

## Model selection in complex meta-analyses

Symposium on 'Recent Advances in Meta-Analysis'  
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2024-08-28

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## Introduction / Overview

- discuss fixed-versus random-effects models in meta-analysis
- ... not again!
- discuss the issue of model selection in complex meta-analyses
- illustrate various principles based on several example analyses (using the `metafor` package in R [1])

```
install.packages("metafor")  
library(metafor)
```

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## Standard Random-Effects Model

- let  $y_i$  denote the estimate,  $\theta_i$  the corresponding true effect, and  $v_i$  the sampling variance in the  $i$ th study (and hence  $SE_i = \sqrt{v_i}$  denotes the corresponding standard error)
- **random-effects model:**

$$y_i = \theta_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where  $\theta_i \sim N(\mu, \tau^2)$  and  $\varepsilon_i \sim N(0, v_i)$

- the standard 'workhorse' in many MAs for pooling estimates

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## Independence Assumptions

- re-write the model as:

$$y_i = \mu + u_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where  $u_i \sim N(0, \tau^2)$  and  $\varepsilon_i \sim N(0, v_i)$

- model assumes **independence** between estimates:<sup>1</sup>

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Cov}[u_i, u_{i'}] &= 0 && \text{(independent random effects)} \\ \text{Cov}[\varepsilon_i, \varepsilon_{i'}] &= 0 && \text{(independent sampling errors)} \end{aligned}$$

- in more complex analyses, these assumptions are often violated

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<sup>1</sup>There is also  $\text{Cov}[u_i, \varepsilon_i] = 0$  but this is a separate issue [2].

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## Dependent Random Effects

- when estimates from *different subsets of subjects* arise from the same study, their sampling errors can still be assumed to be independent, but not their random effects
- the true effects corresponding to estimates arising from the same study often tend to be similar to each other

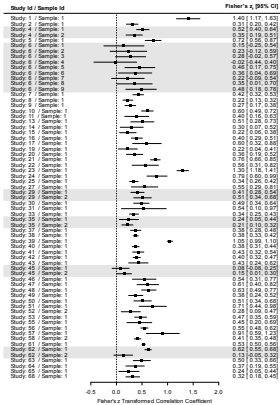
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## Example: Relationship between Class Attendance and Grade

- meta-analysis on the relationship between class attendance of college students and their class performance (i.e., grade) [3]
- some studies examined multiple sub-samples (e.g., men versus women, different sections of the same class)
- dataset includes **54 studies** and **67 estimates** (Fisher r-to-z transformed correlations coefficients)

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## Example: Relationship between Class Attendance and Grade



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## Multilevel Random-Effects Model

- let  $y_{ij}$  denote the  $j$ th estimate from the  $i$ th study
- multilevel random-effects model:<sup>2</sup> [4]

$$y_{ij} = \mu + s_i + u_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where  $s_i \sim N(0, \sigma_1^2)$ ,  $u_{ij} \sim N(0, \sigma_2^2)$ ,  $\varepsilon_{ij} \sim N(0, v_{ij})$

- implies that true effects from the same study are correlated:

$$\rho = \frac{\sigma_1^2}{\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2}$$

<sup>2</sup>Sometimes called a 'three-level model', since the standard random-effects model can be considered a two-level model.

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## Example: Relationship between Class Attendance and Grade

```
dat <- subset(dat.crede2010, criterion=="grade")
dat <- escalc(measure="ZCOR", ri=r1, ni=ni, data=dat)
print(res <- rma.mv(yi, vi, random = ~ 1 | studyid/sampleid, data=dat))

## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 67; method: REML)
##
## Variance Components:
##
##      estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed  factor
## sigma^2.1  0.0376  0.1939   54    no    studyid
## sigma^2.2  0.0159  0.1259   67    no    studyid/sampleid
##
## Test for Heterogeneity:
## Q(df = 66) = 1068.7213, p-val < .0001
##
## Model Results:
##
## estimate  se  zval  pval  ci.lb  ci.ub
##  0.4798  0.0331  14.5167  <.0001  0.4151  0.5446

round(res$sigma2[1] / sum(res$sigma2), digits=2)

## [1] 0.7
```

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## Model Selection via LRT / Information Criteria

