

Clustering standard errors at the "session" level*

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August 14, 2020

Abstract

Session-specific features of a laboratory experiment, if those exist, do not disappear by clustering standard errors at the session level. Ordering sessions randomly, which is crucial to deal with sampling issues, cannot justify clustering the standard errors at the session level. The experimental design should primarily determine the clustering level. In a typical controlled laboratory experiment where subjects make choices in the same environment repeatedly, clustering at a participant level is inherited from the experimental design, and standard errors could be larger (that is, statistical inference can be more conservative) when clustered at the individual or decision-group level than the session level. It implies that clustering standard errors at the session level can lead to false-positive treatment effects if it is mistakenly chosen. A rule of thumb using standard deviations is introduced. Having a small sample size per session to increase the number of sessions could yield unnecessary heterogeneities that are hard for the experimenter to control or observe.

Keywords: Lab experiment, Cluster-robust standard errors, Statistical inference

JEL codes: C18, C90

1 Introduction

This paper aims to convince the experimental economists and the readers interested in lab-experimental studies that the session-level clusters should be used only in particular situations with proper justification. A session is typically defined as a group of individuals who participate in the same laboratory experiment at the same time. For an experiment adopting a between-subject design, a subject participated in one session

*I thank Guillaume Fréchette, Franziska Heinicke, Sang-Hyun Kim, Wooyoung Lim, Yoshiyasu Rai, Euncheol Shin, Donggyu Sul, and Wladislaw Mill, and participants at Mannheim/ZEW Experimental seminar and the Korean Economic Review International Conference for their helpful comments, and Elisa Casarin for her research assistance.

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only,¹ so a set of observations from an individual is a proper subset of the whole observations from a session, which is a proper subset of the whole observations from the same treatment. Thus, adding individual- or session-fixed effects on the regression does not help examine a treatment effect due to multicollinearity.

Obtaining accurate standard errors of the treatment effect is fundamental for proper statistical inference. Although many studies discuss the proper use of cluster-robust standard errors (e.g., [Cameron et al., 2008](#); [Abadie et al., 2017](#)), to the best of my knowledge, only a few studies including [Moffatt \(2016\)](#) explicitly discuss it within the context of laboratory experiments.² Perhaps it is why we see some researchers report standard errors clustered at the session level and some at the individual level. Among all 322 published papers using lab-experimental data at the *Experimental Economics* from March 2010 to March 2020, 124 papers explicitly mentioned that cluster-robust standard errors are used. Standard errors of 40 papers are clustered at the participant level, and those of 34 papers are clustered at the session level.³

I often find arguments that standard errors should be clustered at the session level when the session-specific effects are concerned. For example, Keith Marzilli Ericson, a co-editor of the *Journal of Public Economics*, points out that many lab-experimental papers fail to randomly assign participants to treatment, with claiming that once researchers "[d]o session-level randomization,"⁴ then the statistical "[i]nference should cluster standard errors at the session level."⁵ On top of this, it is not uncommon that reports from referees point out that the standard errors should be clustered at the session level. Most of the time, their reasoning, including ones that Ericson made on his blog post, is that there might be some session effects in the laboratory ([Fréchette, 2012](#)). This reasoning—using session-level cluster adjustment for session effects—is not on solid ground. A concern for session effects is the reason for randomizing the sessions as much as possible so that the session-specific idiosyncratic features can be integrated out, not for clustering standard errors at the session level. I am worried that many researchers seem to insist session-level clustered standard errors as a remedy of session effects, without further justifying why a session should be the cluster level. As I will

¹On the contrary, a within-subject design assigns a participant to two or more treatments. In this case, clustering standard errors at the session level is less persuasive as the primary purpose of the design is to examine individual changes.

²[Moffatt \(2016\)](#) explains that different (subject-level as the lowest and session-level as the highest) clustering can be considered. When analyzing example data, he uses subject-level clustering only.

³Some papers use exogenously given clusters, such as classes and cohorts. Other papers used cluster-adjusted standard errors when analyzing empirical data, not experimental data. A few papers consider a fixed independent group as a clustering unit, which I will discuss in Section 3.

⁴In a typical laboratory experiment, one session is conducted at one time, so session-level randomization practically implies the random ordering of the sessions.

⁵More details can be found in his blog post ([Ericson, 2018, link](#)).

elaborate later, the clustering level should be determined by the experimental design,⁶ and when the design inherits the observational relationship within a session, standard errors should be clustered at the session level. Figure 1 summarizes my arguments.

