

Randomized experiments

INFO/STSCI/ILRST 3900: Causal Inference

29 Aug 2023

Learning goals for today

At the end of class, you will be able to:

1. Explain why exchangeability holds in randomized experiments
2. Understand why exchangeability allows for direct estimation of causal effects

Logistics

- ▶ Problem Set 1 is due on Aug 31 at 5pm on Canvas
- ▶ Come to office hours!
 - ▶ Ian: Tuesday 10:30-11:30 (Gates 223)
 - ▶ Sam: Wednesday 3-4 (Comstock 1192)
 - ▶ Daniel: Thursday 1-2 (Uris Hall 302)
 - ▶ Mayleen: Friday 9-10 (Rhodes 657, Room 2)

Potential outcome notation review

- ▶ We typically use i to denote a generic unit in our study
- ▶ Y_i is the observed outcome for unit i
- ▶ A_i is treatment received by unit i
- ▶ We typically use a to denote a generic treatment in our study
- ▶ Y_i^a denotes the outcome we would have observed for unit i if assigned treatment value a

Potential outcome exercise

- ▶ We observe that Martha ate a Mediterranean diet, and we observe that Martha survived.
Suppose Martha had eaten a standard diet, we would have observed that Martha survived.
- ▶ We observe that Ezra ate a standard diet, and we observe that Ezra did not survive
Suppose Ezra had eaten a Mediterranean diet, we would have observed that Ezra survived.

Potential outcome exercise

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Suppose Martha had eaten a standard diet, we would have observed that Martha survived.
- ▶ We observe that Ezra ate a standard diet, and we observe that Ezra did not survive
Suppose Ezra had eaten a Mediterranean diet, we would have observed that Ezra survived.

Assuming *consistency*, what is A_i , Y_i , Y_i^{MedDiet} and Y_i^{StanDiet}

- ▶ When $i = \text{Martha}$?
- ▶ When $i = \text{Ezra}$?

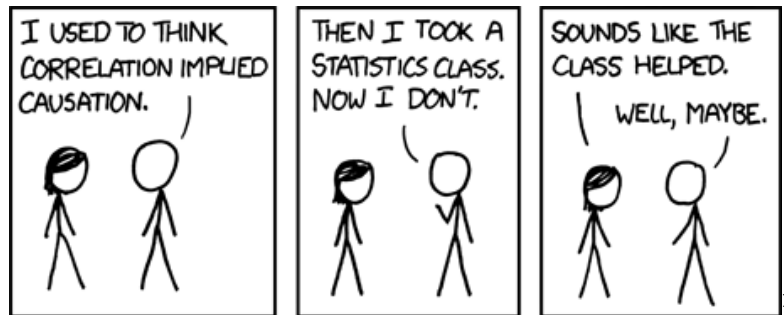
Potential outcome exercise

Suppose we know the following pieces of information:

- ▶ We observe that Martha ate a Mediterranean diet, and we observe that Martha survived.
Suppose Martha had eaten a standard diet, we would have observed that Martha survived.
- ▶ We observe that Ezra ate a standard diet, and we observe that Ezra did not survive
Suppose Ezra had eaten a Mediterranean diet, we would have observed that Ezra survived.

| | A_i | Y_i | $Y_i^a = \text{Med}$ | $Y_i^a = \text{Stan}$ |
|--------|-------|-------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Martha | | | | |
| Ezra | | | | |

Randomized experiments



¹<https://xkcd.com/552/>

Randomized experiments

The New York Times

TheUpshot

What Coronavirus Researchers Can Learn From Economists

Randomized controlled trials remain the gold standard, but natural experiments can help doctors who need answers now.



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By Anupam B. Jena and Christopher M. Worsham

June 30, 2020



Fundamental problem of causal inference

- ▶ Randomized experiments are the gold standard for estimating causal effects
- ▶ Fundamental problem of causal inference is that we don't observe counterfactual outcomes
- ▶ Data is still missing in random experiments

| | A | $Y^{a=1}$ | $Y^{a=0}$ | $Y^{a=1} - Y^{a=0}$ |
|-------|---|-----------|-----------|---------------------|
| Ind 1 | 0 | ? | 0 | ? |
| Ind 2 | 0 | ? | 1 | ? |
| Ind 3 | 0 | ? | 0 | ? |
| Ind 4 | 1 | 1 | ? | ? |
| Ind 5 | 1 | 0 | ? | ? |
| Ind 6 | 1 | 1 | ? | ? |

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| Ind 6 | 1 | 1 | ? | ? |

- ▶ Why do randomized experiments “work”?