- the standard and multilevel RE models are nested (if  $\sigma_1^2 = 0$ , the multilevel model collapses to the standard RE model)
- comparison via likelihood ratio test and information criteria
- test  $H_0: \sigma_1^2 = 0$  ( $\Rightarrow H_0: \rho = 0$ )

```
res0 <- update(res, sigma2=c(0,NA)) # NA = estimate the component
anova(res0, res)

##      df  AIC      BIC  AICc  logLik  LRT  pval  QE
## Full  3  3.3911  9.9601  3.7782  1.3044  1068.7213
## Reduced 2  6.5060  10.8853  6.6964  -1.2530  5.1149  0.0237  1068.7213
```

- can also test  $H_0: \sigma_2^2 = 0$  ( $\Rightarrow H_0: \rho = 1$ )

```
res0 <- update(res, sigma2=c(NA,0)) # NA = estimate the component
anova(res0, res)

##      df  AIC      BIC  AICc  logLik  LRT  pval  QE
## Full  3  3.3911  9.9601  3.7782  1.3044  1068.7213
## Reduced 2  14.8533  19.2326  15.0438  -5.4267  13.4622  0.0002  1068.7213
```

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## Model Selection Considerations

- this extends to more than two levels
- want to account for potential heterogeneity at each level
- there should be a random effect at the level of the individual estimates ( $u_i$  in the RE model,  $u_{ij}$  in the multilevel model)<sup>3</sup>
- but no simple rule for what should be considered a 'level'
- related to issue of what to consider a fixed vs. random effect [5]
- if the phenomenon of interest may vary across the units of a variable, may want to consider it as a level
- often use random effects to account for heterogeneity at a level, but there are circumstances where we also use fixed effects
- a variance component may be estimated to be  $\approx 0$  (ok!)

<sup>3</sup>So `rma.mv(yi, vi, random = ~ 1 | studyid, data=dat)` would be wrong!

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## Example: Handedness and Eye-Dominance

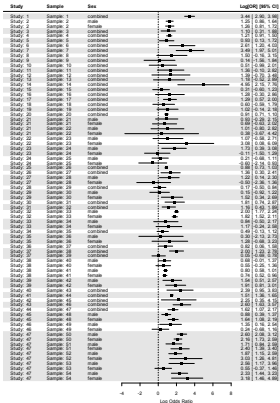
- meta-analysis of 47 studies on the association between handedness and eye-dominance [6]
- results are given in terms of 2x2 tables

	Right-Eyed	Left-Eyed
Right-Handed	$a$	$b$
Left-Handed	$c$	$d$

- we quantify the association in terms of log odds ratios
- some studies included multiple (independent) samples and/or reported results separately for men and women, so that the meta-analysis included 54 samples and 75 estimates in total

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## Example: Handedness and Eye-Dominance



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## Example: Handedness and Eye-Dominance

```
print(res <- rma.mv(yi, vi, random = ~ 1 | study/sample/sex, data=dat))

## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 75; method: REML)
## Variance Components:
##      estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed      factor
## sigma^2.1  0.1828  0.4276   47     no      study
## sigma^2.2  0.2259  0.4753   54     no      study/sample
## sigma^2.3  0.0000  0.0000   75     no      study/sample/sex
## Test for Heterogeneity:
## Q(df = 74) = 386.3457, p-val < .0001
## Model Results:
##
## estimate  se      zval  pval  ci.lb  ci.ub
## 1.2681  0.1130  11.2219 <.0001  1.0466  1.4895

predict(res, transf=exp, digits=2)

## pred ci.lb ci.ub
## 3.55  2.85  4.44
```

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## Bivariate Model for Independent Groups

- instead of modeling 'effect sizes' that reflect the difference between two groups ( $y_i = y_i^T - y_i^C$ ), we can also model the arm-level outcomes ( $y_i^T$  and  $y_i^C$ ) directly [7]

Wide Format			Long Format			
Study	$y_i$	$v_i$	Study	Group	$y_{ij}$	$v_{ij}$
1			1	T		
2			1	C		
...			2	T		
			2	C		
			...			