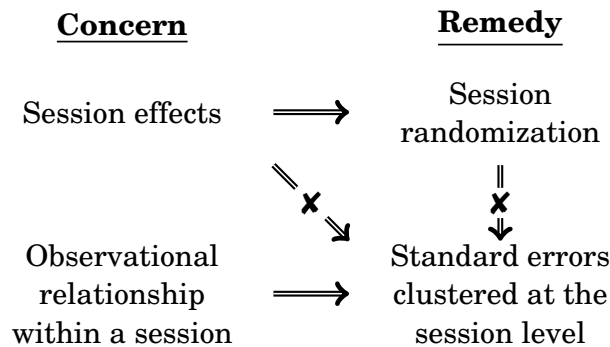


Figure 1: Clustering at the session level is not a remedy for session effects.

To minimize destructive discussions, I emphasize two things that I am *not* claiming. First, I am not claiming that there are no session-specific effects. The experimenter's crucial responsibility is to maintain the environment of every session as homogeneous as possible, except for the treatment conditions being examined. Since it is challenging, if not impossible, to make every session environment identical, the experimenter must make sure both the control-group and the treatment-group participants are from the same population by randomizing the order of the sessions. In this regard, I entirely agree with what Ericson wrote in his blog: "Your subject population could be changing over time (perhaps early subjects are more eager, or have lower value of time). Or news events could change beliefs and preferences. The list of potential stories can be long; some can be ruled out, others cannot." Indeed, the potential stories are long: Perhaps one experimenter manages sessions better than another experimenter. Subjects participating in an early morning session may have distinctive characteristics than other subjects. An exogenous aggregate shock (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic) may arise between sessions. Some sessions may be conducted in more disturbing situations due to unexpected constructions, delays caused by technical glitches, or unexpectedly high/low temperatures, to name a few. Thus, it is legitimate for readers, editors, and referees to demand to conduct more sessions if they believe potential session effects should be controlled. For the same reason, a sequential modification of the experimental design—earlier sessions conducting X and Y and (perhaps several months) later sessions conducting X' and Z—may significantly undermine the internal validity of the research. Although I am wholly sympathetic to the concerns about the session effects, it is a reason for being careful about

⁶Abadie et al. (2020) claim to consider design-based uncertainty, as opposed to sampling-based one, for statistical inference. My claim is in line with theirs.

sampling subjects from the same population pool by randomizing the sessions, a reason for making session environments as homogeneous as possible, and a reason for checking and controlling for session-particular features, but not the reason for clustering standard errors at the session level.

Second, I am not claiming that clustering standard errors at the session level is futile. A session-level cluster can undoubtedly address the observational dependence within the session. It is sometimes tightly aligned with the experimental design, especially when the subjects made decisions only once or the session-(or "market"-)level interactions are of the main interest.⁷ Although Fréchette (2012) argues for using standard errors clustered at the session level when there is "only one observation per subject so that we do not need to keep track of the periods" (p. 488),⁸ it should not be merely extrapolated to a case where there are many observations per subject. Thus, this paper can be understood as an extension of his paper, not negating it. Again, the current paper focuses less on the studies where the experimental design inherits observational relationship within a session, which I firmly believe the session-level clustering is appropriate, but it focuses on the discussions about the proper cluster level when individuals in the lab make repetitive decisions of the same game.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Sections 2 and 3, without formal expositions, illustrate why standard errors need to be clustered and why clustering at the session level should be considered carefully. Section 4 presents a simple econometric model to pinpoint the issues in choosing proper cluster levels. Section 5 discusses practical issues regarding cluster-robust standard errors for the laboratory data, and Section 6 concludes.

2 Why do we adjust standard errors at a cluster level?

Clustered standard errors should be considered when observations within a cluster are related to each other. In words, if the observations within a cluster are similar, then the errors within a cluster will be more correlated than those of the whole observations. Thus, without "penalizing" the observational similarity, we will have downward-biased

⁷For example, Engelmann and Hollard (2010) have participants who made only a small number of decisions and focus more on the interaction within a session. Cipriani et al. (2017)'s main interest is on the session-level information contagion, so the interactions within a session are inherited from the design. Corgnet et al. (2018) similarly justify their use of session-level clustering because each experimental market features a zero-sum game where an increase in one trader's earnings mechanically reduces possible gains of other traders within a session. Bracha et al. (2015) and Carpenter (2016) experimentally examine the attributes of labor supply, which is the accumulation of an individual's decisions, so it is pertinent to regard the labor supply as one observation per subject.

⁸This restriction is reasonable because Fréchette (2012) focuses on the discussions about the session effects, not the relative importance of subject-specific effects and the session effects.

Obs	(0)	(1)	(2)
Treatment	0.0800 (0.25)	0.0800** (1.98)	0.0800 (0.27)
_cons	1.780*** (7.88)	1.780*** (62.19)	1.780*** (8.49)
Cluster SE	–	–	ID
<i>N</i>	10	500	500

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 1: A false-positive effect when SEs are unclustered.

to make decisions in a similar environment repeatedly, clustering at the participant level is inherited from the experimental design, so it is unnatural to cluster standard errors at the session level.

