

Valid or Invalid Natural Experiments?

Dunning describes a few examples of ‘natural’ experiments in political science. He argues that the plausibility of the ‘as if’ random assignment is the key to whether the studies are truly experiments or not, and thus, whether the studies are informing us about true causal relationships.

In groups, your task is to read through some examples given in the Dunning piece, and then diagram two of these studies following our examples in class. The questions below should guide you in this exercise.

Example 1:

1. What is your example? What are the DV (X) and IV (Y) in this example? Why is this question important?

2. Is there a credible mechanism for why X could cause Y? Briefly, what is the mechanism in theory?

3. Could Y cause X in reverse?

4. What confounders Z could exist that bias this study? How does the natural experiment in your example propose to control for these confounders?

5. How plausible is this natural experiment, i.e. is the finding *internally* validity?

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