- we distinguish groups with a fixed effect
- can use fixed or random study effects

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## Example: BCG Vaccine against Tuberculosis

```
dat <- escalc(measure="OR", ai=tpos, bi=tneg, ci=cpos, di=cneg, data=dat.bcg)
rma(yi, vi, data=dat)

## Random-Effects Model (k = 13; tau^2 estimator: REML)
## tau^2 (estimated amount of total heterogeneity): 0.3378 (SE = 0.1784)
## tau (square root of estimated tau^2 value): 0.5812
## I^2 (total heterogeneity / total variability): 92.07%
## H^2 (total variability / sampling variability): 12.61
## Test for Heterogeneity:
## Q(df = 12) = 163.1649, p-val < .0001
## Model Results:
##
## estimate  se      zval  pval  ci.lb  ci.ub
## -0.7452  0.1860  -4.0057 <.0001  -1.1098  -0.3806

# restructure into long format
dat2 <- to.long(measure="OR", ai=tpos, bi=tneg, ci=cpos, di=cneg, data=dat)
dat2$group <- factor(dat2$group, levels=c(2,1), labels=c("con", "exp"))
dat2$id <- 1:nrow(dat2)
dat2 <- escalc(measure="PLO", xi=out1, mi=out2, data=dat2)
```

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## Example: BCG Vaccine against Tuberculosis

```
# fit model with fixed study effects
rma.mv(yi, vi, mods = ~ 0 + factor(study) + group, random = ~ 1 | id, data=dat2)

## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 26; method: REML)
## Variance Components:
##      estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed  factor
## sigma^2  0.1689  0.4110   26     no     id
## Test for Residual Heterogeneity:
## QE(df = 12) = 163.1649, p-val < .0001
## Model Results:
##
## estimate  se      zval  pval  ci.lb  ci.ub
## study1   -2.5287  0.4119  -6.1386 <.0001  -3.3360  -1.7213
## ...
## study13  -6.0594  0.3330  -18.1962 <.0001  -6.7121  -5.4067
## groupexp -0.7452  0.1860  -4.0057 <.0001  -1.1098  -0.3806
```

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## Example: BCG Vaccine against Tuberculosis

```
# fit model with random study effects
rma.mv(yi, vi, mods = ~ group, random = ~ 1 | study/group, data=dat2)

## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 26; method: REML)
## Variance Components:
##      estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed  factor
## sigma^2.1  1.9109  1.3824   13     no     study
## sigma^2.2  0.1720  0.4147   26     no     study/group
## Test for Residual Heterogeneity:
## QE(df = 24) = 5270.3863, p-val < .0001
## Model Results:
##
## estimate  se      zval  pval  ci.lb  ci.ub
## intrcpt  -4.0831  0.4050  -10.0826 <.0001  -4.8768  -3.2894
## groupexp -0.7566  0.1873  -4.0393 <.0001  -1.1238  -0.3895
```

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## Bivariate Model for Independent Groups

- with fixed study effects, *identical* to the standard RE model; often quite similar when using random study effects<sup>4</sup>
- fixed versus random study effects is a debated issue [8–10]
- most important: need to account for study-level differences

<sup>4</sup>Estimate of  $\tau^2$  (with fixed study effects) or  $\sigma_u^2$  (with random study effects) needs to be doubled to match the amount of heterogeneity from the standard RE model.

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## Dependent Sampling Errors

- when multiple estimates are computed for the *same subjects*, the sampling errors cannot be assumed to be independent
- can account for this by computing the covariance between dependent estimates (i.e., construct var-cov matrix of the  $\varepsilon_{ij}$ )
- note:** since we then have multiple estimates from the same study, this is an issue in addition to dependent random effects
- often multiple estimates reflect different constructs/outcomes
  - include outcome type as a fixed effect
  - allow the amount of heterogeneity to differ between types
- multivariate random-effects model:** [11,12]

$$y_{ij} = \mu_j + u_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where  $u_{ij} \sim N(0, G)$  and  $\varepsilon_{ij} \sim N(0, V)$

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## Example: Treatment for Periodontal Disease

- meta-analysis on the effectiveness of surgical versus non-surgical treatment for periodontal disease [12,13]
- included 5 trials that each measured two outcomes: probing depth (PD) and attachment level (AL)

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## Example: Treatment for Periodontal Disease

```
# examine the dataset
dat <- dat.berkey1998
dat
```

trial	author	year	ni	outcome	yi	vi	v1i	v2i
1	Pihlstrom et al.	1983	14	PD	0.47	0.0075	0.0075	0.0030
1	Pihlstrom et al.	1983	14	AL	-0.32	0.0077	0.0030	0.0077
2	Lindhe et al.	1982	15	PD	0.20	0.0057	0.0057	0.0009
2	Lindhe et al.	1982	15	AL	-0.60	0.0008	0.0009	0.0008
3	Knowles et al.	1979	78	PD	0.40	0.0021	0.0021	0.0007
3	Knowles et al.	1979	78	AL	-0.12	0.0014	0.0007	0.0014
4	Ramfjord et al.	1987	89	PD	0.26	0.0029	0.0029	0.0009
4	Ramfjord et al.	1987	89	AL	-0.31	0.0015	0.0009	0.0015
5	Becker et al.	1988	16	PD	0.56	0.0148	0.0148	0.0072
5	Becker et al.	1988	16	AL	-0.39	0.0304	0.0072	0.0304