3 When is the session-level clustering more robust?

If standard errors cluster-adjusted at the session level are larger than those at the individual level, it means that the session-level observations are more correlated than the individual’s repeated choices. It may not be the case when the subjects are asked to make decisions in the same or similar environment repeatedly.

To support my claims, I use hypothetical data instead of actual data from the previously published studies. Although I found some studies reporting standard errors clustered at the session level, and sometimes the statistical results become less significant when clustering the standard errors differently, I do not intend the current paper to be read as comments/criticism to those papers. It is the main reason for using hypothetical data. However, all hypothetical data aim to be plausible and capture the key features from actual data.

Imagine a particular type of controlled lab experiment on a group decision making,⁹ where a between-subject design, random rematch, anonymity, and no communications are adopted. To be more illustrative, suppose that six subjects per session have ten repetitive decision rounds choosing an integer between 1 and 50, and the payoff of each round is determined by the subject’s decision, a randomly-matched pair’s decision, and

⁹For a decision-theoretic lab experiment, that is, for an experiment where a single player makes a streak of decisions under some uncertainties, it is straightforward to cluster standard errors at the individual level. Here I focus on experiments that involve strategic decisions.

some luck. At the beginning of a new round, the subjects are randomly rematched with another subject in the session. Their decisions are made anonymously, and they are not allowed to communicate with each other. Each subject participates in only one session. Suppose that a researcher has collected data from four (two control and two treatment) sessions, as shown in Table 2.

Round\ID	Control-Session-01						Treatment-Session-01						Control-Session-02						Treatment-Session-02					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
r01	6	36	21	17	32	17	29	22	13	40	19	29	37	7	16	23	26	16	8	41	29	16	33	16
r02	12	42	23	20	27	15	27	16	15	39	13	23	39	8	19	23	31	11	11	39	24	20	29	14
r03	6	36	28	18	31	18	29	16	14	43	17	31	39	5	13	23	29	11	13	39	30	22	34	14
r04	12	37	26	14	31	17	27	18	13	42	19	30	35	6	12	26	25	14	9	38	25	16	31	15
r05	6	43	22	19	27	17	34	17	10	42	16	25	42	8	16	21	30	12	8	44	22	20	28	20
r06	7	40	22	15	29	12	31	17	9	36	16	30	40	8	16	24	27	15	9	42	25	17	32	18
r07	9	36	22	20	32	17	27	19	13	38	14	29	39	11	18	23	27	14	14	38	28	17	34	17
r08	9	37	23	19	33	15	32	21	12	41	13	23	37	6	14	25	29	11	9	44	25	20	33	20
r09	11	39	21	17	29	16	35	17	11	39	19	27	38	5	14	20	26	14	14	40	24	22	32	18
r10	10	41	20	16	27	16	31	19	10	43	19	28	41	12	12	18	27	16	15	41	27	20	31	17
Std.	2.4	2.7	2.4	2.1	2.3	1.7	2.9	2.0	1.9	2.3	2.5	2.9	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.4	1.9	2.0	2.7	2.2	2.5	2.3	2.0	2.2
Std.(session)=11.2						Std.(session)=11.4						Std.(session)=11.4						Std.(session)=11.6						
Std.(whole)=11.4																								

Table 2: Data from Four Sessions

Each column of Table 2 is a vector of an individual's decisions over ten rounds. A researcher wants to examine the mean treatment effect. If we do not cluster standard errors, the mean control-group observation is significantly different from the mean treatment-group observation ($\bar{y}_C=21.55$, $\bar{y}_T=24.15$, $t=1.9808$, $p\text{-value}=0.0488$). The standard error of the difference is 1.313.

In the hypothetical data, standard deviations of the individual-level observations are less than 2.7, which implies that individuals made similar choices over rounds. The session-level standard deviations, around 11, are as large as the standard deviation of the whole observations. If we cluster the standard error of the mean difference at the participant level, the difference is no longer statistically significant (see models (2) and (5) in Table 3). However, clustering standard errors at the session level does not help us to handle the false-positive treatment effect (see models (3) and (6) in Table 3.)

Unless the experiment encourages every subject to make completely arbitrary decisions,¹⁰ the observational similarity at the participant level is *inherited from* the experimental design when the experiment asks a participant to make repetitive decisions in the same environment. Two of the primary reasons for the repetitions are to increase the number of observations and to allow subjects to learn the equilibrium of the game in the course of getting feedback. Thus, when the dynamic changes of the subjects' decisions are not of their primary interest, researchers often focus on analyzing the observations from the later half decision rounds. Those observations are likely to be "less noisy," meaning

¹⁰In this case, the incentive structure of the experiment should be criticized.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment	2.600** (1.98)	2.600 (0.63)	2.600*** (4.43)	2.600 (0.62)	2.600 (0.63)	2.600*** (4.43)
_cons	21.55*** (23.22)	21.55*** (7.26)	21.55*** (36.75)	21.55*** (7.23)	21.55*** (7.26)	21.55*** (36.75)
Individual RE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cluster SE	–	ID	Session	–	ID	Session
<i>N</i>	240	240	240	240	240	240

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3: False-positive effects when SEs are clustered at a session level

that the individual’s decisions are similar over rounds. Roughly put, the observations become similar to the half-sleeping RA’s duplicated data.

