Chapter 17: Consumption

Keynes’s conjectures

1. $0 < MPC < 1$
2. Average propensity to consume ($APC$) falls as income rises. ($APC = \frac{C}{Y}$)
3. Income is the main determinant of consumption.

The Keynesian consumption function

\[ C = \bar{C} + cY \]

- $\bar{C}$ = slope of the consumption function
- $c = MPC$

Early empirical successes: Results from early studies

- Households with higher incomes:
  - consume more, $\Rightarrow MPC > 0$
  - save more, $\Rightarrow MPC < 1$
  - save a larger fraction of their income, $\Rightarrow APC \downarrow$ as $Y \uparrow$
- Very strong correlation between income and consumption:
  $\Rightarrow$ income seemed to be the main determinant of consumption

Problems for the Keynesian consumption function

- Based on the Keynesian consumption function, economists predicted that $C$ would grow more slowly than $Y$ over time.
- This prediction did not come true:
  - As incomes grew, $APC$ did not fall, and $C$ grew at the same rate as income.
  - Simon Kuznets showed that $C/Y$ was very stable in long time series data.
The Consumption Puzzle

Irving Fisher and Intertemporal Choice

The basic two-period model

Deriving the intertemporal budget constraint

The intertemporal budget constraint
The intertemporal budget constraint

\[ Y_2 + \frac{C_2}{1+r} = Y_1 + \frac{C_1}{1+r} \]

The slope of the budget line equals \(-1/(1+r)\)

Consumer preferences

An indifference curve shows all combinations of \(C_1\) and \(C_2\) that make the consumer equally happy.

Consumer preferences

Higher indifference curves represent higher levels of happiness.

Marginal rate of substitution (\(MRS\)): the amount of \(C_2\) the consumer would be willing to substitute for one unit of \(C_1\).

The slope of an indifference curve at any point equals the \(MRS\) at that point.

Optimization

The optimal \((C_1, C_2)\) is where the budget line just touches the highest indifference curve.

Optimization

At the optimal point, \(MRS = 1+r\)

How \(C\) responds to changes in \(Y\)

Results: Provided they are both normal goods, \(C_1\) and \(C_2\) both increase, regardless of whether the income increase occurs in period 1 or period 2.

Keynes vs. Fisher

- Keynes: Current consumption depends only on current income.
- Fisher: Current consumption depends only on the present value of lifetime income. The timing of income is irrelevant because the consumer can borrow or lend between periods.
How $C$ responds to changes in $r$

As depicted here, $C_1$ falls and $C_2$ rises. However, it could turn out differently...

An increase in $r$ pivots the budget line around the point $(Y_1, Y_2)$.

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Constraints on borrowing

- In Fisher’s theory, the timing of income is irrelevant: Consumer can borrow and lend across periods.
- Example: If consumer learns that her future income will increase, she can spread the extra consumption over both periods by borrowing in the current period.
- However, if consumer faces borrowing constraints (aka “liquidity constraints”), then she may not be able to increase current consumption ... and her consumption may behave as in the Keynesian theory even though she is rational & forward-looking.

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Consumer optimization when the borrowing constraint is not binding

The borrowing constraint is not binding if the consumer’s optimal $C_1$ is less than $Y_1$.
Consumer optimization when the borrowing constraint is binding

The optimal choice is at point $D$. But since the consumer cannot borrow, the best he can do is point $E$.

The Life-Cycle Hypothesis

- due to Franco Modigliani (1950s)
- Fisher’s model says that consumption depends on lifetime income, and people try to achieve smooth consumption.
- The LCH says that income varies systematically over the phases of the consumer’s “life cycle,” and saving allows the consumer to achieve smooth consumption.

