

CAUSES AND COUNTERFACTUALS IN THE EMPIRICAL SCIENCES

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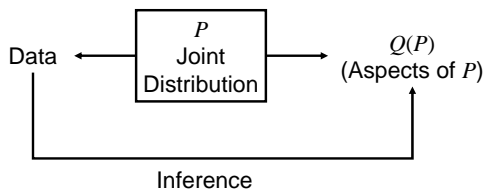
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OUTLINE

- Inference: Statistical vs. Causal, distinctions, and mental barriers
- Unified conceptualization of counterfactuals, structural-equations, and graphs
- Inference to three types of claims:
 1. Effect of potential interventions
 2. Attribution (Causes of Effects)
 3. Direct and indirect effects
- Frills

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TRADITIONAL STATISTICAL INFERENCE PARADIGM

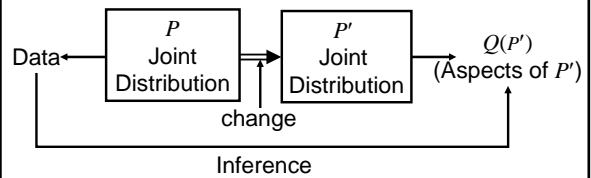


e.g.,
Infer whether customers who bought product A would also buy product B.
 $Q = P(B | A)$

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FROM STATISTICAL TO CAUSAL ANALYSIS: 1. THE DIFFERENCES

Probability and statistics deal with static relations

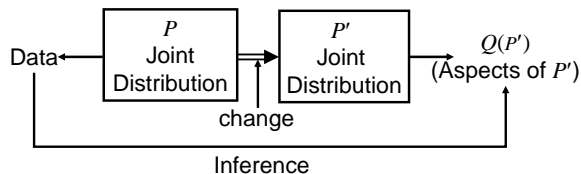


What happens when P changes?
e.g.,
Infer whether customers who bought product A would still buy A if we were to double the price.

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FROM STATISTICAL TO CAUSAL ANALYSIS: 1. THE DIFFERENCES

What remains invariant when P changes say, to satisfy $P'(price=2)=1$



Note: $P'(v) \neq P(v | price = 2)$

P does not tell us how it ought to change
e.g. Curing symptoms vs. curing diseases
e.g. Analogy: mechanical deformation

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FROM STATISTICAL TO CAUSAL ANALYSIS: 1. THE DIFFERENCES (CONT)

1. Causal and statistical concepts do not mix.

CAUSAL	STATISTICAL
Spurious correlation	Regression
Randomization / Intervention	Association / Independence
Confounding / Effect	"Controlling for" / Conditioning
Instrumental variable	Odd and risk ratios
Strong Exogeneity	Collapsibility / Granger causality
Explanatory variables	Propensity score
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

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FROM STATISTICAL TO CAUSAL ANALYSIS: 2. MENTAL BARRIERS

- Causal and statistical concepts do not mix.

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- No causes in – no causes out (Cartwright, 1989)

$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{statistical assumptions + data} \\ \text{causal assumptions} \end{array} \right\} \Rightarrow \text{causal conclusions}$
- Causal assumptions cannot be expressed in the mathematical language of standard statistics.
-

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FROM STATISTICAL TO CAUSAL ANALYSIS: 2. MENTAL BARRIERS

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$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{statistical assumptions + data} \\ \text{causal assumptions} \end{array} \right\} \Rightarrow \text{causal conclusions}$
- Causal assumptions cannot be expressed in the mathematical language of standard statistics.
- Non-standard mathematics:
 - Structural equation models (Wright, 1920; Simon, 1960)
 - Counterfactuals (Neyman-Rubin (Y_x), Lewis ($x \rightarrow Y$))

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WHY CAUSALITY NEEDS SPECIAL MATHEMATICS

Scientific Equations (e.g., Hooke's Law) are non-algebraic
e.g., Length (Y) equals a constant (2) times the weight (X)
Correct notation:

$Y = 2X$	$X = 1$
$X = 1$	$Y = 2$
<u>Process information</u>	<u>The solution</u>

Had X been 3, Y would be 6.
If we raise X to 3, Y would be 6.
Must "wipe out" $X = 1$.