Instead of a random rematch, if the experiment involves fixed independent groups of the participants over the repetitive decision rounds, then clustering standard errors at the group level could also be considered. If the experiment features repeated games (e.g., [Duffy and Fehr, 2018](#)) or asks the independent groups to achieve a collective goal (e.g., [Hortala-Vallve et al., 2013](#)), it is appropriate to have a fixed group to interact over time. In this case, both individual-level clusters and group-level clusters can be inherited by the experimental design. If there are more than two ways of defining a cluster, and those ways are equally justifiable by the experimental design, then a researcher, given that he/she wants to report more robust statistical results, must choose a cluster within which observations are more related. One rule of thumb is to check the standard deviation of the observations within a potential cluster. For illustration, consider a public goods experiment with a fixed group of three subjects. Suppose that a researcher has collected data shown in Table 4.

If the individual choices vary little, as illustrated on the data from Groups 1 and 2 in Table 4, then standard deviations of the participant-level observations (varying from 0.00 to 1.25) are smaller than those of the group-level observations (1.95 to 4.25). In this case, the standard error clustered at the individual level should be used. Meanwhile, if the choices of a group vary less than individual choices, as illustrated on the data from Groups 3 and 4, then the researchers may consider standard errors clustered at an independent-group level. I imagined situations where a group collectively reaches to complete free-riding or complete cooperation. Such a case may happen when group members’ previous actions have influenced a subject’s action much more than the sub-

ID	Group 1			Group 2		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
r01	0	10	5	2	5	3
r02	0	10	4	2	5	3
r03	0	10	4	3	5	1
r04	0	10	3	3	5	0
r05	0	10	3	3	6	0
r06	0	10	3	3	5	0
r07	1	10	3	3	5	0
r08	0	10	3	2	4	0
r09	0	10	3	1	4	0
r10	0	10	1	2	5	0
Std.	0.32	0.00	1.03	0.70	0.57	1.25
Std.(Group)=4.25			Std.(Group)=1.95			

ID	Group 3			Group 4		
	7	8	9	10	11	12
r01	7	6	5	1	1	2
r02	3	4	4	5	3	3
r03	2	2	3	6	5	3
r04	0	1	4	3	5	4
r05	1	0	1	5	6	3
r06	0	1	0	7	5	6
r07	1	0	0	9	7	8
r08	0	0	0	10	10	9
r09	0	0	0	10	10	10
r10	0	0	0	10	10	10
Std.	2.22	2.07	2.06	3.17	3.08	3.19
Std.(Group)=2.05			Std.(Group)=3.06			

Table 4: Strong dependence at the participant level (L) or at the decision-group level (R)

ject’s own previous actions.¹¹

The discussion above may be extrapolated to justify to cluster standard errors at the session level. If the session-level observations are more correlated than the individual’s or the decision group’s repeated choices, it could mean that the session-level clustered standard errors yield more robust statistical results. I am skeptical about this data-driven approach, and I will discuss it after introducing cluster-robust inference in the following section.

4 Cluster-Robust Inference

In this section, I present a prototype parametric¹² model for cluster-robust inference of the mean treatment effect. I assume that there is only one treatment (and one control) and that the experimenter controls session effects appropriately, so the model does not include them. An econometrician has $N = (S + S) \times I \times R$ observations in total, where S is the number of controlled and treated sessions, I is the number of subjects per session, and R is the number of repetitions of the same game.¹³

For simplicity, set the dependent variable as the deviation from the mean control-group observations. Then, the treatment effect that we want to examine is captured by

¹¹Some papers, e.g., [Robbett \(2014\)](#) and [Gallo and Yan \(2015\)](#), used the term "session" as a fixed independent group. In this case, clustering at the session level is appropriate if the experiment focuses on the interactions among subjects within the group.

¹²Some researchers prefer non-parametric tests such as the Mann-Whitney test and Wilcoxon signed-rank test, taking the session-level aggregate data as one independent data point. This approach may be free from the concern about the clustering issues as well as parametric assumptions, but the current paper does not address comparative the advantages of non-parametric methods.

¹³For expositional simplicity, I assume that the number of the subjects and the repetitions are the same for each session and that the number of controlled sessions is equal to the number of treated sessions, but these assumptions do not affect main messages.

