



Bringing Research Design Back In

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The choice of variables that are adjusted for in a statistical analysis is the single most important aspect in x-centered research designs. The choice of this “adjustment set” first and foremost depends the parameter of interest itself. It is thus impossible to make an informed choice without clearly defining the parameter of interest. Secondly, the choice of the adjustment set depends on assumptions about the causal relations between the covariates (as opposed to the associations between the covariates and the outcome). These assumptions should be thus made stand out. Thirdly, the choice of the adjustment set depend on the covariate of interest. It is thus usually not sensible to interpret more than one coefficient in a statistical model.

A review of all x-centered research papers published in the *European Sociological Review* in 2016 and 2017 ($N = 118$) shows that the vast majority of papers use insufficient reasoning for the adjustment set. Particularly, only a minority of papers clearly define the parameter of interest and disclose their assumptions about the causal relations between the covariates. In consequence, a huge number of papers interpret several coefficients of their models as if they had the same meaning. We conclude that the ritualized research design in sociological papers can be best described as an immunization strategy.