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Deception, Efficiency, and Random Groups

Psychology and the Gradual Origination of the Random Group Design

By Trudy Dehue*

ABSTRACT

In the life sciences, psychology, and large parts of the other social sciences, the ideal experiment is a comparative experiment with randomly composed experimental and control groups. Historians and practitioners of these sciences generally attribute the invention of this “random group design” to the statistician R. A. Fisher, who developed it in the 1930s for agricultural research. This essay argues that the random group design was advanced in psychology before Fisher introduced it in agriculture and that in this context it was the unplanned outcome of a lengthy historical process rather than the instantaneous creation of a single genius. The article analyzes how the random group design came about bit by bit when methodological practices from nineteenth-century psychophysical laboratories were gradually adapted, extended, and codified by twentieth-century educational psychologists to support procedural objectivity in educational administration. In passing, the article also amends the received historiography of the separate elements of randomization and control groups.

To contemporary students of the life sciences, psychology, and large parts of the other social sciences, comparative experimentation with randomly composed control and experimental groups is the standard against which all other research designs are measured. For studies without a control group, or without chance allocation of subjects to groups, the authoritative methodologist Donald T. Campbell introduced the

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qualification quasi experiments. Methodologically trained reviewers of such experiments habitually seek alternative variables to explain the reported results.

The random group experiment achieved the status of an exemplar largely through Ronald A. Fisher’s 1935 methodological handbook The Design of Experiments. In the 1920s and 1930s Fisher, a statistician and biometrician, was employed in an agricultural research station at Rothamstead in England. There he designed research strategies for discovering the causes of observed crop variations or studying the effects of particular treatments. He proposed that experimental groups of plants or plots of land should be subjected to a treatment (say, supply of nitrogen) and subsequently compared to an untreated control group. In order to balance out other—possibly contaminating—differences between the groups (e.g., humidity of the soil, quantity of light), Fisher argued, the experimental and control groups should be randomly composed.

Although working researchers gradually came to regard comparing randomly composed groups as the ideal experiment, the design did not remain undisputed among specialists in statistics. The value of randomization, in particular, was already challenged in the 1930s. Opponents of Fisher, like W. S. Gosset, alias “Student,” contended that when causes of variation or effects of treatments are studied, there is more profit in considering beforehand what factors might contaminate the research results. The items to be investigated should be paired or “matched,” as it is still called today. Pairs equal on each possible contaminating factor are formed; then one item from each pair is assigned to the experimental group and the other to the control group. Thus every relevant factor apart from the condition under experimental consideration is presumed to occur equally in both groups. Proponents of matching held that this strategy of equalizing the groups is both more reliable and more informative than that of randomization. Fisher, however, stressed that it is impossible to make groups comparable by matching: researchers, if pressed, can usually think up many more contaminating factors than those for which they can create equal pairs; moreover, more factors than they can possibly imagine may play a part in even the simplest experiment—and any one of those factors might be responsible for an experimental effect. Fisher believed that careful randomization offers a far better guarantee that contaminating differences between groups will be excluded.

I will not venture into such specialists’ debates on the methodological merits of ran-

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1 Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966). Many comparable expressions have also been in circulation. As early as 1945, the sociologist Ernest Greenwood listed adjectives like substitute, semi, tentative, partial, uncontrolled, and indirect for experiments without control groups; see Ernest Greenwood, Experimental Sociology: A Study in Method (New York: King’s Crown, 1945), pp. 11–12, 14.