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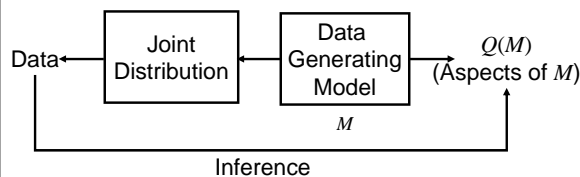
(or)

$Y \leftarrow 2X$	$X = 1$
$X = 1$	$Y = 2$
<u>Process information</u>	<u>The solution</u>

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THE STRUCTURAL MODEL PARADIGM

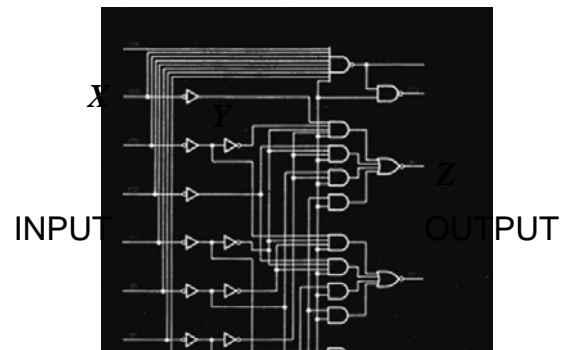


M – Invariant strategy (mechanism, recipe, law, protocol) by which Nature assigns values to variables in the analysis.

"Think Nature, not experiment!"

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FAMILIAR CAUSAL MODEL ORACLE FOR MANIPULATION



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STRUCTURAL CAUSAL MODELS

Definition: A structural causal model is a 4-tuple $\langle V, U, F, P(u) \rangle$, where

- $V = \{V_1, \dots, V_n\}$ are endogeneous variables
- $U = \{U_1, \dots, U_m\}$ are background variables
- $F = \{f_1, \dots, f_n\}$ are functions determining V ,
 $v_i = f_i(v, u)$ e.g., $y = \alpha + \beta x + u_Y$
- $P(u)$ is a distribution over U

$P(u)$ and F induce a distribution $P(v)$ over observable variables

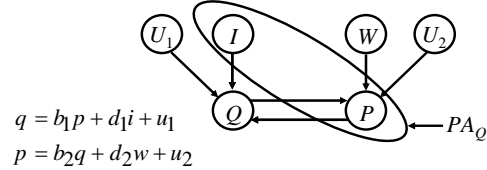
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STRUCTURAL MODELS AND CAUSAL DIAGRAMS

The functions $v_i = f_i(v, u)$ define a graph

$$v_i = f_i(p a_p u_i) \quad PA_i \subseteq V \setminus V_i \quad U_i \subseteq U$$

Example: Price – Quantity equations in economics



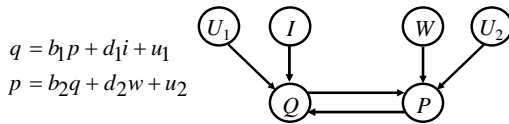
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STRUCTURAL MODELS AND INTERVENTION

Let X be a set of variables in V .

The action $do(x)$ sets X to constants x regardless of the factors which previously determined X .

$do(x)$ replaces all functions f_i determining X with the constant functions $X=x$, to create a mutilated model M_x .



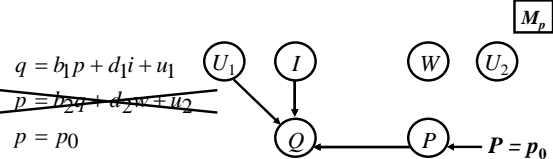
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CAUSAL MODELS AND COUNTERFACTUALS

Definition:

The sentence: "Y would be y (in situation u), had X been x ," denoted $Y_x(u) = y$, means:

The solution for Y in a mutilated model M_x (i.e., the equations for X replaced by $X=x$) with input $U=u$, is equal to y .

The Fundamental Equation of Counterfactuals:

$$Y_x(u) = Y_{M_x}(u)$$

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- Joint probabilities of counterfactuals:

$$P(Y_x = y, Z_w = z) = \sum_{u: Y_x(u)=y, Z_w(u)=z} P(u)$$

In particular:

$$P(y | do(x)) \triangleq P(Y_x = y) = \sum_{u: Y_x(u)=y} P(u)$$

$$P(Y_{x'} = y' | x, y) = \sum_{u: Y_{x'}(u)=y'} P(u | x, y)$$

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THE FIVE NECESSARY STEPS OF CAUSAL ANALYSIS

- Define: Express the target quantity Q as a function $Q(M)$ that can be computed from any model M .
- Assume: Formulate causal assumptions A using some formal language.
- Identify: Determine if Q is identifiable given A .
- Estimate: Estimate Q if it is identifiable; approximate it, if it is not.
- Test: Test the testable implications of A (if any).

