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The Nonexistence of Instrumental Variables

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Abstract

The method of instrumental variables (IV) and the generalized method of moments (GMM) has become a central technique in health economics as a method to help to disentangle the complex question of causality. However the application of these techniques require data on a sufficient number of instrumental variables which are both independent and relevant. We argue that in general such instruments cannot exist. This is a reason for the widespread finding of weak instruments..

JEL classification: C32, C51

1. Introduction

Researchers are becoming increasingly aware that there are often serious problems with the use of instrumental variable based techniques (both instrumental variable (IV) estimation and versions of generalized methods of moments (GMM) which use instrumental variables). Auld(2006) points out that while many researchers in health economics resort to instrumental variable techniques to identify causal effects there are serious difficulties with finding valid instruments in many contexts. A valid instrument must be uncorrelated with the errors in an equation (independent) and correlated with the variable which it is being used to replace (relevant). Increasingly, researchers are finding that when a set of instruments are independent of

the error they often have little relevance, this is the well known problem of ‘weak instruments’. Recently Basu, Heckman, Navarro-Lozano and Urzua(2007), following on from earlier work by Imbens and Angrist (1994) have shown that there can also be serious problems with the use of instrumental variables where treatment effects are heterogeneous across patients. In this case researchers aim to achieve an average treatment effect (ATE) but IV does not provide a consistent estimate of this and instead only estimates a local average treatment effect (LATE), see Jones’s (2009) survey for many examples of IV applied in the Health Economics context and for a thorough discussion of ways to estimate a causal relationship. This argument is similar, although less general, to the criticism of IV made below. Here we show that any type of model misspecification may be represented by a model without errors but with coefficients which vary across each individual or each time period (we refer to time here but by simply replacing t with i the analysis goes through exactly with respect to cross section data and with only a minor complication panels may also be included in the proofs below). Once this has been done then the problems identified by Basu et al become relevant to all uses of IV.

We show that, in general, valid instrumental variables cannot, in principle exist. We do this by first developing a general representation of how misspecification arises in an econometric model, in section 2, and then showing that this representation implies that valid instrumental variables cannot exist. In section 3 we then illustrate this argument in the context of a very simple model involving measurement error. Section 4 concludes.

2. A General Representation of Misspecification

Economic theory suggests relationships between variables but it does not usually give clear guidance as to the correct functional form or the exact set of variables which might be relevant.

For example, consider an economic variable, denoted by y_t^* , and its determinants, denoted by $x_{jt}^*, j = 1, \dots, L_t$. Here the total number L_t of determinants may be time dependent. Typically, data on y_t^* and on a subset $K - 1$ of the L_t determinants are available. The remaining $L_t - K + 1$ determinants are omitted from the model either because they are unobserved or for some other reason. Moreover, these data may contain measurement errors. Let $y_t = y_t^* + v_{0t}$ and $x_{jt} = x_{jt}^* + v_{jt}, j = 1, \dots, K - 1$, where the variables without an asterisk are observable, the variables with an asterisk are unobservable, and v s are measurement errors. The theoretical relationship is

$$y_t^* = f_t(x_{1t}^*, \dots, x_{L_t}^*) \quad (t = 1, \dots, T) \quad (1)$$

with unknown functional form.

Without misspecifying the relationship in (1), we can write

$$y_t^* = \alpha_{0t} + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} \alpha_{jt} x_{jt}^* + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} x_{gt}^* \quad (2)$$

where the time profiles of the coefficients are determined by the correct functional form of model (1). These time profiles are unknown, since the correct functional form is unknown¹. Allowing the coefficients of equation (2) to vary freely defines an infinite class of functional forms, which surely encompasses the correct (but unknown) functional form of (1) as a special case.

The correlations between the omitted determinants and the observed determinants are implied by

$$x_{gt}^* = \lambda_{0gt} + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} \lambda_{jgt} x_{jt}^* \quad (g = K, \dots, L_t) \quad (3)$$

where λ_{0gt} is a portion of x_{gt}^* remaining after the effects of the x_{jt}^* 's have been removed from

¹ It is possible to represent any functional form exactly by a time varying Parameter model, we refer to this as the Swamy theorem. Recently, Granger(2008) has also confirmed this theorem although he attributes the proof to Halbert White.

x_{gt}^* . Since we do not have data on the $L_t - K + 1$ x_{gt}^* variables, we can eliminate them from equation (2) by substituting (3) into (2), which gives

$$y_t^* = \alpha_{0t} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{0gt} + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} (\alpha_{jt} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{jgt}) x_{jt}^* \quad (4)$$

Note that equation (4) shows y_t^* as a function of $K - 1$ included determinants and the remainders of the excluded variables - - i.e., what remains after subtracting the effects on the excluded variables of the $K - 1$ observable determinants. Equation (4) accounts for both the unknown functional form (since it is derived from equation (2)) and the full set of (time-varying) determinants of y_t^* . It does not, however, account for measurement errors. In this connection, consider model (2) again. It is not in an estimable form. Such a form is derived below.