3 An early and very clear presentation of the idea of matching was given by Francis Galton in 1872. Doubting the positive effects of piety, Galton proposed to settle the issue empirically. He explained that “the principles are broad and simple. We must gather cases for statistical comparison, in which the same object is keenly pursued by two classes similar in their physical but opposite in their spiritual state; the one class being spiritual, the other materialistic. Prudent pious people must be compared with prudent materialistic people and not with the imprudent nor the vicious. . . . We simply look for the final result—whether those who pray attain their objects more frequently than those who do not pray, but who live in all other respects under similar conditions”: Francis Galton, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” Fortnightly Review, 1872, 12:124–135, on p. 126. An abridged version of this research proposal was printed in Galton, Inquiry into Human Faculty and Its Development (New York: Macmillan, 1883), pp. 277–294, on p. 278.
domization. This essay discusses the historical background of the random group design. Many credit Fisher not just with its dissemination, but also with its invention. I argue, however, that the random group design was advanced in psychology before Fisher introduced it in agriculture and that in this context it was the unplanned outcome of a lengthy historical process rather than the instantaneous creation of a single genius. The essay considers how the random group design came about bit by bit, as methodological practices from nineteenth-century psychophysical laboratories were gradually adapted, extended, and codified by twentieth-century educational psychologists to support procedural objectivity in educational administration. In passing, it also amends the received historiography of the separate elements of randomization and control groups.

RANDOMIZATION IN PSYCHOPHYSICS

Between 1845 and 1849, the German scholar Gustav Fechner lifted his arms with a weight in each hand over sixty-seven thousand times. After each lifting, Fechner meticulously wrote down whether he had been able to tell the heavier weight from the lighter one. Thus he tried to establish the relationship between the weights as measured and the weights as perceived—that is, between physical stimuli and mental sensations. Using the “difference threshold” or “just noticeable difference” as an accounting unit, Fechner arrived at a formula expressing a logarithmic relation of increase in stimulus and increase in sensation.

In Fechner’s time, a claim to measure anything as subjective as human sensation was an impressive novelty. Soon the “psychophysical research” he initiated became a craze. Innumerable psychophysical experiments were conducted in biology, in physiology, and, particularly, in the newly established psychological laboratories at European and American universities. Countless weights were lifted, and Fechner’s so-called method of right and wrong cases was employed for testing other senses as well. A popular variation was touching the skin with two pins at a particular distance and trying to establish the relationship between the actual distance and the distance as perceived. The differential sensitivities of foreheads and chins, shoulders and fingers, hips, bellies, legs, knees, and ankles were extensively discussed. Experimenters would complain about sensitive and scaly skins and would apologetically argue that 5,710 pricks should suffice to prove a point.
Possible sources of experimental bias were also considered. Thus, in the early 1870s, researchers at the Physiological Institute in Tübingen reasoned that knowing the pins’ distance in previous trials might give rise to particular expectations about the next trials and that such expectations might bias the results. Some psychophysical researchers held that skilled subjects were able to avoid forming expectations, but the Tübingen experimenters decided not to rely on this ability. They concluded that it takes two to experiment: stimulations were to be administered by an assistant (Experimentator) to an observer (Beobachter) kept ignorant as to the actual distances of the pins. The Tübingen group also reasoned that the observer’s expectations should be thwarted by secretly inserting control or “deception” trials (Vexirversuche) in which only one pin was used. And, most significant for the purposes of this essay, they decided to administer the trials with different distances—including the control or deception trials with only one pin (i.e., zero distance)—in irregular order (in buntem Wechsel).  

In 1879 the psychophysicist Georg E. Müller, at the time Privatdozent at Göttingen, published a well-received methodological treatise entitled “Über die Maßbestimmungen des Ortsinnes der Haut mittels der Methode der richtig und falschen Falle [On establishing the space-sensibility of the skin employing the method of right and wrong cases].” Whereas the Tübingen researchers had mentioned their method of irregular order only in passing, Müller, expressly praising them for the idea, emphasized that stimuli should always be administered in buntem Wechsel. In several other writings Müller and his students elaborated upon the methodological condition of irregularity.

With the separation of the roles of the experimenter and the observer, Fechner’s original one-man job was distributed between two parties. The experimenter, who used to pick the stimuli, administer them, and observe the sensations, had been discharged from the third

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Figure 1. The Tübingen experimenters in the 1870s used pins fixed on wooden blocks, but by the turn of the century standardized "aesthesiometers" were available from the Leipzig firm E. Zimmerman. The instrument with three pins was specially designed for experiments with "deception trials" in which the "observer" was secretly touched at only one point every now and then. (Courtesy Archives of Dutch Psychology, Groningen.)

task. (See Figure 2.) In an 1884 presentation, "On Small Differences of Sensation," the American scholar Charles Sanders Peirce introduced a further division of functions by also relieving the experimenter of the job of picking the stimuli. Whereas the German researchers did not describe any ways of establishing irregularity and apparently relied on the experimenter's independent ability to achieve a truly arbitrary selection, in the experiments conducted by Peirce and his student Joseph Jastrow the sequence of the trials was carefully randomized with the help of two packs of playing cards. In "A Critique of Psychophysic Methods," published in 1887, Jastrow suggested that one could also throw dice.