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## Example: Treatment for Periodontal Disease

```
# construct the variance-covariance matrix of the observed outcomes
V <- vcalc(vi=1, cluster=author, rvars=c(v1i, v2i), data=dat)
V
##          1      2      3      4      5      6      ...      9      10
## 1 0.0075 0.0030 ... .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
## 2 0.0030 0.0077 ... .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
## 3 ... .. 0.0057 0.0009 ... .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
## 4 ... .. 0.0009 0.0008 ... .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
## 5 ... .. .. .. 0.0021 0.0007 ... .. .. .. .. ..
## 6 ... .. .. .. 0.0007 0.0014 ... .. .. .. .. ..
## . ... .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
## 9 ... .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. 0.0148 0.0072
## 10 ... .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. 0.0072 0.0304

# fit the multivariate model
res <- rma.mv(yi, V, mods = ~ outcome - 1, data = dat,
             random = ~ outcome | trial, struct = "UN")
res
```

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## Example: Treatment for Periodontal Disease

```
## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 10; method: REML)
##
## Variance Components:
##
## outer factor: trial (nlvls = 5)
## inner factor: outcome (nlvls = 2)
##
##          estim  sqrt  k.lv1  fixed  level
## tau^2.1  0.0327  0.1807    5     no    AL
## tau^2.2  0.0117  0.1083    5     no    PD
##
##          rho.AL  rho.PD  AL  PD
## AL           1         -   5
## PD 0.6088      1         no  -
##
## Model Results:
##
##          estimate    se    zval    pval    ci.lb    ci.ub
## outcomeAL -0.3392  0.0879  -3.8589  0.0001  -0.5115  -0.1669
## outcomePD  0.3534  0.0588  6.0057  <.0001  0.2381  0.4688
```

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## Example: Treatment for Periodontal Disease

```
# estimate the difference between the two pooled effects
predict(res, newmods=c(1,-1))

##      pred      se   ci.lb   ci.ub
## -0.6926 0.0744 -0.8384 -0.5469

# test the difference between the two pooled effects
anova(res, L=c(1,-1))

## Hypothesis:
## 1: outcomeAL - outcomePD = 0
##
##      estimate      se      zval      pval
## 1: -0.6926 0.0744 -9.3120 <.0001

# test the correlation among the true effects
res0 <- update(res, rho=0)
anova(res0, res)

##      df      AIC      BIC      AICc logLik      LRT      pval      QE
## Full   5 2.6165 3.0137 32.6165 3.6918          128.2267
## Reduced 4 1.5975 1.9153 14.9308 3.2012 0.9810 0.3219 128.2267
```

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## Dependent Sampling Errors

- when multiple groups are compared against a common comparator, need to account for dependent sampling errors

$$y_1 = y^{T_1} - y^C \quad \text{with} \quad \text{Var}[y_1] = \text{Var}[y^{T_1}] + \text{Var}[y^C]$$
$$y_2 = y^{T_2} - y^C \quad \text{with} \quad \text{Var}[y_2] = \text{Var}[y^{T_2}] + \text{Var}[y^C]$$

$$\text{Cov}[y_1, y_2] = \text{Var}[y^C]$$

- a common issue especially in network meta-analyses
- sidenote: as a rough approximation,  $\text{Cov}[y_1, y_2] \approx 1/n^C$

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## Dependent Sampling Errors

- problem:** computation of the covariance between the sampling errors requires information that is often not reported
- solution:** use an approximate var-cov matrix (as a working model) and then use cluster-robust inference methods [14]
- results will be similar when the working model is an adequate approximation to the data generating mechanism

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## Example: Association between Recidivism and Mental Health

- meta-analysis on the difference in recidivism between delinquent juveniles with/without a mental health disorder [15]
- results are given in terms of standardized mean differences, with positive values indicating a higher prevalence of recidivism in those with a mental health disorder
- multiple effect size estimates could be extracted from most studies (e.g., for different types of delinquent behaviors)
- but no information about the correlation among the estimates

