The utility of standardized or crude weight measures in modeling of postnatal growth trajectories: Are there differences?

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Introduction

- Postnatal growth trajectory characteristics play an important role in life course analyses, and differences in growth according to prenatal exposures is one frequently used analytic approach.
- Z-scores are a frequent outcome choice when modeling weight growth trajectories. **Advantages** include sex- and age-independent measures free of dimension. **Disadvantage** is measure designed for cross-sectional use.
- Compared to crude measures of weight, the advantages of standardized measures, such as Z-scores, are unclear.

Aim

- Estimate group differences in postnatal weight change across three different outcomes and three models to assess precision, type I error and parameter estimate values via Monte Carlo simulations.

Samples

- Growth trajectory parameters for baseline exposure correspond to published estimates for three samples: Italy, Portugal and Chile [1].

Method

- We generated fixed effects infant growth data with a Reed first order parametric model (**Source**): $y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \mathrm{t}_{ij} + \beta_2 \cdot \ln(\mathrm{t}_{ij}) + \frac{\beta_3}{\mathrm{t}_{ij}} + \beta_4 \cdot \mathrm{group}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \mathrm{t}_{ij} \cdot \mathrm{group}_i + e_{ij}$
- After simulating weight values, we converted simulated weight to Z-score and percentiles and fit three models:
- **Model 1**: $E(m_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \mathrm{t} + \beta_2 \cdot \mathrm{group} + \beta_3 \cdot \mathrm{t} \cdot \mathrm{group}$
- **Model 2** $E(m_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \mathrm{t} + \beta_2 \cdot \mathrm{group} + \beta_3 \cdot \mathrm{t} \cdot \mathrm{group} + \beta_4 \cdot \mathrm{t}^2$
- **Model 3** $E(m_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \mathrm{month6} + \beta_2 \cdot \mathrm{group} + \beta_3 \cdot \mathrm{month6} \cdot \mathrm{group}$

Model Terms

y_{ij}	weight for person *i* and time *j*
t	age (months)
m_{ij}	weight, Z-score, percentile for person *i* and time *j*
group	a binary exposure factor
month6	a binary variable for time with 1=month 6 and 0=month 0
e_{ij}	error term with covariance following an autocorrelation structure, ρ=0.5 and σ=0.75

Results

Figure 1: Simulated weight growth curves with corresponding Z-score and percentile outcomes using Chilean growth parameters