In 1903 Müller, who had become the distinguished head of the psychophysical labo-

10 For an instructive discussion of the social implications of this change see Danziger, Constructing the Subject (cit. n. 7), pp. 27–32. Children were sometimes used as observers because they were believed to have a stronger tactile sense than adults. See, e.g., W. Camerer, "Versuche über den Raumsinn er Haut bei Kindern angestellt an der obern Extremität nach der Methode der richtigen und falschen Fälle," Z. Biol., 1881, 17:1–22; and F. B. Dresslar, "Studies in the Psychology of Touch," American Journal of Psychology, 1894, 6:313–368.
ratory at Göttingen, also recommended this division of the experimental tasks. In order to make sure that stimuli really are administered "auf ganz zufälliger Weise" (in a completely accidental way), Müller suggested, the researchers should write all the stimulus values—including those for the controlling deception trials—on pieces of paper and draw one of them before each trial. Müller's procedure was adopted by Edward B. Titchener, of Cornell, for his 1905 student's manual for psychophysical research.¹²

**RANDOMIZATION IN PSYCHICAL RESEARCH**

Randomization of stimulus order can also be found in early parapsychological, or psychical, research. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, several prominent psychophysicists engaged in psychical experimentation, mostly in hope of unmasking claims of telepathy and the like or of proving physical explanations for alleged psychical phenomena.

Ever since, randomization has been a central issue in this kind of research, as well as in debates about the credibility of its positive results.\textsuperscript{13}

The origins of randomization in psychical research have been analyzed by Ian Hacking. In his fascinating and authoritative “Telepathy: Origins of Randomization in Experimental Design,” Hacking argued that psychical research was the context for the very first “faltering use” of randomization. Hence, he also reasoned, psychical research is the seemingly implausible origin of the present-day “ideal design” with randomly composed experimental and control groups.\textsuperscript{14}

Hacking’s historical reconstruction began with a meticulous account of Peirce and Jastrow’s experiments. He emphasized that Peirce was not a mainstream psychophysicist, for he wanted to refute rather than confirm the common psychophysical thesis that stimulus differences can no longer be perceived once they drop below an alleged “just noticeable difference.” Peirce suspected that in fact sensorial accuracy decreases gradually and that very small sensorial impressions are still perceived in a subliminal way. At the beginning of “On Small Differences of Sensation,” Peirce and Jastrow classified their experiments as belonging to “physiological psychology,” but Hacking drew attention to the end of the text. In the final paragraph the authors suggested that their evidence of subliminal perception may explain “the insight of females as well as certain ‘telepathic’ phenomena.”\textsuperscript{15} Apart from disproving the notion of an absolute difference threshold, Hacking concluded, Peirce wanted to unmask pretentious or mysterious claims of female intuition or thought transference.

Hacking also discussed an 1885 publication by the Parisian neurophysiologist Charles Richet, who tested the ability of subjects to improve on chance in guessing the color of playing cards that they had not seen, at least not with their bodily eyes. Richet took meticulous care that the cards were randomly chosen. Hacking’s main document, however, was an extensive 1917 research report by John Edgar Coover of the psychology department of Stanford University. In Coover’s experiments on thought transference, an “agent” picked a playing card and tried to “transfer” it to a “reagent” who had to tell what card was selected. The cards were randomly drawn; and, most important, misleading control trials were randomly inserted in which the reagent was asked to guess the card though in fact the agent had neither looked at a drawn card nor tried to transfer a card.\textsuperscript{16}
Hacking convincingly demonstrated, then, that psychical research was an important context for the early rise of experimental randomization. Nonetheless, I would point to psychophysics rather than psychical research as the primary context. After all, Peirce and Jastrow themselves described their experiments as contributions to psychophysics; Richet is known to have combined psychical with psychophysical interests; and Hacking’s prime witness Coover both received his research training in psychophysics and conducted his psychical experiments in a psychology department specializing primarily in psychophysical research. Moreover, as has already been shown, Coover’s way of combining randomization with misleading control trials was quite common in early psychophysics.

