Causes and effects in Dichotomous Comparative Judgments: an information-theoretical system of plausible mechanism

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Abstract

Dichotomous Comparative Judgment (DCJ) requires judges to compare pairs of stimuli to determine which one exhibits a higher degree of a specific trait. DCJ has proven effective and reliable across various fields (Pollitt 2012b; Jones 2015; van Daal et al. 2019; Bartholomew et al. 2018; Lesterhuis 2018; Bartholomew and Williams 2020; Marshall et al. 2020; Boonen, Kloots, and Gillis 2020). However, despite the method’s widespread use, existing literature lacks a clear explanation of the complexities and assumptions underpinning the DCJ system, as well as the plausible mechanisms through which DCJ data could be generated. This study addresses these issues by representing DCJ within the framework of causal inference. Specifically, utilizing the structural approach, the study develops a scientific model to clarify plausible causal assumptions and mechanisms inherent in the DCJ system. The study then translates this model into a probabilistic statistical model to estimate statistical relationships and infer causal effects within the system. This research provides a robust probabilistic foundation for the statistical analysis of DCJ data, building upon Thurstone’s law of comparative judgment (1927). Its findings offer valuable insights for researchers and analysts designing and implementing DCJ experiments.

# Introduction

In contemporary contexts, Thurstone’s law of comparative judgment (1927) primarily refers to the method of *dichotomous* comparative judgment (DCJ, Pollitt 2012a, 2012b). In DCJ, a judge assesses the relative manifestation of a *trait* within a pair of stimuli. This assessment results in a dichotomous value indicating which stimulus possesses a higher degree of the trait. After different judges perform multiple rounds of pairwise comparisons, an outcome vector is produced. This vector is modeled using the Bradley-Terry-Luce model (BTL, Bradley and Terry 1952; Luce 1959), which creates a score that corresponds with the trait of interest. This score is then used to rank the stimuli from lowest to highest or to evaluate the influence of certain variables on the stimuli’s positions in the ranking.

DCJ has proven effective in assessing competencies and traits predominantly within the educational realm, as demonstrated by Pollitt (2012b), Jones (2015), van Daal et al. (2019), Bartholomew et al. (2018), Lesterhuis (2018), Bartholomew and Williams (2020), and Marshall et al. (2020). However, its application transcends education, as exemplified by Boonen, Kloots, and Gillis (2020). The methodology has also evolved to include multiple, as opposed to pairwise comparisons (Luce 1959; Plackett 1975), and to accommodate comparisons with ordinal outcomes (Tutz 1986; Agresti 1992). Overall, research suggests that DCJ offers an alternative and efficient approach to measurement and evaluation, characterized by its reliability and validity (Lesterhuis 2018; van Daal 2020; Marshall et al. 2020; Bouwer et al. 2023). Nevertheless, despite the method’s widespread use, existing literature lacks a clear representation of the plausible mechanisms through which DCJ data could be generated. Particularly, there is no depiction of the complexity and the assumptions underpinning the DCJ system, nor how different assessment factors can potentially influence the observed DCJ outcome.

According to Verhavert et al. (2019) and van Daal (2020), several assessment factors interact and influence the method’s outcome. These factors include the number and characteristics of the stimuli, their *proximity* in terms of the assessed trait, the number of comparison per stimulus, and the pairing algorithm used. Furthermore, since the method relies on judges’ assessments, the number and characteristics of judges, their *discrimination* abilities, and the number of comparisons per judge also play pivotal roles. Moreover, when the stimuli represent sub-units of higher-levels units, factors such as the number and characteristics of these units, along with their *proximity* in terms of the assessed trait, can significantly influence the outcome. For example, in van Daal et al. (2019), the authors assessed the academic writing skills of university students (units) using multiple argumentative essays (sub-units).

Although several studies have examined the individual impact of these factors on the method’s reliability (Bramley 2015; Pollitt 2012b; Bramley and Vitello 2019; Verhavert et al. 2019; Crompvoets, Béguin, and Sijtsma 2022; van Daal et al. 2017; Gijsen et al. 2021; Bouwer et al. 2023), none, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, have provided a transparent depiction of the DCJ system and the mechanisms generating the DCJ outcome. This study aims to fill this gap by representing DCJ within the framework of causal inference. Specifically, utilizing the structural approach to causal inference, the study develops a scientific model to clarify plausible causal assumptions and mechanisms inherent in the DCJ system. The study then translates the scientific model into a probabilistic statistical model. This model aims to produce statistical estimates to draw inferences about plausible causal relationships within the DCJ system.

Ultimately, this study provides a robust causal and probabilistic foundation for the statistical analysis of DCJ data, building upon Thurstone’s law of comparative judgment (1927). Consequently, its findings offer valuable insights for researchers and analysts designing and implementing DCJ experiments.

