

Field experiments in sociology: a delayed (and sloppy) launch

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In sociology, the interest towards field experiments rose later than in contiguous disciplines, such as economics, social psychology or political sciences, due to a delayed awareness of the challenges underneath causal inference among quantitative researchers. Nonetheless, the growth of experimental research in last decades is quite impressive and it implied the development of new skills among sociologists, as it usually happens with the diffusion of novel techniques. Indeed, random assignment alone is not sufficient to develop proper experimental causal inference, as well known in other fields of study where the use of RCTs is a consolidated research practice. Our contribution aims at: i. describing the growing experimental literature in sociology, providing statistics about features of this emerging research field (i.e. recurrent topics, involved countries, etc.); ii. assessing the methodological soundness of experimental literature in the discipline. We focus on field experiments, not considering other designs based on randomization, such as vignette studies, lab experiments, etc.

To properly cover the field we developed a systematic review retrieving and assessing all the published articles based only on field experiments in worldwide top journals in sociology in the last twenty years. The following eligibility criteria were used to include the studies: i. articles published in peer-reviewed sociological journals; ii. studies using experimental methods with random assignment to treatment and control conditions; iii. articles published after 2000 in English.

We identified a corpus of journals through the joint analyses of rankings (Scimago, Google Scholar, Web of Science) and Sociological Abstracts. The subset of journals was identified and crossvalidated independently by two senior scholars of the research team, by classifying each journal using a threefold classification (explicitly sociological, not explicitly sociological but relevant to the discipline, not relevant). Within the group of “explicitly sociological” and “explicitly sociological but relevant to the discipline” we identified all the articles published since 2000 displaying keywords related to randomization processes and/or randomized controlled trials in the title, abstracts, or keywords. 2,413 articles were identified in this first step.

A first screen of each article was carried out by examining the title and abstract. The full texts of articles that were retained after the screening phase were read by two independent reviewers. When two of the authors were in disagreement, the inclusion

or exclusion of the study was discussed with a third author until consensus was reached.

Data of the included studies were extracted according to a set of descriptors (e.g. nation where it took place, main topics, disciplines involved) defined in advance for a descriptive analysis. We then evaluated the accuracy of the experimental reporting of the papers by documenting their alignment with the CONSORT checklist (Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials). CONSORT provides a standard, comprehensive, and authoritative guide for trial reporting. This list, discussed and developed within the biomedical field, was first published in 1994 and was intended as a practical tool to help authors to prepare complete and transparent reports and to allow readers to evaluate them. In this paper, we use the CONSORT-SPI 2018 checklist, a development of CONSORT 2010 Statement for social and psychological interventions.

Our findings show that the majority of studies fails to provide technical reports in full accordance with international standards. This makes it hard, at times, to evaluate the robustness of the causal evidence produced and risks to undermine the contribution of experimental research to sociology. The implications for these results are discussed, both in terms of consequences for experimental evidence in sociology and of actions to be developed to overcome the lack of expertise with this technique. We suggest viable solutions, aimed at improving the robustness of experimental research in sociology, taking advantage from consolidated rigorous praxis developed in other disciplines.