pilot project targeting teachers in the poorest schools of Rwanda and set up a novel SMS-based data collection service

Nov–Dec 2014 **Intern, Infrastructure Advisory Services**, Genesis Analytics, Johannesburg
Drafted a public-private partnership policy framework for an African government in one of Africa's leading economic consultancies

Research

Feb 2016–Jan 2017 **1st Place, Map the System**, Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, Oxford
Conducted qualitative research on maternal depression in India and South Africa and proposed innovative solutions using task-shifting and tech; followed up with on-site research in 3 Indian states
Represented in Skoll World Forum, one of the largest social entrepreneurship conferences

Feb 2014 **Finalist**, Nedbank & Old Mutual Budget Speech Competition, South Africa
Attended Budget Speech & workshop on youth unemployment as top 10 finalist in national competition

Leadership & Activities

2018–present **Strategist**, Rhodes Artificial Intelligence Lab (RAIL), Rhodes Trust, Oxford
Advised how the UK Future of Work Commission can leverage machine learning in informing policy

2017 **Co-Founder of OxFood**, Rhodes Incubator, Rhodes Trust, Oxford
Created and prototyped the cheapest, locally-sourced bulk cooking service (a personalised and adaptive mealkit design) promoting sustainable, healthy diets for resource-constrained populations

2016–present **Coordinator**, Rhodes Trust, Oxford
Co-led events to create an empowering community for Rhodes Women and Deputy Chair of Rhodes Ventures Forum 2018 on the role of business in driving social change

2014 **Tutor Coordinator**, School of Economics, UCT, South Africa
Hired, trained & managed 90 tutors and head tutors for 16 undergrad courses under competitive contract position; re-invisaged the welfare support system to redress structural educational inequalities

Teaching

2017 Teaching Assistant, Microeconomics, MSc in Economics for Development, Oxford

2017 Seminar Leader, Development Economics, Exeter Summer School, Oxford

2014 Head Tutor, Advanced Micro & Macro, School of Economics, University of Cape Town

2012 & 2014 Tutor, Micro and Macro, School of Economics, University of Cape Town

Social Impact

2016–2017 **Manager, Scholarship & Access Portfolio**, Oxford Africa Society (AfriSoc)
Partnered with colleges to expand access to financially excluded African applicants and produced aspirational video for prospective applicants, given the dearth of applications

July–Aug 2016 **English Teacher**, TEACH Caribbean NGO, Jamaica
Experimented with creative educational techniques to improve the learning experience of a cohort of students in two low-income schools for a pilot summer school programme in rural Jamaica

2013–2014 **Head of Outreach, Siyenyuka**, UCT Mountain & Ski Club, South Africa
Led bi-monthly hikes centered on environmental education; an overnight camp; a careers development talk and other mentorship activities between UCT volunteers and township school students

2010 **Head of Community Partnerships**, St Cyprian's School, South Africa
Coordinated over thirty community partnerships with various local NGOs, such as the Rape Crisis Centre and blood donation clinics; subsequently awarded the school's highest honour

Skills & Interest

Technical STATA, Matlab, LaTex, SurveyCTO

Languages French (fluent), Spanish (intermediate), Afrikaans (intermediate), Mandarin (very basic)

Sports 2016 & 2017 Oxford Half Marathon; St Antony's rowing team (Oxford); Mt Elbrus (Russia); Alba Endeavour, Tall Ships Race (Scotland); Mt Kilimanjaro (Tanzania)

Statement of Motivation

My DPhil in Economics sits at the intersection of development and behavioural economics. My current research agenda explores the behavioural motivations underlying economic outcomes for households and firms. Having commenced the PhD in September 2016, I passed the qualifying examinations in June 2017 and submitted my transfer of status in February 2018. My aspiration to participate in the NBER Entrepreneurship Research Boot Camp derives from my managing an exciting randomized control trial (RCT) with the largest entrepreneurship programme in Colombia. My deep interest in entrepreneurship and the research thereof is best exemplified by my ongoing engagement with the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and my own entrepreneurship experience. I first outline the research project before explaining why I might be a good fit for the workshop as a result.

