

## Who likes sex?

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As a variable? Plenty of people. Even now, I'm afraid.

Lee Sechrest's paper was written in the 1990s. So far as I am aware, it has not been published. He handed it to those of us fortunate enough to take one of his graduate level courses at the University of Arizona. In the article, he illustrates—using few words—the problem associated with the use of proxy variables, namely that most of the time those variables are not the construct you wish to measure, and they may only be loosely connected to that construct.

I don't want to say much else. Lee made the case better than I (or possibly anybody else) could. However, I felt it was my duty to point out an egregious abuse of proxy variables, which Lee may have been aware of.

In 2010, an anthropologist (Joseph Henrich) and two psychologists (Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan) published their target article "The weirdest people in the world?" in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. In the article and in their response, the authors argued that a) most published psychology research relied on samples of people from Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic nations<sup>i</sup>, and b) the underlying assumption—that there are human universals—is false. Ergo, psychologists and other behavioral scientists should spend more time studying other human populations.

I am not alone in thinking that encouraging researchers to study diverse populations is a terrific idea. Since being published, the article has been cited over 7000 times. Many students where I taught were taken by the idea. Some psychology journals gave extra leeway in judging whether to publish manuscripts on these other populations.

In practice, however, there is a problem—there are many problems—with the approach that Henrich and his colleagues promote. Even if studies that compare [acronym omitted] populations to non-[acronym omitted] populations were 'perfect', *nothing* about human nature can be learned by such studies. This is clear when one considers that it is impossible with these studies to determine which, if any, features of typically studied populations explain differences that researchers may find. Likewise, this approach makes it impossible to identify mechanisms that lead from some subset of these five features to findings that end up in textbooks. This dog's breakfast becomes even more unappetizing when one considers that, with few exceptions, the other populations do not differ in all five ways from those

typically studied. Japan, for instance, is non-Western, but it is educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic.

The answer to this problem, that is, a way to go beyond description and to explanation, is spelled out in Lee's paper, which Mende Davis has been kind enough to reproduce here.

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<sup>i</sup> Nature abhors an acronym (NAA), and so other than DNA, RNA, *g*, and ANOVA, I resist the temptation to use them in my writing.