β in

$$y_i = \beta T_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where $i = 1, \dots, N$ is an index for observations, and $E[\varepsilon_i] = 0$. T_i has a value 1 if the observation is from the treated session and 0 otherwise. $\beta = 0$ implies that the mean treatment-group observation is the same as the control-group mean. With a slight abuse of notation, T is a set of treated observations such that for $i \in T$, $T_i = 1$. The OLS estimator is

$$\hat{\beta} = \frac{\sum_i T_i y_i}{\sum_i T_i^2} = \frac{\sum_{i \in T} y_i}{SIR},$$

and the variance of the estimator is

$$V[\hat{\beta}] = E[(\hat{\beta} - \beta)^2] = \frac{V[\sum_{i \in T} \varepsilon_i]}{S^2 I^2 R^2}$$

$V[\sum_{i \in T} \varepsilon_i] = \sum_{i \in T} \sum_{j \in T} \text{Cov}[\varepsilon_i, \varepsilon_j] = \sum_{i \in T} \sum_{j \in T} E[\varepsilon_i \varepsilon_j]$ is the middle part of the "sandwich matrix." If errors are uncorrelated, that is, $E[\varepsilon_i \varepsilon_j] = 0$ for $i \neq j$, then it simply becomes $\sum_{i \in T} E[\varepsilon_i^2]$, and its sample analog, $\sum_{i \in T} u_i^2$, yields the heteroskedasticity-robust standard error. We are concerning that this is not the case, at least within a cluster. Let C_i denote the cluster (a partition of the entire observations) that i belongs to. If $E[\varepsilon_i \varepsilon_j] \neq 0$ for i and $j \in C_i$, then

$$V_{clu}[\hat{\beta}] = \frac{\sum_{i \in T} \sum_{j \in T} E[\varepsilon_i \varepsilon_j] \mathbf{1}_{j \in C_i}}{S^2 I^2 R^2},$$

where $\mathbf{1}_A$ is an indicator function whose value is 1 when condition A holds, and 0 otherwise. Given that the number of clusters is sufficiently large,¹⁴ we can use the variance estimate

$$\hat{V}_{clu}[\hat{\beta}] = \frac{\sum_{i \in T} \sum_{j \in T} u_i u_j \mathbf{1}_{j \in C_i}}{S^2 I^2 R^2},$$

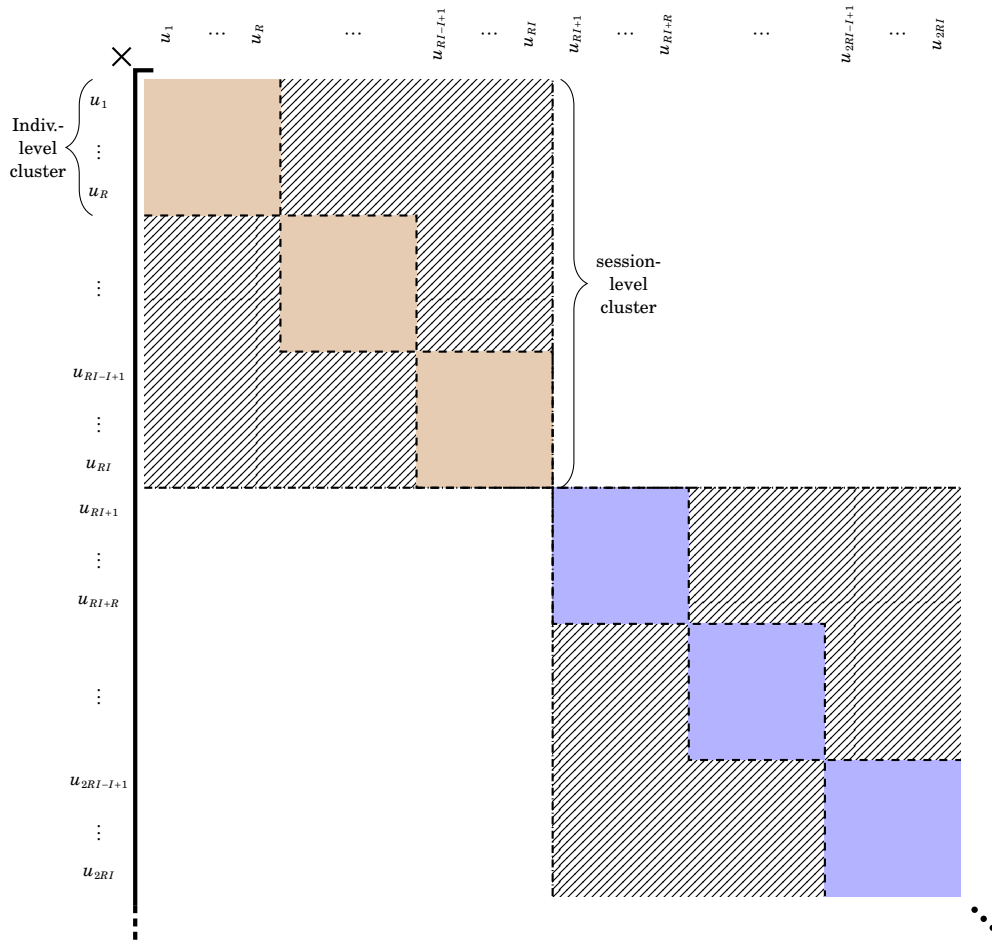
where $u_i = y_i - \hat{\beta} T_i$. It is worth noting that (1) if the cluster is the entire set, then $\hat{V}_{clu}[\hat{\beta}]$ becomes zero because $\sum_{i \in T} u_i = 0$, and (2) if clusters are defined in a far-fetched manner so that there are many pairs of i and j such that $\text{sgn}(u_i) \neq \text{sgn}(u_j)$, then the sign of $u_i u_j$ is negative, and the estimate could even be smaller than the heteroskedasticity-robust variance of the estimator, $\hat{V}[\hat{\beta}] = \sum_{i \in T} u_i^2 / (SIR)^2$.