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## Example: Association between Recidivism and Mental Health

```
# copy the dataset to dat
dat <- dat.assink2016

# assume a correlation of 0.7 for effect sizes corresponding to the same
# type of delinquent behavior and a correlation of 0.5 for effect sizes
# corresponding to different types of delinquent behavior
V <- vcalc(vi, cluster=study, type=delttype, obs=esid,
          data=dat, rho=c(0.7, 0.5))

# fit multilevel model using this approximate V matrix
res <- rma.mv(yi, V, random = ~ 1 | study/esid, data=dat)
res
```

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## Example: Association between Recidivism and Mental Health

```
## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 100; method: REML)
##
## Variance Components:
##
##      estim      sqrt  nlvls  fixed      factor
## sigma^2.1 0.0704 0.2654    17     no      study
## sigma^2.2 0.1508 0.3883   100     no  study/esid
##
## Test for Heterogeneity:
## Q(df = 99) = 840.9174, p-val < .0001
##
## Model Results:
##
##      estimate      se      zval      pval   ci.lb   ci.ub
## 0.3618 0.0933 3.8794 0.0001 0.1790 0.5446

# use cluster-robust inference methods
robust(res, cluster=study, clubSandwich=TRUE)
```

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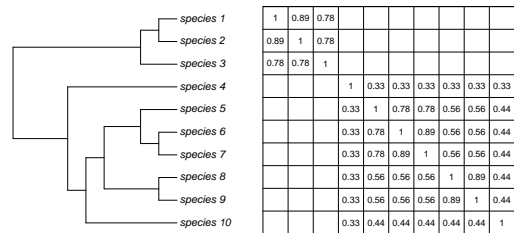
## Example: Association between Recidivism and Mental Health

```
## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 100; method: REML)
##
## Variance Components:
##
##          estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed  factor
## sigma^2.1  0.0704  0.2654   17    no    study
## sigma^2.2  0.1508  0.3883   100    no    study/esid
##
## Test for Heterogeneity:
## Q(df = 99) = 840.9174, p-val < .0001
##
## Model Results:
##
## estimate    se1  tval1  df1  pval1  ci.lb1  ci.ub1
## 0.3618  0.0938  3.8567  14.34  0.0017  0.1611  0.5626
##
## ---
## 1) results based on cluster-robust inference (var-cov estimator: CR2,
##    approx t-test and confidence interval, df: Satterthwaite approx)
```

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## Phylogenetic Meta-Analysis [16–19]

- meta-analyses in ecology and evolutionary biology often contain studies conducted with different species
- these species share an evolutionary history (= phylogeny)
- effects for species that are more similar to each other might also correlate more strongly

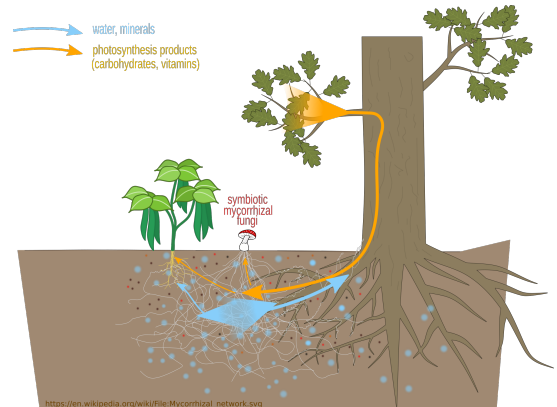


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## Example: Effects of Mycorrhizal Fungi Inoculation

- mycorrhiza are fungi that attach to the root of plants
- typically form a symbiotic relationships with their host (supplying the plant with water and minerals and receiving photosynthesis products in exchange)

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## Example: Effects of Mycorrhizal Fungi Inoculation

- as a result, plants often show improved growth and resistance to drought, diseases, and insects
- meta-analysis on the effects of inoculating plants with mycorrhizal fungi [20–22]
- focus here on plants inoculated with arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi belonging to one or more fungal genera (359 papers, 2984 effects, 1776 control conditions, 293 plant species)
- growth response in treatment vs. control groups quantified in terms of log transformed ratios of means (response ratios) [23]

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## Example: Effects of Mycorrhizal Fungi Inoculation

- model includes random effects for papers, control conditions, effect sizes, and plant species without and with its phylogenetic correlation matrix (and the covariance for estimates sharing a control condition)
- plant species are *crossed random effects* (a heightened or reduced response for a species should hold across studies)

```
rma.mv(EffectSize, V, data = dat,
       random = list(~ 1 | PaperID/ControlID/EffectID,
                    ~ 1 | PlantSpecies,
                    ~ 1 | PlantSpecies.phyl),
       R = list(PlantSpecies.phyl=R.PS))
```

