

10.2: Research Questions about Independent Means

Many research ideas in the behavioral sciences and other areas of research are concerned with whether or not two means are the same or different. Logically, we therefore say that these research questions are concerned with group mean differences. That is, on average, do we expect a person from Group A to be higher or lower on some variable than a person from Group B. In any time of research design looking at group mean differences, there are some key criteria we must consider: the groups must be mutually exclusive (i.e. you can only be part of one group at any given time) and the groups have to be measured on the same variable (i.e. you can't compare personality in one group to reaction time in another group since those values would not be the same anyway).

Let's look at one of the most common and logical examples: testing a new medication. When a new medication is developed, the researchers who created it need to demonstrate that it effectively treats the symptoms they are trying to alleviate. The simplest design that will answer this question involves two groups: one group that receives the new medication (the "treatment" group) and one group that receives a placebo (the "control" group). Participants are randomly assigned to one of the two groups (remember that random assignment is the hallmark of a true experiment), and the researchers test the symptoms in each person in each group after they received either the medication or the placebo. They then calculate the average symptoms in each group and compare them to see if the treatment group did better (i.e. had fewer or less severe symptoms) than the control group.

In this example, we had two groups: treatment and control. Membership in these two groups was mutually exclusive: each individual participant received either the experimental medication or the placebo. No one in the experiment received both, so there was no overlap between the two groups. Additionally, each group could be measured on the same variable: symptoms related to the disease or ailment being treated. Because each group was measured on the same variable, the average scores in each group could be meaningfully compared. If the treatment was ineffective, we would expect that the average symptoms of someone receiving the treatment would be the same as the average symptoms of someone receiving the placebo (i.e. there is no difference between the groups). However, if the treatment WAS effective, we would expect fewer symptoms from the treatment group, leading to a lower group average.

Now let's look at an example using groups that already exist. A common, and perhaps salient, question is how students feel about their job prospects after graduation. Suppose that we have narrowed our potential choice of college down to two universities and, in the course of trying to decide between the two, we come across a survey that has data from each university on how students at those universities feel about their future job prospects. As with our last example, we have two groups: University A and University B, and each participant is in only one of the two groups (assuming there are no transfer students who were somehow able to rate both universities). Because students at each university completed the same survey, they are measuring the same thing, so we can use a t -test to compare the average perceptions of students at each university to see if they are the same. If they are the same, then we should continue looking for other things about each university to help us decide on where to go. But, if they are different, we can use that information in favor of the university with higher job prospects.

As we can see, the grouping variable we use for an independent samples t -test can be a set of groups we create (as in the experimental medication example) or groups that already exist naturally (as in the university example). There are countless other examples of research questions relating to two group means, making the independent samples t -test one of the most widely used analyses around.

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