In themselves, debates on the exact origins of an idea or practice mostly involve trivial hairsplitting. It is not just to set the historical record straight, then, that I begin my account of the history of the random group design with psychophysical experimentation rather than the closely related field of psychical research. In the psychophysical and psychical experiments described so far, randomization was applied to determine the order of experimental conditions: the same subjects were exposed to both the experimental and the control conditions. In the current ideal design, however, randomization is used to compose experimental and control groups: different subjects (people, animals, plants, plots of land, etc.) are randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control groups. As I will show, from a historical point of view it is crucial not to overlook this difference between random ordering and random grouping. The transition from the first kind of randomization to the second involved much more than a single obvious step (which, as Hacking’s analysis implies, must still be attributed solely to Fisher). The combination of randomization and grouping in psychology was an outcome of an intricate historical trajectory. Tracing this trajectory makes visible the vital part played by social administration in the early creation of the random group design.

In order to present this extended story, I must first discuss yet another aspect of nineteenth-century psychophysical experimentation that would become part of the methodological tradition in which the design eventually came about. I will subsequently show how methodological elements from psychophysics were integrated in a set of methodological routines that offered the support of procedural objectivity to early twentieth-century management. Attempts to enhance educational efficiency and the trustworthiness of educational data led, first, to the idea of installing a separate control group for the nonstimulus control condition and, later, to use of the older technique of randomization to ensure the comparability of the control and experimental groups. Finally, I will recount how psychologists disseminated the ideal of the random group design—implemented, from the 1930s, with the help of Fisher’s statistical methods—in other social sciences as the best tool for testing...
the effectiveness of a wide range of administrative regulations. Research on thought-transference will be further integrated as part of this larger account.

THE TRANSFER OF TRAINING PHENOMENON

The psychophysicists’ methodological worries did not end with experimental bias due to expectations caused by fixed sequences of the stimuli. A related factor suspected of causing contamination was called “habituation” or “training.” As early as the 1850s, there were reports of striking decreases of the threshold of perception that occurred simply because the subjects were trained. In the pinprick experiments, switching stimulus application to the other arm or leg did not solve this problem of the unstable threshold, as the increased sensitivity seemed to transfer automatically to other parts of the body, particularly to symmetrical parts.18

By the end of the century, experiments on this so-called transfer of training phenomenon were conducted as intensively as was research on the transfer of thoughts elsewhere. Formerly a suspected source of bias, the transfer effect had itself become a psychophysical issue. As researchers looked beyond the refinement of sensory discrimination, subjects were asked to thrust needles through small holes with one hand and then checked for improvement in the other hand, or trained in tapping with the right big toe and checked for transfer to the left big toe.19

One imagines distinguished men, in suits or white coats, sitting on wooden laboratory chairs and concentrating intently on their bare feet. It should be noted, though, that these experiments had a specific aspect in common with the present-day random group experiment that the former experiments had not. Whereas the transfer of training experiments were designed to establish the effects of an intervention, the pinprick and psychical trials had been conducted “just” to prove or disprove the existence of particular phenomena such as the lawlike relationship of stimuli and sensations or the truth of telepathy. To put it another way: whereas in the former experiments the subjects were not tested for improvement of their capacities in thought transference or skin sensibility, the transfer of training experiments were meant for drawing causal conclusions. With a slight anachronism, one could say that in the latter cases the result of a particular treatment was at issue.

The present-day ideal for evaluating treatments is comparison of randomly composed experimental and control groups, but in these early training experiments no control groups were employed and (if only for that reason) subjects were not randomly assigned to groups. Causal inferences were drawn from simple comparison of the subjects’ results before and after training. For instance, first the left hand’s ability was recorded, then the right hand was trained, and finally the left hand’s improvement was established. Likewise, first one


big toe’s pliancy was examined, then the other one was trained, and subsequently the untrained one was tested again. Nevertheless, such experiments would become significant for the earliest applications of random grouping.