# Theoretical framework

This section introduces fundamental concepts in causal inference, such as directed acyclic graphs (DAGs), structural causal models (SCMs), and the flow of association and causation in graphs. The section is not a comprehensive description of causal inference methods. Readers interested in deeper exploration should consult introductory papers like Pearl (2010), Rohrer (2018), Pearl (2019), and Cinelli, Forney, and Pearl (2020). They may also find introductory books such as Pearl and Mackenzie (2018), Neal (2020) and McElreath (2020) useful. For more advanced study, seminal intermediate papers like Neyman (1923), Rubin (1974), Spirtes, Glymour, and Scheines (1991), and Sekhon (2009), as well as books like Pearl (2009), Morgan and Winship (2014) and Hernán and Robins (2020) are recommended.

## The structural approach to causal inference

Empirical research addresses real-world challenges by relying on evidence gathered through observation and experimentation. In this context, researchers typically frame their research questions as *estimands* or *targets of inference*. These estimands represent the specific quantities the study aims to determine (Everitt and Skrondal 2010). For instance, a study might seek to answer the question, “To what extent do daily practice hours () influence students’ ability to produce high-quality written texts ()?”. To investigate this, the study randomly assigns students to two groups with different levels of daily practice, low and medium . The quality of the written texts is evaluated using pairwise comparisons, resulting in a dichotomous outcome . The research question is then framed as the estimand, “*On average*, which group of students produces higher-quality written texts?” This estimand is mathematically expressed as , where represents the expected value.

Researchers then proceed to identify the estimands. *Identification* is the process of accurately computing an estimand using an estimator. An *estimator* is a method or function that transforms data into an estimate (Neal 2020). *Estimates* are numerical values that approximate the estimand and are derived through *estimation*, which is the process that integrates data with an estimator (Everitt and Skrondal 2010). While various methods can approximate an estimand, researchers prioritize estimators with desirable properties that ensure accurate estimates. For example, Fisher’s exact test (Fisher 1922) is an estimator with desirable properties for comparing tables. The test provides accurate estimates for comparing proportions when its assumptions are satisfied. [Figure 1](#fig-IEflow), known as the Identification-Estimation flowchart (McElreath 2020; Neal 2020), illustrates the aforementioned process of transitioning from estimands to estimates.

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| Figure 1: Identification-Estimation flowchart. Extracted and slightly modified from Neal (2020, 32) |

However, many studies aim to establish causal relationships rather than merely infer associations. In the earlier example, the estimates obtained using Fisher’s exact test can be interpreted as causal because the data were collected through a randomized experiment. In randomized experiments, the researcher fully controls the treatment assignment mechanism, such as assigning students to different groups. This control allows causal estimates to be derived from associational estimates, such as those provided by the Fisher statistic, since randomization effectively eliminates confounding (Neal 2020). *Confounding* occurs when an external variable influences both the outcome and the variable of interest, leading to spurious association (Everitt and Skrondal 2010).

## DAGs and SCMs

Graph theory is a branch of mathematics focused on the study of graphs. Graphs are mathematical structures modeling pairwise relations between objects. They can represent physical relations, such as electrical circuits and roadways, and less tangible structures, such as ecosystems and sociological relations. Graphs have proven useful in various fields, including computer science, operations research, and the natural and social sciences (Gross, Yellen, and Anderson 2018).

In statistics, one application incorporating concepts from graph theory is causal inference. Specifically, the structural approach to causal inference uses directed acyclic graphs (DAG) to provide a graphical and formal representation of the causal structure of a system (Neal 2020). In this context, a *graph* denotes a collection of nodes connected by edges, where nodes represent random variables. The term *directed* indicates the edges of the graph extend from one node to another, with arrows showing the direction of causal influence. Moreover, the term *acyclic* indicates the causal influences do not form a loop, meaning the influences do not cycle back on themselves (McElreath 2020).

DAGs offer two key advantages for modeling causal structures. Firstly, they represent causal relations in a nonparametric and fully interactive manner. This feature allows for feasible causal analysis strategies without needing the specification of the type of data or the nature of the functional dependence among variables (Morgan and Winship 2014). Secondly, regardless of complexity, DAGs can represent various causal structures using only five fundamental building blocks (Neal 2020; McElreath 2020). This feature enables the decomposition of complex structures into basic building blocks, facilitating the analysis of these structures by focusing on the causal assumptions associated with each building block individually (McElreath 2020). These building blocks can be represented in three ways: the magnified representation, the standard representation, and the structural causal model form (SCM, Morgan and Winship 2014).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | (a) Two unconnected nodes | |  | |  | | --- | | (b) Two unconnected nodes | |

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|  | |  | | --- | | (c) Two unconnected nodes | |  |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | (d) Two connected nodes or descendant | |  | |  | | --- | | (e) Two connected nodes or descendant | |

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|  | |  | | --- | | (f) Two connected nodes or descendant | |  |

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| |  | | --- | | (g) Chain or pipe | |  | |  | | --- | | (h) Chain or pipe | |

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|  | |  | | --- | | (i) Chain or pipe | |  |

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| |  | | --- | | (j) Fork | |  | |  | | --- | | (k) Fork | |

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|  | |  | | --- | | (l) Fork | |  |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | (m) Collider or inmorality | |  | |  | | --- | | (n) Collider or inmorality | |

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | |  | | --- | | (o) Collider or inmorality | |

Figure 2: The five fundamental building blocks of DAGs. **Note:** left panels show the magnified representation, middle panels show the standard representation, and the right panels show their corresponding SCM form.

