

Soc 30902 students – here are excerpts from notes I made on student papers way, way back in 1987. Many of the comments are a bit cryptic to me now, but they may give you ideas for your own projects. You can see what sorts of hypotheses others have come up with, and the sorts of mistakes that you will want to try to avoid. Additional comments I have added today appear in *Italics*. The original comments appear in normal type.

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1. *This study had various problems in the cover story. While the student acknowledged the problems with the field study, it was nevertheless the case that the problems were so great that the entire study was unnecessarily shaky. The study involved the effects of contact on racial prejudice. If I recall correctly, there had been some campus discussion at the time about how blacks and whites at ND stayed separated from each other, and that helped inspire the study.*

Pretty good. Good motivation for conducting the study. (Incidentally, if you are interested, there is a lot of research on the effects of contact on racial prejudice - findings are very complex, and the nature of the contact is very important.) Some problems that I see:

(1) Cover story might be stronger - would people believe Bill Hickey really cares about this?

(2) Some of the problems you acknowledge at the end really seem pretty devastating. In particular, there is no reason blacks can't just sit at another table. Perhaps you could have worked out something that forced blacks and whites to eat at the same table. Mortality also seems like a major threat. Also, how would you guarantee people could even find seats at the designated tables? In general, you need to figure out how to enhance your control over the situation.

(3) Measurement of your dependent variable is very rough and seems somewhat subjective; you could refine this more.

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2. *The following was a pretty good study, but would have been better if the author justified her hypothesis more.*

Various sociological explanations have been offered for the effects of attractiveness - your discussion could be enhanced by explaining exactly why you think attractive people generate greater interest. (It isn't a straightforward matter - sometimes attractive people scare others off, sometimes attractiveness is associated with stupidity, sometimes people who are more similar to you are more influential than people who are more attractive.)

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3. *This study had some major plausibility problems. Also, it had problems with comparing non-equivalent groups that could have been overcome.*

(1) Plausibility is a bit of a problem. How exactly are you going to have someone split their head wide open - and then tell other people not to discuss it? You need to think of a more realistic accident, and then come up with some good way of telling people not to discuss it.

(2) The groups are non-equivalent; differences in reaction might be due to natural differences between seniors and freshmen (maybe the seniors would react differently to the accident in Theodores even if they hadn't seen the earlier incident). Coming up with equivalent groups would be much better; perhaps one group of seniors could see the accident at the memorial, and another group not see it, and you could compare their reactions.

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4. *This study was complex, awkward, and the hypotheses were never clearly stated.*

(1) Remember, this is just a proposal, don't get too carried away in pretending you've actually done it.

(2) Your design is a little unwieldy. Twenty-four combinations are implied by W, X, Y, and Z, and you only have 4 classrooms. I don't think you have a clear understanding of how your factorial design would work in practice.

(3) What are your hypotheses? You never say, though they could be inferred from your choice of independent variables.

(4) Some good ideas on testing for cheating, although some might be very unwieldy in practice. I'd probably work more on ways of getting honest self-reports of cheating behavior.

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5. *This study needed better control over the treatment. Also, the author was confused about what the variables were.*

(1) Remember, this is a proposal, you don't have to pretend you actually did it.

(2) Your experiment depends on an individual being surrounded by others with similar views. You don't necessarily have that; some students might actually support the administration's new policy. In general, you have the problem of controlling what everyone is doing. Often, experiments use groups composed of confederates and one real subject, in order to provide maximum control over the interactions that take place.

(3) The indep. variable is not the decision that was handed down (as stated on p. 1), rather, it is the size of the group.

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6. *This was a good study. The design could have been improved a little bit.*

This is a well thought-out experiment. Your hypotheses are reasonable, and you have carefully considered how you would conduct the experiment and the problems you would likely encounter.

It might be better to use multiple parishes rather than multiple weeks at one parish; it would be less disruptive of any one parish, and the priest could keep on giving the same sermon at different places rather than have to think up new ones every week.