The Life-Cycle Hypothesis

- The basic model:
  - $W =$ initial wealth
  - $Y =$ annual income until retirement (assumed constant)
  - $R =$ number of years until retirement
  - $T =$ lifetime in years
- Assumptions:
  - zero real interest rate (for simplicity)
  - consumption-smoothing is optimal

Implications of the Life-Cycle Hypothesis

The LCH can solve the consumption puzzle:

- The life-cycle consumption function implies $APC = C/Y = \alpha(W/Y) + \beta$
- Across households, income varies more than wealth, so high-income households should have a lower $APC$ than low-income households.
- Over time, aggregate wealth and income grow together, causing $APC$ to remain stable.
The Permanent Income Hypothesis

- due to Milton Friedman (1957)
- \( Y = Y_p + Y_t \)
  where
  - \( Y \) = current income
  - \( Y_p \) = permanent income
    average income, which people expect to persist into the future
  - \( Y_t \) = transitory income
    temporary deviations from average income

The PIH can solve the consumption puzzle:

- The PIH implies
  \[ APC = \frac{C}{Y} = \frac{\alpha Y_p}{Y} \]
- If high-income households have higher transitory income than low-income households, 
  APC is lower in high-income households.
- Over the long run, income variation is due mainly (if not solely) to variation in permanent income, 
  which implies a stable APC.

PIH vs. LCH

- Both: people try to smooth their consumption in the face of changing current income.
- LCH: current income changes systematically as people move through their life cycle.
- PIH: current income is subject to random, transitory fluctuations.
- Both can explain the consumption puzzle.

The Random-Walk Hypothesis

- due to Robert Hall (1978)
- based on Fisher’s model & PIH, in which forward-looking consumers base consumption on expected future income
- Hall adds the assumption of rational expectations, that people use all available information to forecast future variables like income.
Implication of the R-W Hypothesis

If consumers obey the PIH and have rational expectations, then policy changes will affect consumption only if they are unanticipated.

The Psychology of Instant Gratification

- Theories from Fisher to Hall assume that consumers are rational and act to maximize lifetime utility.
- Recent studies by David Laibson and others consider the psychology of consumers.

Two questions and time inconsistency

1. Would you prefer (A) a candy today, or (B) two candies tomorrow?
2. Would you prefer (A) a candy in 100 days, or (B) two candies in 101 days?

In studies, most people answered (A) to 1 and (B) to 2. A person confronted with question 2 may choose (B). But in 100 days, when confronted with question 1, the pull of instant gratification may induce her to change her answer to (A).

Summing up

- Keynes: consumption depends primarily on current income.
- Recent work: consumption also depends on expected future income, wealth, interest rates.
- Economists disagree over the relative importance of these factors, borrowing constraints, and psychological factors.

Chapter Summary

1. Keynesian consumption theory
   - Keynes’ conjectures
     - \( MPC \) is between 0 and 1
     - \( APC \) falls as income rises
     - current income is the main determinant of current consumption
   - Empirical studies
     - in household data & short time series: confirmation of Keynes’ conjectures
     - in long-time series data: \( APC \) does not fall as income rises
2. Fisher’s theory of intertemporal choice
   - Consumer chooses current & future consumption to maximize lifetime satisfaction of subject to an intertemporal budget constraint.
   - Current consumption depends on lifetime income, not current income, provided consumer can borrow & save.

3. Modigliani’s life-cycle hypothesis
   - Income varies systematically over a lifetime.
   - Consumers use saving & borrowing to smooth consumption.
   - Consumption depends on income & wealth.

4. Friedman’s permanent-income hypothesis
   - Consumption depends mainly on permanent income.
   - Consumers use saving & borrowing to smooth consumption in the face of transitory fluctuations in income.

5. Hall’s random-walk hypothesis
   - Combines PIH with rational expectations.
   - Main result: changes in consumption are unpredictable, occur only in response to unanticipated changes in expected permanent income.

6. Laibson and the pull of instant gratification
   - Uses psychology to understand consumer behavior.
   - The desire for instant gratification causes people to save less than they rationally know they should.