What can go wrong?

Suppose we have data gathered by surveying individuals in Fall of 2021

- ▶ Whether the individual was vaccinated for Covid
 $A_i = 1$ if vaccinated, $A_i = 0$ if not vaccinated
- ▶ Whether the individual tested positive for Covid in 2021
 $Y_i = 1$ if positive test, $Y_i = 0$ if no positive test

What can go wrong?

Left side of class

- ▶ Of the individuals who are **vaccinated** ($A_i = 1$), 50% had a positive Covid test ($Y_i = 1$)
- ▶ Of the individuals who are **not vaccinated** ($A_i = 0$), 70% had a positive Covid test ($Y_i = 1$)
- ▶ How might a vaccine skeptic explain the data?

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Right side of class

- ▶ Of the individuals who are **vaccinated** ($A_i = 1$), 70% had a positive Covid test ($Y_i = 1$)
- ▶ Of the individuals who are **not vaccinated** ($A_i = 0$), 50% had a positive Covid test ($Y_i = 1$)
- ▶ How might a vaccine advocate explain the data?

Randomized experiment

Experiment designed by Pfizer **randomly assign** each individual (43,000 total) into two groups²:

- ▶ Two doses of BNT162b2 vaccine 21 days apart
- ▶ Two doses of placebo 21 days apart
- ▶ Whether a positive Covid test was recorded between 7 days and 14 weeks after the injection

²Polack et. al. NEJM 2020

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- ▶ Whether a positive Covid test was recorded between 7 days and 14 weeks after the injection

- ▶ Of the individuals who were given the vaccine ($A_i = 1$), 0.04% had a positive Covid test ($Y_i = 1$)
- ▶ Of the individuals who were given the placebo ($A_i = 0$), 0.9% had a positive Covid test ($Y_i = 1$)
- ▶ Individuals who received the placebo were ≈ 20 times more likely to get Covid

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Do the skeptics objections still hold?

²Polack et. al. NEJM 2020

Why experiments “work”

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants in the Main Safety Population.*

| Characteristic | BNT162b2 (N=18,860) | Placebo (N=18,846) | Total (N=37,706) |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Sex — no. (%) | | | |
| Male | 9,639 (51.1) | 9,436 (50.1) | 19,075 (50.6) |
| Female | 9,221 (48.9) | 9,410 (49.9) | 18,631 (49.4) |
| Race or ethnic group — no. (%)† | | | |
| White | 15,636 (82.9) | 15,630 (82.9) | 31,266 (82.9) |
| Black or African American | 1,729 (9.2) | 1,763 (9.4) | 3,492 (9.3) |
| Asian | 801 (4.2) | 807 (4.3) | 1,608 (4.3) |
| Native American or Alaska Native | 102 (0.5) | 99 (0.5) | 201 (0.5) |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 50 (0.3) | 26 (0.1) | 76 (0.2) |
| Multiracial | 449 (2.4) | 406 (2.2) | 855 (2.3) |
| Not reported | 93 (0.5) | 115 (0.6) | 208 (0.6) |
| Hispanic or Latinx | 5,266 (27.9) | 5,277 (28.0) | 10,543 (28.0) |
| Country — no. (%) | | | |
| Argentina | 2,883 (15.3) | 2,881 (15.3) | 5,764 (15.3) |
| Brazil | 1,145 (6.1) | 1,139 (6.0) | 2,284 (6.1) |
| South Africa | 372 (2.0) | 372 (2.0) | 744 (2.0) |
| United States | 14,460 (76.7) | 14,454 (76.7) | 28,914 (76.7) |
| Age group — no. (%) | | | |
| 16–55 yr | 10,889 (57.7) | 10,896 (57.8) | 21,785 (57.8) |
| >55 yr | 7,971 (42.3) | 7,950 (42.2) | 15,921 (42.2) |
| Age at vaccination — yr | | | |
| Median | 52.0 | 52.0 | 52.0 |
| Range | 16–89 | 16–91 | 16–91 |
| Body-mass index‡ | | | |
| ≥30.0: obese | 6,556 (34.8) | 6,662 (35.3) | 13,218 (35.1) |

* Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

† Race or ethnic group was reported by the participants.