TRANSFER AS AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

It is important to note that America was in its much-described Progressive Era, a large-scale movement for social and political reform launched at the end of the nineteenth century. Liberal laissez-faire politics was widely rejected; instead, people called for centralized government intervention in social and economic affairs. The state was given responsibility for the welfare of the citizenry, and administrative agencies were installed to plan and steer social progress. Moreover, it was strongly felt that, rather than being based on personal intuitions, administrative measures should be grounded on carefully collected facts and subjected to standardized evaluation of their effectiveness.

This movement for social amelioration through government and technoscientific intervention also made its way into education. Administrators came to look upon learning ability as a natural resource to be discovered and exploited as efficiently and economically as possible; they called for impersonal, standardized assessment of individual capacities and educational approaches. As part of the “cult of efficiency” in education, American psychology found a major area of application. Its research interest in mental phenomena was translated into an interest in mental capacities. The most notorious locus of this interest was the network, amounting to an “Educational Trust,” created by psychologists at Stanford University in California with their colleagues at New York’s Columbia University. Under the undisputed leadership of the Columbia psychologist Edward L. Thorndike, quantities of data were gathered on behalf of scientific management in education.

From the very beginning, the Stanford-Columbia network attributed practical value to the classical psychophysical transfer of training experiments. Not much time was spent on the transferability of left to right big-toe pliancy, but the psychophysical issue of transfer attracted attention in the context of a debate on “formal discipline”—that is, on the teaching
of subjects such as mathematics and Latin. Some educators, arguing that these subjects train the mind, strengthening general mental capacities, argued that they should be taught even to students who would never use the material as such. This viewpoint hearkened back to work on the phenomenon of transfer: the question arose whether, like sensorimotor functions, cognitive abilities acquired in one context would automatically transfer to related areas. Thus the phenomenon of transfer, which had first been investigated in psychophysical laboratories as a source of experimental bias and had then become an interesting issue in its own right, now became a matter of educational management and control. Simultaneously, the responses of experimental subjects, formerly seen as neutral reports of inner sensations or memories, became expressions of personal achievement to be compared to other subjects’ performance. Responses were now transformed into “test scores,” whereas the stimuli became “trainings.”

A quite early example of the new orientation is offered by a series of articles published in 1901 by Thorndike and his colleague Robert S. Woodworth. Thorndike and Woodworth considered the notion of formal discipline under the telling title “Influence of Improvement in One Mental Function upon the Efficiency of Other Functions,” which clearly displays both the inheritance from psychophysics and the instrumental turn psychology was taking. Their experimental design was borrowed directly from the psychophysical transfer experiments. For instance, they first tested a given function, like estimating weights or marking misspelled words; trained their subjects on a slightly different function, like estimating other weights and marking other misspelled words; and then repeated the first test. As in traditional psychophysical experiments, the same experimental subjects were tested both before and after the training was given.

In contemporary social science research methodology this design is called the “one-group pretest-posttest design”; it is discussed only to illustrate a series of “threats to validity.” A common objection is that the pretest may also act as a form of training: anyone who takes the same test twice is likely to do better the second time. Besides, methodologists point out, in the period between administration of the first and second tests, events other than the treatment may occur that might influence a subject’s performance on the second test. It was in order to avoid these problems that—in 1907—the control group was introduced. Interestingly, it seems to have been John Edgar Coover—saved from historical oblivion by Hacking’s treatment of him as a clever psychical experimenter of the 1910s—who first introduced the remedy of the nontreated control group in psychology.