Without loss of generality, lexicographically order the observations in a way that $i = s \times n \times r$, $s = 1, \dots, 2S$, $n = 1, \dots, I$, and $r = 1, \dots, R$. Then $\sum_{i \in T} \sum_{j \in T} u_i u_j \mathbf{1}_{j \in C_i}$ is the summation of entities on the block diagonal matrices of $u_i u_j$, $i, j \in T$. Figure 2 illustrates

¹⁴Another question would regard the asymptotic refinement of the cluster-adjusted standard errors when the number of clusters is small (Cameron et al., 2008). I discuss it in Section 5 regarding the session-level clustering. The number of sessions is typically not large enough to obtain the asymptotics.

the difference between standard errors clustered at the individual level and the session level. The main difference is that there are more off-diagonal (but still within a larger block diagonal) entities when clustering standard errors at the session level (see hatched areas in Figure 2). If standard errors clustered at the session level are larger than those at the individual level, then it implies that the summation of those off-diagonal entities is positive. It happens when the signs of u_i and u_j are, in general, the same for $j \in C_i$. With recalling that the residual is the deviation from the conditional mean, the same signs imply that those are correlated.

Figure 2: Individual-level vs. session-level clusters



This figure illustrates a part of N -by- N matrix where entity at (i, j) is $u_i u_j$. The cluster-robust standard error of the treatment effect is the sum of the entities on block-diagonal sub-matrices. Clustering standard errors at the session level, compared to the individual level, involves more off-diagonal entities.

If the experimental design inherits the strong correlation between, for example, the first choice of individual i and the twentieth choice of individual j in the same session, then the session-level cluster might be used. Perhaps someone's initial choice profoundly

affects other's later choices so that those observations are related. Many questions can be followed. Is that relationship stronger than the relationship between a subject's own choices? Is that relationship stronger than the relationship between the last observations in one session and those in another session with the same treatment condition? It is, of course, possible that errors are weakly but positively correlated within a session, but considering a larger-size cluster comes at a price. Given the same number of observations, larger-size clusters have a more downward bias due to the smaller number of clusters. Although statistical analysis software uses finite-cluster corrections,¹⁵ it is unclear whether the downward bias of the standard error will be appropriately corrected when a session level is used as a clustering unit. While the experimenters may be concerned about the observational relationship within a session for any laboratory experiments, they should want to double-check whether the experimental design inherits the relationship from the beginning.

5 Discussions

5.1 Standard deviation as a rule of thumb

Suppose the primary purpose of clustering the standard errors is to provide a more robust treatment effect, and clustering observations can be done in two or more ways, which are equally justifiable by the experimental design. In that case, a researcher chooses a cluster within which the observations are more related to each other. I propose to check the within-cluster standard deviations of the observations. Recall that the residuals of the simple regression are the deviations from a conditional mean. A sufficiently smaller within-cluster standard deviation compared to the standard deviation of the whole observations may imply that the residuals flock together within sessions, and hence they are correlated within the cluster.

Consider the following example. Suppose u_i , $i = 1, 2, \dots, 100$, has either a value of +1 or -1 such that $\sum_{i=1}^{100} u_i = 0$. Then the (population) standard deviation is 1. A researcher considers two clusters of 50 values each. If $\sum_{i=1}^{50} u_i = \sum_{j=51}^{100} u_j = 0$, the standard deviation of each cluster is 1 and the sum of block-diagonal entities of $[u_1 u_2 \dots u_{100}]' [u_1 u_2 \dots u_{100}]$ is zero. If $\sum_{i=1}^{50} u_i = 50$, which means that all +1's are in the first cluster and -1's are in the second cluster, then the standard deviation of each cluster is 0, and the sum of block-diagonal entities is 2,500 each. Note that the cluster-robust standard errors are proportional to the sum of the block-diagonal matrices. Having those two extreme cases

¹⁵For example, Stata uses $\frac{G}{G-1} \frac{N-1}{N-k} u_i$ instead of u_i , where G is the number of clusters, N is the number of observations, and k is the number of regressors.

in mind, one can easily check that the negative relationship between the within-cluster standard deviation and the magnitude of the cluster-robust standard errors (see Figure 3). In this example, if $|\sum_{i=1}^{50} u_i| \leq 6$, then the cure is worse than the disease, that is, the cluster-robust standard error is smaller than the heteroskedasticity-robust standard error.