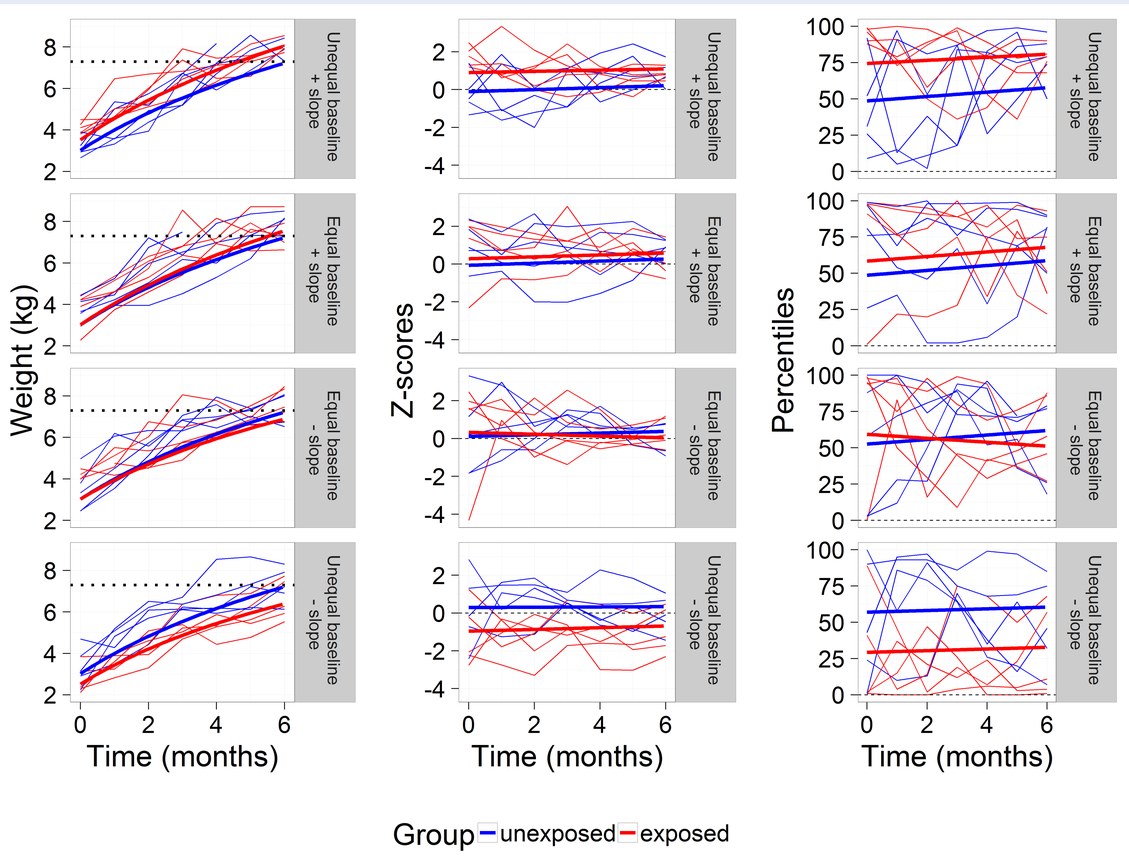
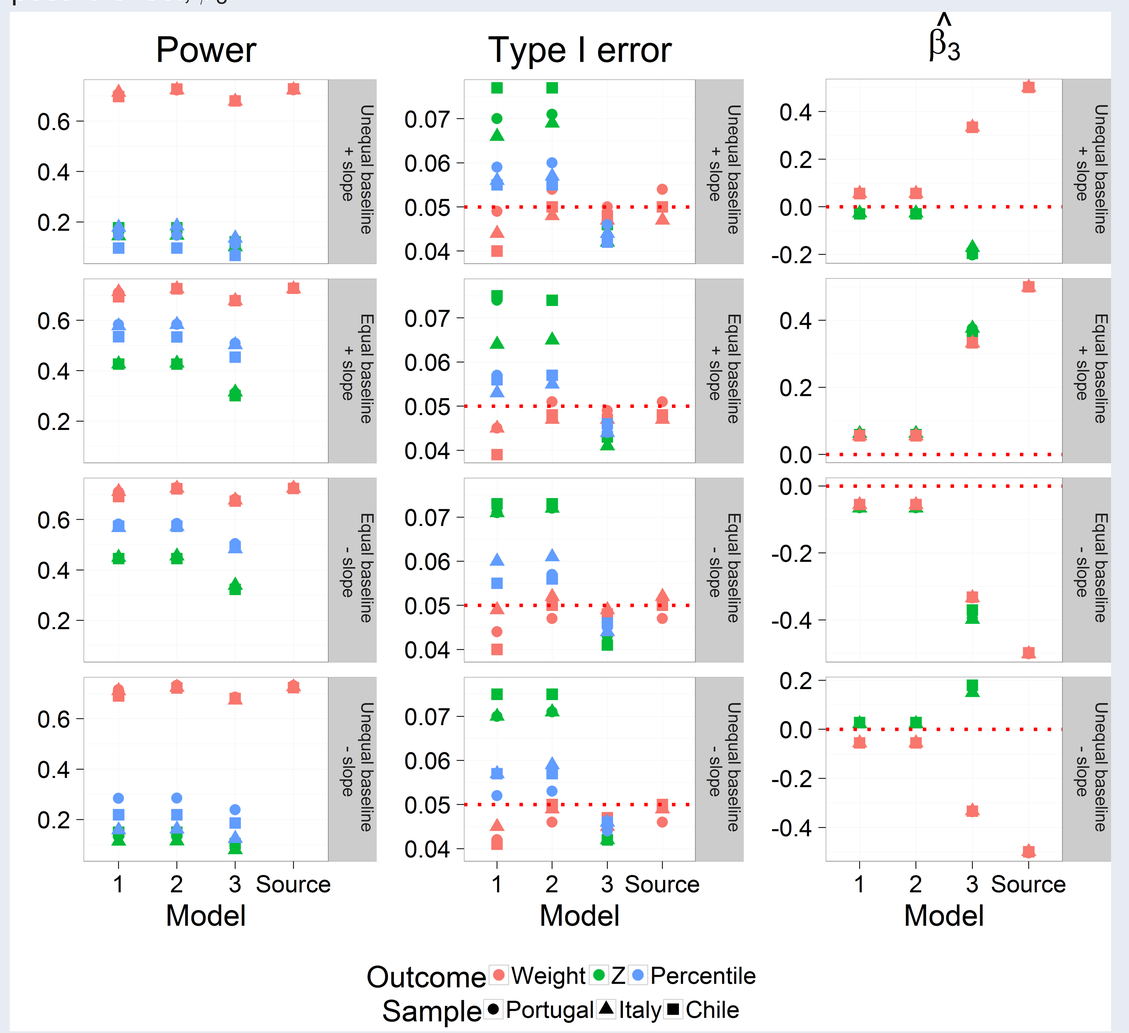


Figure 2: Comparison of power, type-I error and estimated product term for time and exposure effect, β_3.



Results, cont . . .

Power Consistently greater with crude weight.
- Weight difference at baseline results in larger differential.

Type I error Crude weight measure closest to nominal type I error of 0.05.
- Z-scores have greatest type I error for models 1 and 2.

Parameter estimates Baseline weight differences lead to opposite direction of effect for Z-score vs crude weight outcomes.
- No weight differences at baseline leads to similar estimates between Z-score and original weight outcomes.

Conclusions

Each measure examined in this project, Z-scores, percentiles and crude weight measures, serves a purpose as needed in research. However, these outcomes in growth trajectory analyses are not equivalent, and if used incorrrectly can have adverse effects.

- Even at similar age and gender values, reference to a standard, WHO Z-scores, is not equivalent to crude weight values when assessing group differences in weight change over time.
- Supporting this conclusion, estimated group differences in weight change for all three outcomes only coincide in direction under certain conditions – equivalent weight at baseline.
  - ⇒ Special attention needed when interpreting standardized measures in longitudinal models. What is your target population?
- If comparisons to a standard such as WHO are not an objective, using Z-scores instead of crude weight can lead to
  - ⇒ biased estimates and conflicting inference.
  - ⇒ lower power and inflated type I error.
- Findings replicate lower power found in adolescent age group [2].
- **Future efforts**: How does this finding extend to other contexts beside group comparisons in infant growth?

References

(1) C. Pizzi et al. "Prenatal Influences on Size, Velocity and Tempo of Infant Growth: Findings from Three Contemporary Cohorts". In: *PLoS ONE* 9.2 (Feb. 27, 2014). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0090291

(2) C. S Berkey and G. A Colditz. "Adiposity in adolescents: Change in actual BMI works better than change in BMI z score for longitudinal studies". In: *Annals of Epidemiology* 17.1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 44–50. DOI: 10.1016/j.annepidem.2006.07.014

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