The RCT is a co-authored study with Professor Nava Ashraf (LSE), Dr Gharad Bryan (LSE), Alexia Delfino (LSE) and Dr Leonardo Iacovone (World Bank). We will evaluate the effects of using targeted cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in updating the limiting beliefs of entrepreneurs traumatised by conflict in Colombia. The programme will be implemented and financed under the auspices of the largest public entrepreneurship programme, Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA). We seek to answer the following research questions: "How can we shift post-conflict beliefs that might limit entrepreneurs' performance by biasing views about themselves, their environment and their future? Does positive learning result in better behavioural and business outcomes?" If effective, this study provides a strong case for adopting psychology in business training – typically ineffectual if delivered alone, especially in fragile or post-conflict states. Moreover, our findings generalise to other distressing situations (such as poverty and entrepreneurship by necessity) where incorrect beliefs bias the way people interpret information from the world and their process of updating. We adopt a "co-generation of knowledge" model, which entails working intimately with policymakers in designing and implementing RCTs. This process ensures that research insights feed directly into policy, thus scaling if successful. The project's potential has thus far been recognised by my receiving an exploratory grant from IPA Peace & Recovery Program. In April 2018, I will be spending a month in Colombia adapting the training curriculum. The entire principal investigator team will also travel with SENA to two prospective locations to conduct qualitative interviews and design the intervention together with its Director.

Our contribution to the literature is two-fold. In the first instance, our research will measure how incorrect beliefs affect the interpretation of signals from the world and the way in which maladaptive beliefs could update to an optimal equilibrium. CBT has already been shown to be effective in discouraging violent behaviour, trauma and stress in the short term (see Baingana, 2005; Murthy and Lakshminaravana, 2006; Drake, Aos and Miller, 2009; Heller et al, 2013; Blattman et al, 2017). However, no study has explained the mechanisms through which CBT could undo "vicious cycles" in Beck's paradigmatic cognitive triad – beliefs about the self, world and future – that result in low effort and productivity amongst entrepreneurs. In the second instance, our research speaks to the entrepreneurship literature. The literature typically relies on static survey measures, small sample sizes or laboratory settings, while the evidence on internal sources of motivation is mixed (see Begley and Boyd, 1987; Camerer and Lovallo, 1999; Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007; de Mel et al., 2009). Similarly, traditional training has had weak effects on the success of microenterprises, with more recent studies suggesting that soft skills might matter (McKenzie and Woodruff, 2015; Acevedo et al., 2017). However, it is unclear which skills matter, why and how they develop over time. The "personal initiative" training promoting a proactive mindset in Togo results in an increase in profit for microenterprises by 30% over two years, compared with a statistically insignificant 11% for traditional training (Campos et al., 2017). However, unlike Campos et al. (2017), we seek to uncover the mechanisms through which beliefs improve behaviour and profits.

In designing the above RCT, I am cognizant that my comparative advantage lies in behavioural economics. It is for this reason that the NBER Boot Camp will be hugely beneficial to my research. I have dived into the entrepreneurship literature for the RCT and through a reading group on firms under Christopher Woodruff and Simon Quinn. However, I recognize the current limitations of my knowledge. Consequently, I embrace the depth of preparatory reading prior to the workshop. More importantly, having read a variety of papers, I look forward to the opportunity to engage face-to-face with other talented graduates and professors in identifying the most promising research insights and gaps in the literature. I find these discussions most fruitful in shaping the direction of my own research. Furthermore, the workshop has the important potential to create a community of researchers with shared interests. I have experienced this sense of community through the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, where I first became involved when placing first in the 2016 Map the System for research on maternal depression. In 2017, I was later awarded a £12,000 grant from the Skoll Centre to design a related intervention for low-income entrepreneurial women located in markets with the Zambian Ministry of Health. This research now informs my current project in Colombia. The Skoll research community meets on a fortnightly basis to discuss research related to entrepreneurship and social impact and this community has provided a crucial sounding board for my ideas.

