Roundtable Mediation Analysis

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Mediation is often of interest to social science researchers. A theoretical premise posits an intervening variable, an indicative measure of the process through which an independent variable is thought to impact a dependent variable. This roundtable provides the opportunity to clarify some misperceptions and confusions about how to test for mediation effects.

Without question, the most popular means of testing for mediation is the procedure offered by Baron and Kenny (1986). We’ll begin by reviewing their classic approach. In their enormously influential paper, Baron and Kenny presented a series of tests to be conducted via regression models. We will review those techniques, and demonstrate that in a database of the JCR articles that contain mediation analyses, most analyses were not conducted properly. Oops. Even had they been, the state of the art has moved beyond Baron and Kenny’s regression tests. That is, we absolutely agree that their approach has been hugely impactful, but the methodological literature also recognizes that the approach has shortcomings, and is no longer state-of-the-art. More contemporary methodology allows for superior tests of intervening variable effects. We will present some results of simulations to illustrate the conditions under which results obtained using the older methods might be particularly misleading. We provide a tutorial of how to test for mediation, presenting exactly those analytical steps to take and the precise results to report. Don’t worry, it’s easy!

We plan to raise issues regarding experimental vs. correlational data, cross-sectional vs. longitudinal data, the meaning of “causality” and the central need for strong theoretical defenses of mediation, issues of measurement error and complex inter-construct relationships, yep, a.k.a. “nomological nets.” Of key importance, we will discuss the statistical issues regarding the proper assessments of mediation parameter estimates and indices to capture the phenomena.

We conclude by suggesting that mediation analyses are probably conducted more frequently than need be, but for those scholars who wish to do so, we offer clear prescriptions as to the steps to take to support or negate the premise of a mediator. In reviewing the logic of mediation as a concept, we suggest that many times a researcher should simply forgo a test of mediation.

References