MORE ON STANFORD’S COOVER

Before Coover entered academia, he had already gained some experience of life. He had finished vocational school and worked as a telegraphist with the Union Pacific Railway and as a journeyman printer and publisher of a country newspaper. Next, he attended a State Normal School and worked as a school principal. In 1899, at the age of twenty-seven, he registered at the newly founded Stanford University. There the skills he had acquired not only assured him of some income but also guided his academic interests.
Though interested in education, Coover did not enter the education department. Instead, he began studying at the one-man Department of Psychology. His teacher was the psychophysical researcher Frank Angell, who had been taken on as a full professor of psychology in 1892, only a year after he gained his Ph.D. with Wilhelm Wundt at Leipzig. Nevertheless, as befitted a man of his background, Coover soon gave Angell’s theoretical interests an applied twist. He started experimenting on the issue of formal discipline, work that in 1905 resulted in a master’s thesis entitled “Formal Discipline from the Standpoint of Experimental Psychology.”

In a 1907 article, coauthored by Angell, Coover advanced the idea of employing a nontreated control group to study the question of formal discipline. He first discussed some experiments by others—including Thorndike and Woodworth, whose 1906 work he described as “rough experiments of very little value.” His chief reason for rejecting Thorndike and Woodworth’s experiments was their lack of “introspection”: that is, the reagents were not asked what they were thinking while taking the tests. Most important in the context of the present history, however, was his remark that “it is to be regretted that the authors do not carry on a ‘control’ experiment along with their tests to ascertain the training effect of the tests themselves and to throw additional light on the changes taking place in the training intervals.” In Coover’s own experiments the notion of formal discipline was supported by observed differences between the test results of “reagents” who had been given training and “control reagents” who had not.

With this design, the usual sequence of “test—training—test” was, so to speak, cut in two: one group underwent only the first “test” part, the other the “training—test” half. In other words, the classical misleading control trial in which the stimulus was withheld was now applied to special control subjects. Yet another actor had been added to the cast of participants in experimentation. First Fechner’s dual role as subject and experimenter had been divided between two persons; then the addition of an artificial randomizer relieved the experimenter of the job of randomizing the stimuli; now different types of experimental subjects were also introduced.
In describing these experiments, Coover repeated his reasons for employing control groups three more times. This repeated clarification and the use of quotation marks with the word *control* indicate that in 1907 the idea of a control group was virtually unknown in psychology. Indeed, Coover and Angell’s article offers a correction to the standard historiography of the control group. Ever since the historical reconstructions presented by R. L. Solomon and Edwin G. Boring, a 1908 British example of educational group comparison has been cited as the earliest use of control groups in psychology and a 1926 example from American psychophysics as the first application of the word *control* in relation to psychological group comparison. In fact, Coover and Angell, in their largely neglected article, used the term *control reagents* for their untreated controls nineteen years before Solomon’s and Boring’s example. Coover is an intriguing figure in the history of science—and not just for his work in psychical research. (See Figure 3.)

**SAVING MONEY: RANDOM GROUPING AT SCHOOL**

In 1912, at the age of forty, Coover earned his Ph.D., again with a thesis entitled “Formal Discipline from the Standpoint of Experimental Psychology.” In the same year, Stanford University finally made up its mind to accept a large sum offered decades before by the brother of its founder under the regretted condition that the money would be spent on psychical research. Angell, commissioned to find a suitable psychical researcher, drew up the profile of a typical *psychophysical* experimenter, and Coover, of course, fit the de-