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THE FIVE NECESSARY STEPS FOR EFFECT ESTIMATION

- Define: Express the target quantity Q as a function $Q(M)$ that can be computed from any model M .
 $ATE \triangleq E(Y | do(x_1)) - E(Y | do(x_0))$
- Assume: Formulate causal assumptions A using some formal language.
- Identify: Determine if Q is identifiable given A .
- Estimate: Estimate Q if it is identifiable; approximate it, if it is not.
- Test: Test the testable implications of A (if any).

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COUNTERFACTUALS AT WORK ETT – EFFECT OF TREATMENT ON THE TREATED

1. Regret:
I took a pill to fall asleep.
Perhaps I should not have?
2. Program evaluation:
What would terminating a program do to those enrolled?

$$P(Y_x = y | x')$$

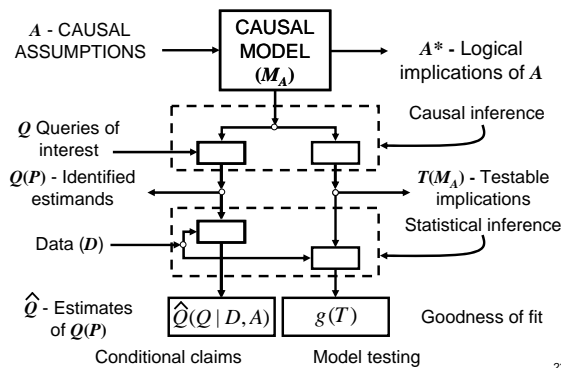
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 $ETT \triangleq P(Y_x = y | X = x')$
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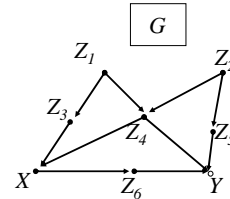
THE LOGIC OF CAUSAL ANALYSIS



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IDENTIFICATION IN SCM

Find the effect of X on Y , $P(y|do(x))$, given the causal assumptions shown in G , where Z_1, \dots, Z_k are auxiliary variables.

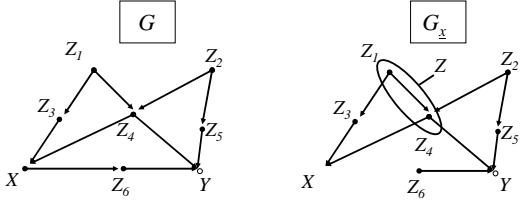


Can $P(y|do(x))$ be estimated if only a subset, Z , can be measured?

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ELIMINATING CONFOUNDING BIAS THE BACK-DOOR CRITERION

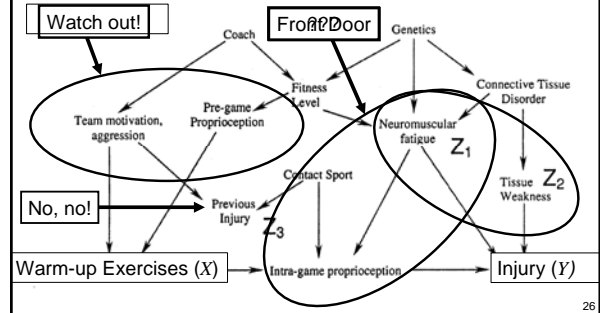
$P(y | do(x))$ is estimable if there is a set Z of variables such that Z d -separates X from Y in G_x .



Moreover, $P(y | do(x)) = \sum_z P(y | x, z)P(z) = \sum_z \frac{P(x, y, z)}{P(x | z)}$
 ("adjusting" for Z) \rightarrow Ignorability

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EFFECT OF WARM-UP ON INJURY (After Shrier & Platt, 2008)



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FROM IDENTIFICATION TO ESTIMATION

Define: Express the target quantity Q as a function $Q(M)$ that can be computed from any model M .

$$Q = P(y | do(x))$$

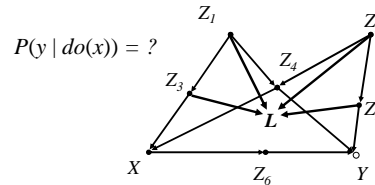
Assume: Formulate causal assumptions using ordinary scientific language and represent their structural part in graphical form.