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7. *The following was a good study, similar to many that have actually been conducted on helping behavior. The author failed to realize that random assignment would take care of some of the things s/he thought were problems.*

Pretty good experiment - very straightforward, but solid. You might have made it a little more interesting by adding some additional independent variables - perhaps willingness to help members of another race is contingent on the specific circumstances.

Some very similar experiments have been conducted. For example, in one study, experimenters claimed to have dialed a wrong number (using their last quarter) and asked subjects to call a service station for them. In some trials, the caller sounded black, in others white. Your experiment is a variation on this idea, in that subjects can actually see the person in distress.

Your concerns about gender differences (expressed in your final paragraph) aren't really warranted - random assignment should take care of these problems.

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8. *This was more of a survey than an experiment.*

This would be very good as a project on survey research. As an experiment, though, it doesn't really qualify. The experimental treatment has to be something the experimenter can manipulate, and past church attendance does not qualify. In a survey, you can apply statistical controls for other independent variables, but there is always the possibility that some variable you have overlooked accounts for group differences. In an experiment, you can get around such problems via such things as random assignment.

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9. *This study had something to do with dating and drinking. It could have been motivated a little better. The study apparently used random assignment, but mortality was still a potential problem.*

You could do a little more in the way of theoretical development. For example, an alternative hypothesis is that people may be reluctant to drink with someone they don't know. You could also clarify how this information would be useful to the administration - what are the policy implications (force everyone to have blind dates? Or you can only go to parties with people you know?) Basically, you need to think more about why you are doing this.

You could say a bit more about internal validity - mortality seems like a problem here, people might be less likely to go to the party if paired with someone they don't know.

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10. *The writeup of this paper was sloppy. The cover story needed work. The theory and the actual measures used were not quite in sync with each other.*

(1) You could use a tad more editing here and there - your writing is reasonably clear overall, but you do have a fair number of misspellings, awkward phrasings, etc.

(2) Cover story needs more work. You need to come up with a clearer explanation of how an alleged study on financial decision-making would involve showing pornography. The basic idea (deceiving people as to why they are seeing a particular type of film) is good though.

(3) You are interested in the effects of pornography on violence. Your field experiment does not seem to address this issue; rather, it seems to deal with the effect of pornography on friendliness towards women.

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11. *This is an example of a student focusing on local issues. He or she thought that dorms would affect attitudes, but didn't offer any reasons why. She was using non-equivalent groups, and should have explained why the groups she chose were fairly comparable. The problem of mortality could have been discussed.*

(1) You could develop your hypotheses more - why exactly do you think type of dorm will affect attitudes?

(2) You could discuss the equivalence or non-equivalence of the schools more. Are there reasons for believing they are fairly similar, except for their type of dorms? The advantages of using Catholic University could have been expanded upon.

(3) Mortality deserves greater consideration; perhaps certain types of people are more likely to drop out than others.

Overall, not bad, you mostly need to develop some of your arguments in greater depth.

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12. *Yet another "local" issue. The student was examining stereotypes concerning ND and SMC women. In this experiment, there were questions about whether concepts were being operationalized ok. There were measurement problems that could have been overcome fairly easily.*

Pretty good. Some comments:

(1) You may be overdoing the "dizzy" aspect. Regardless of what the subject thinks about N.D. or St. Mary's students in general, it may be quite clear that this particular student is a real dingbat, and subjects will respond accordingly. That is, your treatment may be ineffective, because you won't measure attitudes towards St. Marys' students as a whole; rather you will just measure attitudes towards this particular person.

(2) Money may be a better and more practical incentive than extra credit. You wouldn't need to get all these professors backing you up (most of whom would have no reason for wanting to help you); you could just put a bunch of posters up looking for volunteers.