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32 Solomon, “Extension of the Control Group Design” (cit. n. 29); and Edwin G. Boring, “The Nature and History of Experimental Control,” Amer. J. Psychol., 1954, 67:573–589. Whereas Coover and Angell’s 1907 article was ignored, Thorndike and Woodworth’s 1901 experiments were very well received. Kolesnik reported that by the 1930s thousands of American teachers were taught, by reference to “Thorndike and Woodworth (1901),” that the doctrine of formal discipline was a myth. In 1930 their article was still described as “a veritable bombshell into the educational camp”: Kolesnik, Mental Discipline in Modern Education (cit. n. 23), pp. 7, 34. As a matter of fact, Woodworth seems to be the one who first denied Coover and Angell their rightful place in the historiography of the control group. Whereas Boring mostly borrowed his discussions of the control group in psychology from Solomon, Solomon appears to have copied his history from Woodworth. His reconstruction is just like that on the pages of Woodworth’s Experimental Psychology to which his bibliography refers. Woodworth’s history of the use of control groups began with the research he conducted with Thorndike in 1901 (this was repeated by Solomon, but Boring pointed out that Thorndike and Woodworth, in their thick report of countless experiments, spent only eight casual lines discussing a trial with a control group). Woodworth’s next instances are the now-standard 1908 British and 1926 American cases. See Robert S. Woodworth, Experimental Psychology (New York: Holt, 1938), pp. 178–181. It is highly unlikely that at the time he was writing his overview he had simply forgotten Coover and Angell’s dismissal of his own work. Elsewhere in Experimental Psychology, Woodworth overtly expressed his annoyance with Coover’s dissertation on transfer experiments (p. 198), and a mimeographed version of his book was already used for teaching at Columbia in 1909. See A. S. Winston, “Robert Session Woodworth and the ‘Columbia Bible’: How the Psychological Experiment Was Redefined,” Amer. J. Psychol., 1990, 103:391–401. Of course, both Woodworth’s maneuvers and all these laborious searches for the “origins” of the control group (including my own) only underline the pivotal role ascribed to it from the 1930s to the present.
Figure 3. John Edgar Coover. The date and source are unknown, but a caption states that in his spare time Coover developed a new system of shorthand "specially for students to simplify notetaking." (Courtesy Department of Special Collections, University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.)
While Coover applied himself to psychical research, experimental educational research thrived. Educational psychologists, armed with contracts from educational administrators, left their university laboratories for experimentation in real schools. “Treatments” now included ways of teaching, educational measures like punishment and praise, and all kinds of teacher behaviors and classroom circumstances. Whereas Boring counted no control groups at all in reports of experiments published in the 1916 volume of the American Journal of Psychology, Kurt Danziger found that 14 percent of those described in the same year’s Journal of Educational Psychology used control groups.35 In the world outside the orderly laboratory, however, many more variables had to be controlled; moreover, a bigger and more varied audience had to be convinced of the merits of psychological research. Educational psychologists soon began to discuss the price they paid for comparing the results of different groups rather than comparing subjects’ results before and after treatment: while they had abolished the possible unwanted effect of the pretest, they had also introduced possible unwanted differences between the groups. The experimenters faced the problem of ascertaining that distinct outcomes for the experimental and control groups were caused by the treatments and not by some other variables.36

35 Danziger scrutinized the Journal of Educational Psychology by taking samples from the volumes of 1914–1916, 1924–1926, and 1934–1936; between 14 percent and 18 percent of the articles published in these periods used control groups. In the Journal of Applied Psychology volumes of 1917–1920 and 1934–1936, between 1 percent and 6 percent reported control groups. As to the postwar period, in 1951 Boring found that only 52 percent of articles in the American Journal of Psychology mentioned control groups. See Boring, “Nature and History of Experimental Control” (cit. n. 32), p. 587; and Danziger, Constructing the Subject (cit. n. 7), pp. 113–115.

36 Coover again was among the first to raise the issue. Whereas his 1907 paper with Angell had shown no awareness of the problem of dissimilar groups, his 1912 Ph.D. dissertation expressed doubts on the topic: “Our trained reagents were more mature than the control reagents and were experienced in laboratory work.” And in
In educational research conducted in the 1920s, it became customary to handle this problem by subjecting children to preliminary tests on suspected factors and composing matched groups on the basis of the test results. A slightly easier way of matching was to experiment with existing school classes with the same mean scores and standard deviations on particular tests. When matching was not viable, the procedure of the so-called rotation experiment was sometimes followed: several groups were subjected to a full series of different treatments given in variable order. An early rotation experiment, undertaken by Thorndike and his Ph.D. student William Anderson McCall, investigated whether fresh or recirculated air would make children perform better on mental tests. It seems to have been McCall who first suggested composing the groups at random.

As biographical and autobiographical notes report, McCall was raised in a very poor family that worked in the Kentucky and Tennessee coal mines. From early childhood, he had to contribute to the family income by laboring half of each year as a coal digger. In 1913, at the age of twenty-two, he borrowed some money and left for New York. “With the black dust of years of summer work in the coal mines imbedded in his hands,” he arrived at Columbia University, where he gained his third bachelor’s degree, as well as an M.A. and a Ph.D., from Teachers College within three years.