Identify: Determine if Q is identifiable.

Estimate: Estimate Q if it is identifiable; approximate it, if it is not.

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PROPENSITY SCORE ESTIMATOR (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983)



$P(y | do(x)) = ?$

$$L(z_1, z_2, z_3, z_4, z_5) \triangleq P(X = 1 | z_1, z_2, z_3, z_4, z_5)$$

$$\text{Theorem: } \sum_z P(y | z, x)P(z) = \sum_l P(y | L = l, x)P(L = l)$$

Adjustment for L replaces Adjustment for Z

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WHAT PROPENSITY SCORE (PS) PRACTITIONERS NEED TO KNOW

$$L(z) = P(X = 1 | Z = z)$$

$$\sum_z P(y | z, x)P(z) = \sum_l P(y | l, x)P(l)$$

1. The asymptotic bias of PS is EQUAL to that of ordinary adjustment (for same Z).
2. Including an additional covariate in the analysis CAN SPOIL the bias-reduction potential of others.
3. In particular, instrumental variables tend to amplify bias.
4. Choosing sufficient set for PS, requires knowledge of the model.

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REGRESSION VS. STRUCTURAL EQUATIONS (THE CONFUSION OF THE CENTURY)

Regression (claimless, nonfalsifiable):

$$Y = ax + \epsilon_Y$$

Structural (empirical, falsifiable):

$$Y = bx + u_Y$$

Claim: (regardless of distributions):

$$E(Y | do(x)) = E(Y | do(x), do(z)) = bx$$

The mothers of all questions:

Q. When would b equal a ?

A. When all back-door paths are blocked, $(u_Y \perp\!\!\!\perp X)$

Q. When is b estimable by regression methods?

A. Graphical criteria available

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TWO PARADIGMS FOR CAUSAL INFERENCE

Observed: $P(X, Y, Z, \dots)$

Conclusions needed: $P(Y_x=y), P(X_y=x | Z=z) \dots$

How do we connect observables, X, Y, Z, \dots to counterfactuals Y_x, X_z, Z_y, \dots ?

N-R model

Counterfactuals are primitives, new variables

Super-distribution

$P^*(X, Y, \dots, Y_x, X_z, \dots)$

X, Y, Z constrain Y_x, Z_y, \dots

Structural model

Counterfactuals are derived quantities

Subscripts modify the model and distribution

$P(Y_x = y) = P_{M_x}(Y = y)$

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"SUPER" DISTRIBUTION IN N-R MODEL

X	Y	Z	$Y_{x=0}$	$Y_{x=1}$	$X_{z=0}$	$X_{z=1}$	$X_{y=0} \dots$	U
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0...	u_1
0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1...	u_2
0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1...	u_3
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0...	u_4

inconsistency: $x=0 \Rightarrow Y_{x=0}=Y$ $Y = xY_1 + (1-x)Y_0$

Defines: $P^*(X, Y, Z, \dots, Y_x, Z_y, \dots, Y_{xz}, Z_{xy}, \dots)$

$P^*(Y_x = y | Z, X_z)$

$Y_x \perp\!\!\!\perp X | Z_y$

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ARE THE TWO PARADIGMS EQUIVALENT?

- Yes (Galles and Pearl, 1998; Halpern 1998)
- In the N-R paradigm, Y_x is defined by consistency:

$$Y = xY_1 + (1-x)Y_0$$

- In SCM, consistency is a theorem.
- Moreover, a theorem in one approach is a theorem in the other.
- Difference: Clarity of assumptions and their implications

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AXIOMS OF STRUCTURAL COUNTERFACTUALS

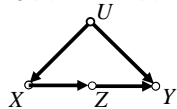
$Y_x(u)=y$: Y would be y , had X been x (in state $U = u$) (Galles, Pearl, Halpern, 1998):