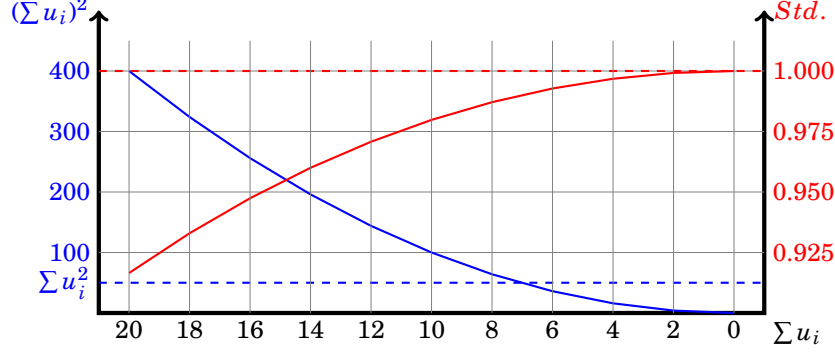


Figure 3: Within-cluster standard deviations (red) and cluster-robust variance (blue)

Thus, when both session-level and individual-level clusters are equally justifiable by the experimental design, my rule of thumb is to compare within-cluster standard deviations. Consider I individual-level clusters, and S session-level clusters, where an individual-level cluster is a proper subset of a session-level cluster. Let std_I and std_S denote the standard deviation of the individual-cluster observations and the standard deviation of the session-cluster observations, respectively. If $std_I < std_S$ in general, then consider clustering the standard errors at the individual level.

If std_S is distinctively smaller than the standard deviation of the whole observations of the same treatment, then the session-level clustering might lead to larger standard errors. However, if it is the case, a researcher may want to check whether the sessions are sufficiently randomized, especially when the experimental design does not inherit the observational relationship within a session. A relevant situation is illustrated in Figure 4, which displays a scatterplot of observations from eight (four control and four treatment) sessions. Almost all residuals from sessions 1, 4, and 8 are positive, and almost all residuals from sessions 2, 3, and 6 are negative. Thus, the multiplications of those residuals within a session have positive values, and the standard error clustered at the session level will be larger than the heteroskedasticity-robust one. However, if thinking conversely, one may wonder whether the samples are balanced because otherwise, it is hard to explain the stark differences between sessions of the same treatment. This distinctive variation across sessions may be due to the failure of session randomization or the session size being too small.

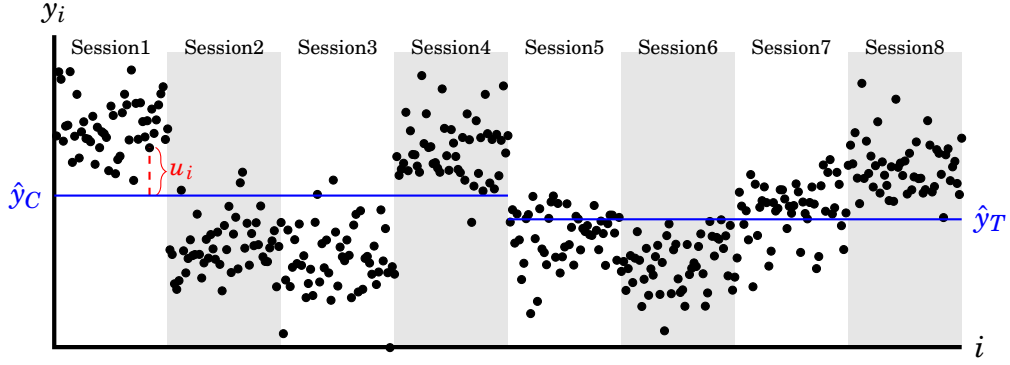


Figure 4: Small session-level standard deviations may question balanced sampling.

5.2 Further thoughts on the session-level clustering

I have claimed that the session-level cluster should be used either when the experimental design inherits the observational relationship within a session or when the session-level residuals flock together. The latter reasoning is not conclusive as it relies on the mechanical aspects of the data, not on the experimental design. If a researcher considers clustering standard errors at the session level because it generates large standard errors, why not considering at the date-of-session or time-of-session level, why not at the experimenter level, and why not at the experiment level for meta-analysis¹⁶ if those do the same or a better job?