In addition to the RCT, I have a number of completed or early-stage projects. As a very early-stage project, I am also fascinated by the intersection between firms and urban spatial economics. In particular, I am currently exploring the feasibility of researching the underlying mechanisms for firm clustering in Sub-Saharan Africa using a unique dataset in Uganda – largely comprised of microenterprises. Moreover, two near-to-completion chapters speak to a broader debate on unconditional cash transfers. The first evaluates whether an exogenous increase in the income of the elderly through the state pension crowds out inter-household private transfers in post-Apartheid South Africa. I identify whether crowding out exists using a novel dataset and a credible econometric technique that overcomes the endogeneity concerns that typically contaminates estimates in the literature. The second chapter builds on this reduced form approach by structurally identifying the behavioural parameters underlying transfer motives over the income distribution. Lastly, together with a postdoctoral researcher, Donna Harris, we have been exploring the possibility of researching whether intrinsic motivations can be fostered through narratives by evaluating a UNODC ethics project (Education for Justice) on decision-making. The project would fall within the "Economics Research Network on Identity, Norms and Narratives" (ERINN) project led by Stefan Dercon and Paul Collier, for which funding is already available.

Lastly, my academic interest in entrepreneurship is grounded on my own personal entrepreneurship experience. In 2017, I prototyped a locally-sourced adaptive meal kit design promoting healthy and sustainable eating among resource-constrained consumers through an incubator in Oxford. Furthermore, as Deputy Chair of the Rhodes Ventures Forum (a forthcoming conference in June 2018), I have further questioned the role of business in "doing well by doing good" and the fundamental tenants of an "entrepreneurial mindset". While my research speaks to my academic potential, I believe that experimentation as an entrepreneur is crucial for more nuanced research insights in this area.

My current research agenda and past experiences with an entrepreneurship research community highlights why my participation in the NBER Entrepreneurship Research Boot Camp would be beneficial. I hope to become part of this inspiring research community.

30 March 2018

Letter of support ASHLEY POPLE

Ashley Pople has applied for the NBER bootcamp on entrepreneurship and/or entrepreneurial finance run by the NBER Entrepreneurship Working Group. I would like to support her in the strongest terms for this opportunity. Ashley has completed the first year of PhD programme in economics at Oxford (in our system she is to transfer to the full DPhil status having completed all the course work requirements). I am her advisor.

She is not just an excellent student, the research project she is embarking on with Nava Ashraf, Leonardo Iacovone (LSE) and Gharad Bryan (LSE). Given the nature of her involvement, she will be able to use this work for her PhD, as she is treated as a co-PI. This research is extremely promising and directly linked to areas of work of the working group. It combines behavioural economics with training programmes for entrepreneurship. In particular, they are working in Columbia, in a post-conflict setting, where much hope is pinned that those who experienced the conflict will now engage productively and entrepreneurially. They are asking how do maladaptive beliefs about the world form and update, and apply that to the case business training in this setting. Can one push for 'positive learning' and does that lead to better behavioural and economic outcomes? Their hypothesis is that limiting beliefs bias the way in the current state of the world is experienced. This bias undermines the performance of entrepreneurs who should exhibit self-confidence, risk-taking and ambiguity resistance. CBT will be used as a treatment, adapted to circumstances. If impactful, this would provide a scientific basis for suggesting that the is a case for adopting psychology in business training in post-conflict settings, or in response to any distressful experience, such as poverty.

As a young researcher, she combines strong technical skills with deep intellectual interest. She was in the top 10% of our graduate students during the course work in her stream, having produced also an excellent paper applying very imaginatively discontinuity design to study the impact of formal pensions in South Africa on informal networks. She should be able to

prepare this for publication in a top field journal in due course. Her design for her work for the PhD is definitely material for a top-5, but she would benefit enormously from exposure to the NBER working group bootcamp.

I strongly recommend her to you. Let me know if your require more information.

Yours sincerely,



Stefan Dercon
Professor of Economic Policy, BSG and Economics
Director, Centre for the Study of African Economies