

2.1: Introduction to Psychological Measurement

The first thing to understand is data collection can be thought of as a kind of **measurement**. That is, what we're trying to do here is measure something about human behaviour or the human mind. What do I mean by "measurement"?

2.1.1 Some thoughts about psychological measurement

Measurement itself is a subtle concept, but basically it comes down to finding some way of assigning numbers, or labels, or some other kind of well-defined descriptions to "stuff". So, any of the following would count as a psychological measurement:

- My **age** is 33 years.
- I *do not like anchovies*.
- My **chromosomal gender** is *male*.
- My **self-identified gender** is *male*.⁷

In the short list above, the **bolded part** is "the thing to be measured", and the *italicised part* is "the measurement itself". In fact, we can expand on this a little bit, by thinking about the set of possible measurements that could have arisen in each case:

- My **age** (in years) could have been 0, 1, 2, 3 ..., etc. The upper bound on what my age could possibly be is a bit fuzzy, but in practice you'd be safe in saying that the largest possible age is 150, since no human has ever lived that long.
- When asked if I **like anchovies**, I might have said that I *do*, or I *do not*, or I *have no opinion*, or I *sometimes do*.
- My **chromosomal gender** is almost certainly going to be *male (XY)* or *female (XX)*, but there are a few other possibilities. I could also have *Klinefelter's syndrome (XXY)*, which is more similar to male than to female. And I imagine there are other possibilities too.
- My **self-identified gender** is also very likely to be *male* or *female*, but it doesn't have to agree with my chromosomal gender. I may also choose to identify with *neither*, or to explicitly call myself *transgender*.

As you can see, for some things (like age) it seems fairly obvious what the set of possible measurements should be, whereas for other things it gets a bit tricky. But I want to point out that even in the case of someone's age, it's much more subtle than this. For instance, in the example above, I assumed that it was okay to measure age in years. But if you're a developmental psychologist, that's way too crude, and so you often measure age in *years and months* (if a child is 2 years and 11 months, this is usually written as "2;11"). If you're interested in newborns, you might want to measure age in *days since birth*, maybe even *hours since birth*. In other words, the way in which you specify the allowable measurement values is important.

Looking at this a bit more closely, you might also realise that the concept of "age" isn't actually all that precise. In general, when we say "age" we implicitly mean "the length of time since birth". But that's not always the right way to do it. Suppose you're interested in how newborn babies control their eye movements. If you're interested in kids that young, you might also start to worry that "birth" is not the only meaningful point in time to care about. If Baby Alice is born 3 weeks premature and Baby Bianca is born 1 week late, would it really make sense to say that they are the "same age" if we encountered them "2 hours after birth"? In one sense, yes: by social convention, we use birth as our reference point for talking about age in everyday life, since it defines the amount of time the person has been operating as an independent entity in the world, but from a scientific perspective that's not the only thing we care about. When we think about the biology of human beings, it's often useful to think of ourselves as organisms that have been growing and maturing since conception, and from that perspective Alice and Bianca aren't the same age at all. So you might want to define the concept of "age" in two different ways: the length of time since conception, and the length of time since birth. When dealing with adults, it won't make much difference, but when dealing with newborns it might.

Moving beyond these issues, there's the question of methodology. What specific "measurement method" are you going to use to find out someone's age? As before, there are lots of different possibilities:

- You could just ask people "how old are you?" The method of self-report is fast, cheap and easy, but it only works with people old enough to understand the question, and some people lie about their age.
- You could ask an authority (e.g., a parent) "how old is your child?" This method is fast, and when dealing with kids it's not all that hard since the parent is almost always around. It doesn't work as well if you want to know "age since conception", since a lot of parents can't say for sure when conception took place. For that, you might need a different authority (e.g., an obstetrician).
- You could look up official records, like birth certificates. This is time consuming and annoying, but it has its uses (e.g., if the person is now dead).

2.1.2 Operationalisation: defining your measurement

All of the ideas discussed in the previous section all relate to the concept of **operationalisation**. To be a bit more precise about the idea, operationalisation is the process by which we take a meaningful but somewhat vague concept, and turn it into a precise measurement. The process of operationalisation can involve several different things:

- Being precise about what you are trying to measure. For instance, does “age” mean “time since birth” or “time since conception” in the context of your research?
- Determining what method you will use to measure it. Will you use self-report to measure age, ask a parent, or look up an official record? If you’re using self-report, how will you phrase the question?
- Defining the set of the allowable values that the measurement can take. Note that these values don’t always have to be numerical, though they often are. When measuring age, the values are numerical, but we still need to think carefully about what numbers are allowed. Do we want age in years, years and months, days, hours? Etc. For other types of measurements (e.g., gender), the values aren’t numerical. But, just as before, we need to think about what values are allowed. If we’re asking people to self-report their gender, what options do we allow them to choose between? Is it enough to allow only “male” or “female”? Do you need an “other” option? Or should we not give people any specific options, and let them answer in their own words? And if you open up the set of possible values to include all verbal response, how will you interpret their answers?

Operationalisation is a tricky business, and there’s no “one, true way” to do it. The way in which you choose to operationalise the informal concept of “age” or “gender” into a formal measurement depends on what you need to use the measurement for. Often you’ll find that the community of scientists who work in your area have some fairly well-established ideas for how to go about it. In other words, operationalisation needs to be thought through on a case by case basis. Nevertheless, while there are a lot of issues that are specific to each individual research project, there are some aspects to it that are pretty general.

Before moving on, I want to take a moment to clear up our terminology, and in the process introduce one more term. Here are four different things that are closely related to each other:

- **A theoretical construct.** This is the thing that you’re trying to take a measurement of, like “age”, “gender” or an “opinion”. A theoretical construct can’t be directly observed, and often they’re actually a bit vague.
- **A measure.** The measure refers to the method or the tool that you use to make your observations. A question in a survey, a behavioural observation or a brain scan could all count as a measure.
- **An operationalisation.** The term “operationalisation” refers to the logical connection between the measure and the theoretical construct, or to the process by which we try to derive a measure from a theoretical construct.
- **A variable.** Finally, a new term. A variable is what we end up with when we apply our measure to something in the world. That is, variables are the actual “data” that we end up with in our data sets.

In practice, even scientists tend to blur the distinction between these things, but it’s very helpful to try to understand the differences.

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