An ad-hoc definition of a session also makes the session-level clustering unclear. Suppose that 24 subjects show up at the lab and that the experimenter decides to split the subjects into two subgroups of twelve without explicitly informing them, but across the subgroups, the experiment proceeds in an identical manner. In this case, would a session consist of 24 subjects, or would two sessions consist of 12 subjects each? This concern becomes more relevant to the fixed-group experiment. Suppose there are 24 subjects in one session, but due to severe no-shows, 12 subjects show up in another session. If a fixed group of six subjects repeatedly played a game, one session is a cluster of four decision groups, and the other one is a cluster of two decision groups. If the observations from the former session are seemingly less related because there are more (potentially heterogeneous) groups, then clustering standard errors at the session level will be more affected by the session with a smaller number of participants. Is having a different weight on each session justified?

Another practical issue is on the trade-off between the session size and the number of sessions. Given that the number of total participants is limited, because of either the

¹⁶Embrey et al. (2017) provide a meta-analysis of prior experimental research on the finitely repeated prisoner's dilemma and report the standard errors clustered at the study level. Detailed discussions and robustness checks on the clustering level for a meta-analysis can be found in their Appendix A.4.

financial reason or the capacity of the recruitment pool, considering session-level clusters encourages researchers to have more sessions with a smaller number of subjects per session. It is problematic in several aspects. First, many experiments adopt a random rematch design to minimize the strategic interactions between the games ([Andreoni and Croson, 2008](#)). If the subject size per session is small, then the indirect interactions are indispensable. If a subject plays ten games with a randomly paired partner in a session of 40 subjects, the probability that a subject does not meet any match again is 28.34%, but with 16 subjects per session, that probability plummets to 1.89%. Such a low probability implies that, with a smaller session size, the fundamental reason for adopting a random rematch is compromised: Although the subjects do not know whether the current match is new, they know that it is highly likely that they have met before or would meet again. Second, as I illustrated in the previous subsection, the small sample size per session can prevent us from having a balanced sample. In other words, given that the subjects are drawn from the same population distribution, having small-sized sessions is associated with more observable/unobservable variations in sessions.¹⁷ Suppose that each session consists of only four subjects each, and the female proportion dramatically varies from 0% to 100%. How can a researcher be sure whether the session effects are controlled, and if not, how does she distinguish the gender ratio effect from others unless having more sessions with sufficiently large variations of the gender ratio? What if the substantial variations across sessions are due to unobservable characteristics, unlike the gender ratio? A vicious cycle of demanding more sessions to control issues with a small-size session may be established.

The following thought experiment can further clarify what I claim regarding the session size. Suppose a researcher has an unlimited physical, financial, and technical capacity to run a large-scale controlled experiment with 1,000 participants, and she considers two options. One option is to bring all participants at the same time, randomly divide them into two—one control and one treatment—groups, and identical twin experimenters conduct the experiment in two similarly-designed nearby places. The other one is to bring ten subjects at a different time and date, randomly order sessions, with hoping that the samples are balanced in aggregate and that the idiosyncratic session effects are integrated out, and the identical twin experimenters (with different levels of fatigue) conduct 50 sessions¹⁸ of the experiment each. Insisting to cluster standard errors at a session level pushes researchers to choose the second option, which I find less appealing.

¹⁷[Tversky and Kahneman \(1974\)](#) point that a majority of people are insensitive to the fact that observational variation is more likely in smaller samples. When both a large hospital and a small hospital recorded the days on which more than 60% of the babies born were boys for one year, only 22% of the subjects correctly answered that the small hospital is more likely to record more such days.

¹⁸[Kézdi \(2004\)](#) shows simulation results that 50 clusters are often large enough for accurate inference. Note that a typical laboratory experiment has a smaller number of sessions.

6 Conclusions

Session-specific idiosyncratic features can and should be integrated out when the researchers carefully randomize the sessions. If the purpose of clustering standard errors is to make more robust standard errors to minimize false-positive treatment effects, then one must consider a cluster within which observations are more related, but across which observations are varying. In a controlled laboratory experiment where participants repeatedly make choices in the same environment, individual-level cluster adjustment should be considered first, as the experimental design inherits the observational similarity within an individual. Takeaway messages are summarized below:

1. The experimenter's crucial responsibility is to ensure the participants in both the control and the treatment sessions are from the same population distribution and make each session environment as homogeneous as possible.
2. If the experiment asks participants to make repetitive decisions in a similar environment, the experimental design inherits clusters at the participant (or independent decision-group) level. Thus, it is natural to consider clustering standard errors at the participant level.
3. The standard deviation of individual-level observations tends to be smaller than that of session-level observations. Thus, clustering standard errors at the participant level may yield more conservative statistical results.
4. If there are more than two ways of clustering observations and those are equally justifiable by the experimental design, then a researcher would choose a cluster within which observations are more related.
5. Although not justifiable by the experimental design, clustering standard errors at the session level may be considered if the standard deviation of the whole session-level observations is smaller than that of participant- or group-level observations. It begs further questions of why a session should be a level for clustering, among several other potential levels, and whether the sessions have balanced samples.

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