In terms of the observable variables, equation (2) can be written as

$$y_t = \gamma_{0t} + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} \gamma_{jt} x_{jt} \quad (5)$$

We call the x_{gt}^* 's "excluded variables" because they are excluded from model (5). The x_{jt} 's are the included explanatory variables. Model (5) coincides with model (2) if

$$\gamma_{0t} = \alpha_{0t} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{0gt} + v_{0t} \quad (6)$$

$$\gamma_{jt} = (\alpha_{jt} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{jgt}) (1 - \frac{v_{jt}}{x_{jt}}) \quad (j = 1, \dots, K-1) \quad (7)$$

These equations are derived by establishing the correspondence between equations (4) and (5).²

The terms on the right-hand side of equations (6) and (7) provide crucial information. Equation (4) shows that the λ_{0gt} 's in conjunction with the x_{jt}^* 's are at least sufficient to

² For the derivation, see Swamy and Tavlás (2007).

determine y_t^* . The interpretation of the terms on the right-hand side of equation (7) and their implications are as follows:

- The term α_{jt} is equal to $\partial y_t^* / \partial x_{jt}^*$ (if y_t^* is a continuous function of x_{jt}^*) and corresponds to the bias-free effect of x_{jt}^* on y_t^* , as can be seen from (2).
- The term $\sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{jgt}$ measures omitted-variables bias. Note that each term in this sum is the products of two coefficients - - the effect of the excluded variable x_{gt}^* on y_t^* (i.e., α_{gt}) and the effect of the included variable x_{jt}^* on the excluded variable x_{gt}^* (i.e., λ_{jgt}).
- The term $(\alpha_{jt} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{jgt})(-v_{jt} / x_{jt})$ measures measurement-errors bias.³ These biases exist whenever estimates of some theoretical variables are used as explanatory variables.
- The explanatory variables of model (5) are correlated with their own coefficients because the measurement-error bias component of γ_{jt} is a function of x_{jt} .

Having derived the model in (5) which explicitly includes all these forms of misspecification it is now possible to show why valid instruments can not be found for this model. Under IV or GMM we are imposing constant parameters on (5) we can therefore re-write 5 as;

$$y_t = \alpha_{0t} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} + v_{0t} + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} (\alpha_{jt} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{jgt}) (1 - \frac{v_{jt}}{x_{jt}}) x_{jt} \quad (8)$$

And then imposing a constant parameter model we get

³ The minus sign in the expression reflects the fact that the second parenthetical term on the right-hand side of (7) in one minus the ratio (v_{jt} / x_{jt}) .

$$y_t = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} \beta_j x_{jt} + (\alpha_{0t} + \sum_{g=K}^L \alpha_{gt} + v_{0t} - \beta_0) + \sum_{j=1}^{K-1} ((\alpha_{jt} + \sum_{g=K}^{L_t} \alpha_{gt} \lambda_{jgt}) (1 - \frac{v_{jt}}{x_{jt}}) - \beta_j) x_{jt} \quad (9)$$

Where the last two terms in (9) become the error term in the model. The problem with instrumental variables in this context now becomes apparent; we need to find a variable which is correlated with x_{jt} but which is not correlated with the error term, which itself contains x_{jt} . Such a variable cannot in general exist. The only case in which a valid instrument may exist is when $\lambda_{jgt} = 0$ For all j, g and t , which implies that there is no correlation between the included and excluded variables at any point in time, or that there are no omitted variables. And that $\alpha_{jt} = \beta_j$ for all t , which implies that there is no time variation in the true parameter which, in turn, implies that we have the correct functional form. This amounts to saying that there is no misspecification in the model and, hence, there is no need for instruments in the first place.

3. A Simple Example

Consider a very trivial example where the only misspecification is measurement error in the independent variable. Assume we have a perfectly fitting relationship in the true variables

$$Y^* = \beta X^* \quad (10)$$

where the measured value of X is given by

$$X = X^* + v \quad (11)$$

Then the model we estimate is

$$Y^* = \beta^1 X + \varepsilon \quad (12)$$

where v and ε are error terms. Then there are two ways we can demonstrate the problem with IV applied to (12). First we may consider the issue from a TVC perspective and we may write an exact version of 10 as

$$Y^* = \beta_t X \quad (13)$$

Then if we apply a fixed parameter model to this equation we get

$$Y^* = \beta^2 X + (\beta_1 - \beta^2) X \quad (14)$$

And the last term is the error term in (12) and we can see that no valid instruments can exist for X since X is also in the error term. We can also see the same problem from a more conventional perspective. If we perform a fixed parameter regression then we can rewrite (12) as

$$Y^* = \beta^1 X + (\beta X - \beta^1 X) \quad (15)$$

Where again the term in brackets in (15) is the error term in (12) and we can see that the error term again contains the same variable that we are trying to instrument and so no valid instrument can exist.

4. Conclusion

The instrumental variables that are correlated with the x_{jt} 's of model (5) but not with the error terms of model (9) do not in general exist because these error terms also involve the x_{jt} 's. These arguments make it clear why practical work with IV methods is plagued by the problem of weak instruments. The general difficulty with IV has become increasingly obvious in Health Economics as well as other areas of our discipline Basu et al (2007). We have argued here that the problems of IV are endemic to all models not just to certain ones such as those with heterogeneous coefficients. We would argue that a much better way forward in terms of practical estimation rests on a recognition of all the potential sources of misspecification which are apparent in (5) and which starts from a time varying coefficient model as outlined in Swamy, Hall, Tavlas and Hondroyianis(2010).

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