1. **Definiteness**
 $\exists x \in X$ s.t. $X_y(u) = x$
2. **Uniqueness**
 $(X_y(u) = x) \& (X_{y'}(u) = x') \Rightarrow x = x'$
3. **Effectiveness**
 $X_{xw}(u) = x$
4. **Composition (generalized consistency)**
 $X_w(u) = x \Rightarrow Y_{wx}(u) = Y_w(u)$
5. **Reversibility**
 $(Y_{xw}(u) = y) \& (W_{xy}(u) = w) \Rightarrow Y_x(u) = y$

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FORMULATING ASSUMPTIONS THREE LANGUAGES

1. English: Smoking (X), Cancer (Y), Tar (Z), Genotypes (U)

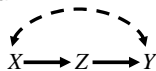


2. Counterfactuals: $Z_x(u) = Z_{yx}(u)$,

$$X_y(u) = X_{zy}(u) = X_z(u) = X(u),$$

$$Y_z(u) = Y_{zx}(u), \quad Z_x \perp\!\!\!\perp \{Y_z, X\}$$

3. Structural:



$$x = f_1(u, \epsilon_1)$$

$$z = f_2(x, \epsilon_2)$$

$$y = f_3(z, u, \epsilon_3)$$

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GRAPHICAL – COUNTERFACTUALS SYMBIOSIS

Every causal graph expresses counterfactual assumptions, e.g., $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$

1. Missing arrows $Y \nleftrightarrow Z$

2. Missing arcs $Y \nleftrightarrow Z$

consistent, and readable from the graph.

- Express assumption in graphs
- Derive estimands by graphical or algebraic methods

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DETERMINING THE CAUSES OF EFFECTS (The Attribution Problem)

- Your Honor! My client (Mr. A) died BECAUSE he used that drug.



- Court to decide if it is MORE PROBABLE THAN NOT that A would be alive BUT FOR the drug!
 $PN = P(? | A \text{ is dead, took the drug}) \geq 0.50$

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THE ATTRIBUTION PROBLEM

Definition:

- What is the meaning of $PN(x,y)$:
 "Probability that event y would not have occurred if it were not for event x , given that x and y did in fact occur."

Answer:

$$PN(x, y) = P(Y_{x'} = y' | x, y)$$

Computable from M

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THE ATTRIBUTION PROBLEM

Definition:

- What is the meaning of $PN(x,y)$:
 "Probability that event y would not have occurred if it were not for event x , given that x and y did in fact occur."

Identification:

- Under what condition can $PN(x,y)$ be learned from statistical data, i.e., observational, experimental and combined.

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TYPICAL THEOREMS

(Tian and Pearl, 2000)

- Bounds given combined nonexperimental and experimental data

$$\max \left\{ \frac{0}{P(x,y)} \right\} \leq PN \leq \min \left\{ \frac{1}{P(x,y)} \right\}$$

- Identifiability under monotonicity (Combined data)

$$PN = \frac{P(y/x) - P(y/x')}{P(y/x)} + \frac{P(y/x') - P(y/x')}{P(x,y)}$$

corrected Excess-Risk-Ratio

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CAN FREQUENCY DATA DECIDE LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY?

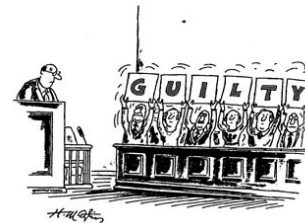
	Experimental		Nonexperimental	
	$do(x)$	$do(x')$	x	x'
Deaths (y)	16	14	2	28
Survivals (y')	984	986	998	972
	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

- Nonexperimental data: drug usage predicts longer life
- Experimental data: drug has negligible effect on survival
- Plaintiff: Mr. A is special.
 - He actually died
 - He used the drug by choice
- Court to decide (given both data):
 Is it more probable than not that A would be alive but for the drug?

$$PN \triangleq P(Y_{x'} = y' | x, y) > 0.50$$

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SOLUTION TO THE ATTRIBUTION PROBLEM



- WITH PROBABILITY ONE $1 \leq P(y'_{x'} | x, y) \leq 1$
- Combined data tell more than each study alone

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EFFECT DECOMPOSITION (direct vs. indirect effects)

1. Why decompose effects?
2. What is the definition of direct and indirect effects?
3. What are the policy implications of direct and indirect effects?
4. When can direct and indirect effect be estimated consistently from experimental and nonexperimental data?

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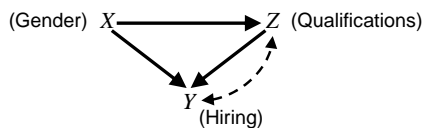
WHY DECOMPOSE EFFECTS?