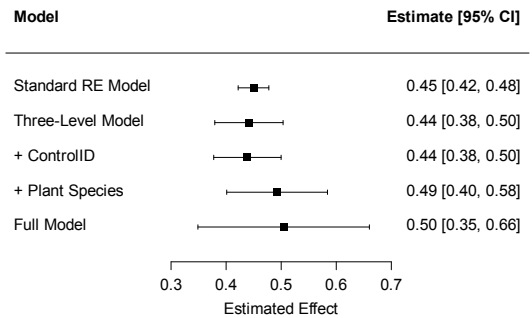
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## Example: Effects of Mycorrhizal Fungi Inoculation

```
## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 2984; method: REML)
##
## Variance Components:
##
##      estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed      factor  R
## sigma^2.1 0.1799 0.4242  359    no      PaperID no
## sigma^2.2 0.1434 0.3786 1776    no      ControlID no
## sigma^2.3 0.1224 0.3498 2984    no      EffectID no
## sigma^2.4 0.1618 0.4023  293    no      PlantSpecies no
## sigma^2.5 0.1000 0.3162  293    no      PlantSpecies.phyl yes
##
## Test for Heterogeneity:
## Q(df = 2983) = 66515.4758, p-val < .0001
##
## Model Results:
##
## estimate      se      zval      pval      ci.lb      ci.ub
## 0.5051 0.0791 6.3858 <.0001 0.3501 0.6601
```

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## Example: Effects of Mycorrhizal Fungi Inoculation



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## Example: Generation Effect

- meta-analysis on the 'generation effect' (= information is better remembered if it is generated from one's own mind rather than simply read) [24]
- a study might ask participants to recall words that were read vs. words self-generated from word fragments
- studies often report multiple experiments and examine various conditions using a mix of within- and between-subject designs

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## Example: Generation Effect

Article	Experiment	Sample	Pairing	Condition	Id	Recall
1	1	1	1	read	1	0.31
1	1	2	1	generate	2	0.45
2	1	3	2	read	3	0.45
2	1	3	2	generate	4	0.61
3	1	4	3	read	5	0.61
3	1	4	3	generate	6	0.72
3	1	4	3	generate	7	0.95
4	1	5	4	read	8	0.28
4	1	5	4	generate	9	0.38
4	1	6	5	read	10	0.36
4	1	6	5	generate	11	0.55
...	...	...	...	...	...	...

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## Example: Generation Effect

- dataset included 126 articles reporting on 310 experiments with 582 samples, yielding 1653 recall estimates for 804 pairings
- model includes random effects for articles, experiments, samples, estimates, and a crossed random effect for pairing
- so a five-level model with an additional crossed random effect

```
rma.mv(Recall, Var, data = dat,
      mods = ~ Condition,
      random = list(~ 1 | article/exp/sample/id,
                   ~ 1 | pairing))
```

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## Example: Generation Effect

```
## Multivariate Meta-Analysis Model (k = 1653; method: REML)
##
## Variance Components:
##
##      estim  sqrt  nlvls  fixed      factor
## sigma^2.1 0.0219 0.1479  126    no      Article
## sigma^2.2 0.0060 0.0777  310    no      Experiment
## sigma^2.3 0.0000 0.0000  582    no      Sample
## sigma^2.4 0.0064 0.0798 1653    no      Id
## sigma^2.5 0.0165 0.1285  804    no      Pairing
##
## [...]
##
## Model Results:
##
## estimate      se      zval      pval      ci.lb      ci.ub
## intrcpt 0.4785 0.0157 30.4456 <.0001 0.4477 0.5093
## generate 0.1021 0.0042 24.0422 <.0001 0.0938 0.1104
```

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## Summary of Considerations

- want to account for potential heterogeneity at each level
- there should be a random effect at the estimate level
- when modeling arm-level outcomes, need to include fixed/random effect for studies (contrasts/pairings)
- when multiple groups are compared against a common comparator, need to account for dependent sampling errors (can avoid this issue by modeling arm-level outcomes)
- when multiple estimates are computed for the same subjects, need to account for dependent sampling errors
- cluster-robust inference methods can be a remedy when we know that the working model is inaccurate

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# Thank You for Your Attention!

Questions, Comments, Suggestions?

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