The left panels of [Figure 2](#fig-dags_scms) illustrate the *magnified* representation. These graphs depict the *endogenous* variables alongside the *exogenous* variables . Endogenous variables are those whose causal mechanisms the investigator chooses to model (Neal 2020). In contrast, exogenous variables represent *errors* or *disturbances* arising from omitted factors that the investigator chooses not to model explicitly (Pearl 2009, 27, 68). The graphs show endogenous variables as solid black circles to signify that they are observed random variables, while endogenous variables are depicted as open circles to signify their unobserved (latent) nature. Lastly, the arrows in the graphs reflect the expected direction of causal influences among these variables.

Often, DAGs omit the exogenous variables for simplicity, resulting in the *standard* representation. However, including exogenous variables in a graph can be beneficial in some scenarios, as their presence can reveal potential issues related to conditioning and confounding (Cinelli, Forney, and Pearl 2020), concepts explored in [Section 2.3](#sec-framework-flow). The standard representation is illustrated in the middle panels of [Figure 2](#fig-dags_scms).

Lastly, the right panels of [Figure 2](#fig-dags_scms) depict the SCM form of the fundamental building blocks. SCMs are formal mathematical models defined by a set of endogenous variables , a set of exogenous variables , and a set of functions (Pearl 2009; Neal 2020). These functions, referred to as structural equations, specify each endogenous variable as nonparametric functions of other variables. Moreover, SCMs use the symbol ‘’ to indicate the variables’ asymmetrical causal dependence and the symbol ‘’ to represent *d-separation*, which roughly equates to the concept of variable independence. The concepts of d-separation and causal (in)dependence are explored in [Section 2.3](#sec-framework-flow).

A careful examination of [Figure 2](#fig-dags_scms) highlights the assumptions underlying these building blocks. Figures [2 (a)](#fig-mdag_bb1), [2 (b)](#fig-sdag_bb1), and SCM [2 (c)](#fig-scm_bb1) depict two unconnected nodes, representing a scenario where variables and are not causally related. Figures [2 (d)](#fig-mdag_bb2), [2 (e)](#fig-sdag_bb2), and SCM [2 (f)](#fig-scm_bb2) illustrate two connected nodes, showing a scenario where a *parent* node exerts a causal influence on a *child* node . Consequently, is considered a *descendant* of . Figures [2 (g)](#fig-mdag_bb3), [2 (h)](#fig-sdag_bb3), and SCM [2 (i)](#fig-scm_bb3) depict a *chain* or *pipe*, where influences , and influences . In this configuration, is a parent node of , and is a parent node of . This creates a *directed path* between and . Consequently, is an *ancestor* of , and fully *mediates* the relationship between the two. Figures [2 (j)](#fig-mdag_bb4), [2 (k)](#fig-sdag_bb4), and SCM [2 (l)](#fig-scm_bb4) illustrate a *fork*, where variables and are both influenced by . Here, is a parent node of and . Finally, Figures [2 (m)](#fig-mdag_bb5), [2 (n)](#fig-sdag_bb5), SCM [2 (o)](#fig-scm_bb5) depict a *collider*, also known as *inmorality*, where variables and are concurrent causes of . In this configuration, and are not causally related to each other but both influence . Additionally, in all SCMs, the errors are assumed to be mutually independent of each other and of all other variables in the graph, as evidenced by the pairwise relations , , and .

## The flow of association and causation in graphs

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| Figure 3: The flow of association and causation in graphs. Extracted and slightly modified from Neal (2020, 31) |

## A motivating example

# Theory

## A scientific model for the DCJ

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| Figure 4: DCJ causal diagram, simplified description |

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| Figure 5: DCJ causal diagram, simplified mathematical description |

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| Figure 6: DCJ causal diagram, population mathematical description |

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| Figure 7: DCJ causal diagram, sample with comparisons mathematical description |

## Probabilitics assumptions of the scientific model

## From the scientific to statistical model

## Let’s talk about Thurstone

# Discussion

## Findings

## Limitations and further research

# Conclusion

# Declarations

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# Appendix

## Why do we need to estimate judges’ abilities?

## Latent variables as a mean of imputation

## Other comparative scenarios

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