1. To understand how Nature works
2. To comply with legal requirements
3. To predict the effects of new type of interventions:
Signal routing, rather than variable fixing

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LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF DIRECT EFFECT

Can data prove an employer guilty of hiring discrimination?



What is the direct effect of X on Y?

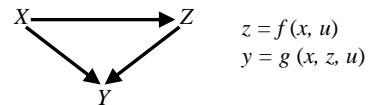
$$E(Y | do(x_1), do(z)) - E(Y | do(x_0), do(z))$$

(averaged over z) Adjust for Z? No! No!

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NATURAL INTERPRETATION OF AVERAGE DIRECT EFFECTS

Robins and Greenland (1992) – “Pure”



$$z = f(x, u)$$

$$y = g(x, z, u)$$

Natural Direct Effect of X on Y: $DE(x_0, x_1; Y)$

The expected change in Y, when we change X from x_0 to x_1 , and, for each u , we keep Z constant at whatever value it attained before the change.

$$E[Y_{x_1 Z_{x_0}} - Y_{x_0}]$$

In linear models, $DE = \text{Controlled Direct Effect}$

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DEFINITION AND IDENTIFICATION OF NESTED COUNTERFACTUALS

Consider the quantity $Q \triangleq E_u[Y_{XZ_{X^*}}(u)]$

Given $\langle M, P(u) \rangle$, Q is well defined

Given u , $Z_{x^*}(u)$ is the solution for Z in M_{x^*} , call it z

$Y_{XZ_{x^*}}(u)$ is the solution for Y in M_{xz}

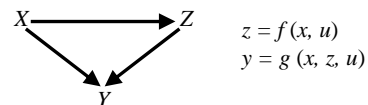
Can Q be estimated from $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{experimental} \\ \text{nonexperimental} \end{array} \right\}$ data?

Experimental: nest-free expression

Nonexperimental: subscript-free expression

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DEFINITION OF INDIRECT EFFECTS



$$z = f(x, u)$$

$$y = g(x, z, u)$$

Indirect Effect of X on Y: $IE(x_0, x_1; Y)$

The expected change in Y when we keep X constant, say at x_0 , and let Z change to whatever value it would have attained had X changed to x_1 .

$$E[Y_{x_0 Z_{x_1}} - Y_{x_0}]$$

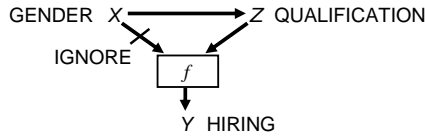
In linear models, $IE = TE - DE$

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF INDIRECT EFFECTS

What is the indirect effect of X on Y?

The effect of Gender on Hiring if sex discrimination is eliminated.



Blocking a link – a new type of intervention

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MEDIATION FORMULAS

1. The natural direct and indirect effects are identifiable in Markovian models (no confounding),
2. And are given by:

$$DE = \sum_z [E(Y | do(x_1, z)) - E(Y | do(x_0, z))] P(z | do(x_0))$$

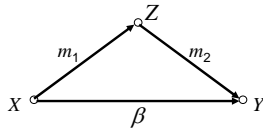
$$IE = \sum_z E(Y | do(x_0, z)) [P(z | do(x_1)) - P(z | do(x_0))]$$

$$TE = DE - IE(\text{rev})$$

3. Applicable to linear and non-linear models, continuous and discrete variables, regardless of distributional form.

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WHY $TE \neq DE + IE$



$$TE = DE - IE(\text{rev})$$

In linear systems $IE(\text{rev}) = -IE$

$$TE = \beta + m_1 m_2$$

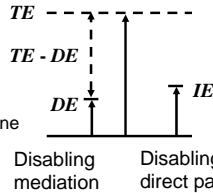
$$DE = \beta$$

$$IE = m_1 m_2 = TE - DE$$

IE = Effect sustained by mediation alone

Is NOT equal to:

$TE - DE$ = Effect prevented by disabling mediation

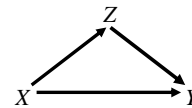


Disabling mediation

Disabling direct path

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MEDIATION FORMULAS IN UNCONFOUNDED MODELS



$$DE = \sum_z [E(Y | x_1, z) - E(Y | x_0, z)] P(z | x_0)$$

$$IE = \sum_z [E(Y | x_0, z)] [P(z | x_1) - P(z | x_0)]$$

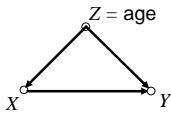
$$TE = E(Y | x_1) - E(Y | x_0)$$

IE = Fraction of responses explained by mediation

$TE - DE$ = Fraction of responses owed to mediation

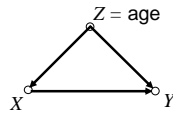
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TRANSPORTABILITY -- WHEN CAN WE EXTRPOLATE EXPERIMENTAL FINDINGS TO DIFFERENT POPULATIONS?



Experimental study in LA

Measured: $P(x, y, z)$
 $P(y | do(x), z)$



Observational study in NYC

Measured:

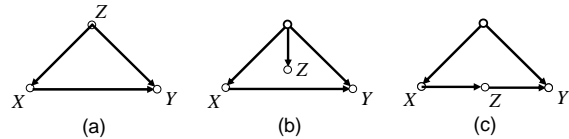
Problem: We find $P(z) \neq P^*(z)$
(LA population is younger)

What can we say about $P^*(y | do(x))$

Intuition: $P^*(y | do(x)) = \sum_z P(y | do(x), z) P^*(z)$

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TRANSPORT FORMULAS DEPEND ON THE STORY



a) Z represents age

$$P^*(y | do(x)) = \sum_z P(y | do(x), z) P^*(z)$$

b) Z represents language skill

$$P^*(y | do(x)) = ???$$

c) Z represents a bio-marker

$$P^*(y | do(x)) = ???$$

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TRANSPORTABILITY (Pearl and Bareinboim, 2010)

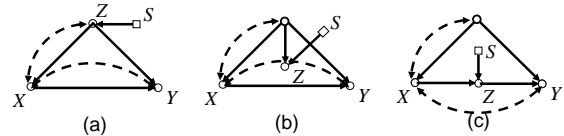
Definition 1 (Transportability)

Given two populations, denoted Π and Π^* , characterized by probability distributions P and P^* , and causal diagrams G and G^* , respectively, a causal relation R is said to be transportable from Π to Π^* if

1. $R(\Pi)$ is estimable from the set I of interventional studies on Π , and
2. $R(\Pi^*)$ is identified from $I, P, P^*, G,$ and G^* .

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TRANSPORT FORMULAS DEPEND ON THE STORY



- Z** represents age

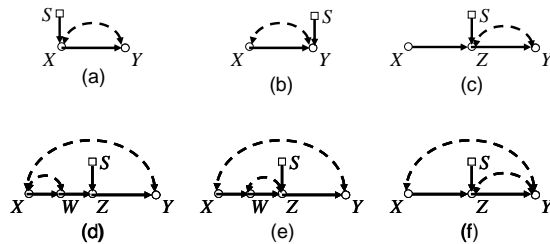
$$P^*(y | do(x)) = \sum_z P(y | do(x), z) P^*(z)$$
- Z** represents language skill

$$P^*(y | do(x)) = P(y | do(x))$$
- Z** represents a bio-marker

$$P^*(y | do(x)) = \sum_z P(y | do(x), z) P^*(z | x)$$

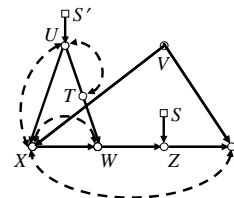
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WHICH MODEL LICENSES THE TRANSPORT OF THE CAUSAL EFFECT



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DETERMINE IF THE CAUSAL EFFECT IS TRANSPORTABLE



What measurements need to be taken in the study and in the target population?

The transport formula

$$P^*(y | do(x)) = \sum_z P(y | do(x), z) \sum_w P^*(z | w) \sum_t P(w | do(x), t) P^*(t)$$

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CONCLUSIONS

I TOLD YOU CAUSALITY IS SIMPLE

- Formal basis for causal and counterfactual inference (complete)
- Unification of the graphical, potential-outcome and structural equation approaches
- Friendly and formal solutions to century-old problems and confusions.
- No other method can do better (theorem)

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CONCLUSIONS

He is wise who bases causal inference on an explicit causal structure that is defensible on scientific grounds.

(Aristotle 384-322 B.C.)

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QUESTIONS???

They will be answered

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