‡ The body-mass index is the weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters.

Why experiments “work”

In random experiments, the distribution of **potential outcomes** for those who are treated and those who are not treated (control group) are similar!

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This is a concept called **exchangeability**

Sometimes also referred to as **exogenous**

$\underbrace{exo}_{\text{outside}} \cdot \underbrace{genous}_{\text{to produce}}$

Exchangeability

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- ▶ Two random variables are **independent** if the outcome of one does not give any information about the outcome of the other
- ▶ What we would have observed if an individual was given the treatment ($Y^{a=1}$) is independent of whether or not the individual actually received treatment
- ▶ What we would have observed if an individual was not given the treatment ($Y^{a=0}$) is independent of whether or not the individual actually received treatment

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- ▶ Exchangeability means that the **potential** outcomes Y^a are independent of the observed treatment
- ▶ Exchangeability does **not** mean that the **observed** outcome Y is independent of the observed treatment!

Exchangeability

$A = 1$ means vaccinated; $A = 0$ means unvaccinated

$Y = 1$ means covid; $Y = 0$ means no covid;

| | $Y^{a=1}$ | $Y^{a=0}$ | A | Y |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----|-----|
| Low Risk 1 | 0 | 0 | ? | ? |
| Low Risk 2 | 0 | 0 | ? | ? |
| High Risk 3 | 0 | 1 | ? | ? |
| High Risk 4 | 0 | 1 | ? | ? |

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$$\text{Average Causal Effect} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1})}_0 - \underbrace{E(Y^{a=0})}_{1/2} = -1/2$$

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Suppose Low Risk choose $A_i = 0$ and High Risk choose $A_i = 1$ so the potential outcomes are not independent of the observed treatment

$$\underbrace{E(Y \mid A = 1)}_{\text{observed unvac}} - \underbrace{E(Y \mid A = 0)}_{\text{observed unvac}} = 0$$

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$$\underbrace{E(Y \mid A = 1)}_{\text{observed vac}} - \underbrace{E(Y \mid A = 0)}_{\text{observed unvac}} = -1/2$$

Exchangeability

In mathematical notation, exchangeability means

$$\underbrace{Y^{a=1}, Y^{a=0}}_{\text{potential outcomes}} \perp\!\!\!\perp \underbrace{A}_{\text{observed treatment}}$$

Why is exchangeability good?

The average causal effect (ACE) is the difference in average outcome that would occur if everyone is treated compared to the average outcome that would occur if no-one is treated

$$\text{ACE} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1)}_{\text{if everyone is treated}} - \underbrace{E(Y^{a=0} = 1)}_{\text{if no-one is treated}}$$

Why is exchangeability good?

The average causal effect (ACE) is the difference in average outcome that would occur if everyone is treated compared to the average outcome that would occur if no-one is treated

$$\text{ACE} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1)}_{\text{if everyone is treated}} - \underbrace{E(Y^{a=0} = 1)}_{\text{if no-one is treated}}$$

The problem is, we only know

- ▶ $E(Y^{a=1} \mid A = 1)$, the average $Y^{a=1}$ among individuals who are actually treated
- ▶ $E(Y^{a=0} \mid A = 0)$, the average $Y^{a=0}$ among individuals who are actually not treated

Why is exchangeability good?

When exchangeability is true, it implies

$$\underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1 \mid A = 1)}_{\text{Within treated}} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1 \mid A = 0)}_{\text{Within not treated}} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1)}_{\text{everyone}}$$

Why is exchangeability good?

When exchangeability is true, it implies

$$\underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1 \mid A = 1)}_{\text{Within treated}} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1 \mid A = 0)}_{\text{Within not treated}} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1)}_{\text{everyone}}$$

This allows us to identify the average causal effect (ACE)

$$\text{ATE} = \underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1)}_{\text{if everyone is treated}} - \underbrace{E(Y^{a=0} = 1)}_{\text{if no-one is treated}}$$

because we can plug-in

$$\underbrace{E(Y^{a=1} = 1 \mid A = 1)}_{\text{outcomes for people who are **actually** treated}} \quad \text{and} \quad \underbrace{E(Y^{a=0} = 1 \mid A = 0)}_{\text{outcomes for people who are **actually** not treated}}$$

Learning goals for today

At the end of class, you will be able to:

1. Explain why exchangeability holds in randomized experiments
2. Understand why exchangeability allows for direct estimation of causal effects