(3) Measurement of the dependent variable seems problematic. It is fairly subjective (as you note), and the researcher is not blind to the treatment. At a minimum, you might want to have a second researcher (who would not know whether the woman was St. Mary's or N.D.) do the scoring. Perhaps you could come up with some plausible way of asking students a few specific questions about their attitudes at the end of their test.

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13. *This study used both a lab and a field experiment. In one study, they wanted to examine how readings at masses would affect generosity. A reversibility design was used. The authors needed to think more about what would happen during the "non-treatment" weeks. The authors went over threats that their design probably took care of. Control could have been better in the lab experiment.*

Nicely done overall. Some comments:

(1) You might want to think about what would be read in the weeks you do not have inspirational readings. You always have some sorts of readings at masses - and few readings are designed to encourage greed and selfishness - so what exactly is going to be happening in those "non-treatment" weeks? Perhaps you could compare the effects of different types of readings on generosity.

(2) You may be overstating the threats to the internal validity of your field experiment. The repeated applications and withdrawals of the treatment make most of the threats very unlikely.

(3) Pretty good lab experiment. To increase your control, you might want to have a tape (that would appear to be a live show) shown to the subjects. That way, you can better control the content of what is seen. Otherwise, some people might see dancing elephants for a half-hour, while others get really heart-rending appeals. Also, to minimize the threat of history, you could alternate every half-hour having the TV on and off; that reduces the possibility that something dramatic happens to influence people during the day. It also reduces the maturation threat; maybe people are more generous at nighttime than daytime.

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14. *This study had to do with dating, and drew from personal observations in forming the hypotheses. The experiment could have been tightened up a little here and there.*

(1) Good background information on N.D. and St. Mary's in your opening pages. Fairly good job of motivating your hypotheses and making them seem plausible. You could better explain why contact would lead to more positive impressions (you could meet somebody and find out they are even worse than you thought, couldn't you?)

(2) Nice experimental design.

(3) I get the impression you want to limit the study to people who actually attend the SYR, but you don't make this explicit, and you don't say how you would do so. Didn't you say something to me before about a means for checking for attendance? Something like that would be good to mention.

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15. *This study had trouble figuring out how to measure the concepts the author was interested in.*

- (1) Good opening paragraph
- (2) You could be clearer about your hypotheses. State clearly at the beginning how you think psychological concentration affects physical activities, and why you think that way. Make it clearer how your treatments relate to your hypotheses.
- (3) Measuring the dependent variable (the reaction) seems to be the most problematic aspect of the experiment. If you really want to do this, you should think more about what reactions you are interested in, and how you would measure them.
- (4) Nice use of deception. Overall, it sounds like something that could really be done, if you can just figure out how to handle the measurement problems.

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16. *This paper had a lot of problems with clarity. It wasn't that well written, and various points got muddled.*

- (1) The wording of your hypothesis is somewhat awkward - I read it several times, and still didn't understand it until I had read the entire paper. You might find it helpful to ask other people to read through your papers and point out any parts they find confusing so you can work on them.
- (2) Did you actually conduct the experiment? It sounds like you did, although that wasn't necessary. Be clear as to whether this is real or imaginary.
- (3) The relevance of your first two factors (University alcohol policies and vehicle regulations) is unclear - at least, you aren't doing any sort of experimental manipulation with them. The real emphasis of your experiment is on how different factors (noise, admission fees) affect choice of party. You could develop this point more, explaining what your hypotheses are and why.
- (4) Your independent variables seem to get confounded, since both noise and admission fee go up and down simultaneously.

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17. *This was a very good paper that could have been enhanced with a little more explanation of the rationale for the hypotheses.*

- (1) Good introductory paragraphs.
- (2) Good experimental design.
- (3) Very impressive discussion of the threats to internal and external validity - one of the best I read, perhaps even the best.
- (4) You could be a little more theoretical - exactly what is it you need to get people to appreciate something, and why is it that Food Services Appreciation Day lacks that quality?