At Columbia, with its instrumental approach to teaching, McCall was the right man at the right place. He acquired a job as an instructor and in 1923 published a methodological treatise entitled How to Experiment in Education. In the introduction, McCall estimated that increased efficiency of education could save a full year of teaching per person, and he worked out that psychological experimentation to determine the best teaching methods could save $134,680,000,000,000 over the next 100 generations of Americans, which would amount to “790 times the costs of the first World War” and “390 times the costs of all wars in recorded history.” Then he advanced a way of making the work of his profession still more profitable to society. The book considers seven options for equalizing groups; the first is “groups equated by chance,” which McCall discussed as “an economical substitute” for matching. Experimental psychology, he claimed, could tip the economic balance still more favorably if the expensive method of matching were exchanged for the cheaper procedure of randomization.

McCall did not take the task of randomization lightly. For example, he rejected the procedure of writing numbers on pieces of paper because papers with larger numbers contain more ink than those with smaller ones and are therefore likely to sink further to the final section of the thesis he suggested that in fact “the control reagents should equal the trained reagents in number, in initial efficiency, and in the facility in introspection, or their results may not be comparable with those of the trained reagents.” See Coover, Formal Discipline (cit. n. 26), pp. 83, 223–224.

This experiment, conducted in 1916, is described in William Anderson McCall, How to Experiment in Education (1923; rpt., New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 194.

McCall published a moving thirty-four-page autobiography that he wrote as a young child, with a biographical preface and afterward by Helen Duder: William Anderson McCall, I Thunk Me a Thaut (New York: Teachers College Press, 1975), quotation from p. 37. Duder explains that McCall gained his first bachelor’s degree in 1911 at Cumberland College in Williamsburg, Kentucky. His father allowed him to attend the college because it offered a one-term telegraphy course, but the college president arranged for him to stay for four years. Next, the president helped him gain a position at Lincoln Memorial University at Cumberland Gap to teach two terms of psychology. Here he earned his second bachelor’s degree. Biographical information on McCall is also available in the Milbank Memorial Library, Special Collections, Teachers College, Box 44, Finding Aid “Will McCall” and Finding Aid “Teachers College News,” Columbia University, New York. Some biographical facts and McCall’s publications up to 1975 are listed in Clare D. Kinsman, ed., Contemporary Authors: A Bio-bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works (Detroit: Gale, 1975), p. 426.

McCall, How to Experiment in Education (cit. n. 37), pp. 41–42.
the bottom of a container. He nevertheless maintained that “any device which will make the selection truly random is satisfactory.”

EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND R. A. FISHER

Experimental psychology has long staked its claim to the status of a science by emphasizing its methodological inheritance from the natural sciences. But random group experimentation, nowhere more the apogee of methodological rigor than in psychology, appears to be firmly rooted in the discipline’s own professional and social history. Moreover, rather than the instantaneous discovery of an ingenious individual, the random group design seems to be an unlooked-for outcome of a long historical process.

There are some indications that Fisher, as he developed his methods and techniques for agricultural research, was acquainted with the ways of experimental psychology. The first substantial chapter in his 1935 book The Design of Experiments is entitled “The Principles of Experimentation Illustrated by a Psycho-Physical Experiment.” The “psycho-physical” experiment of the title is the now-famous “tea experiment,” which Fisher had worked out after a colleague at the agricultural research station declined a cup of tea because Fisher had put the milk in the cup before pouring the tea. She maintained that a cup with the wrong milk-tea order did not taste as good as a cup with the right tea-milk order. To test this claim of delicate sensory discrimination, Fisher explained, a series of trials is necessary, and it must be randomly established before each trial whether the milk or the tea should be poured in first.

Fisher’s little joke in the title of this chapter points to his awareness of the characteristics of psychophysical experimentation. As Hacking discovered, Fisher was also quite knowledgeable about the methodology of psychical research. There is no evidence, however, that Fisher derived his random group design directly from psychology. Although he advances reasons for randomization that were also presented by the psychologists I have discussed (including McCall’s argument that it would save money), he derived the randomization requirement primarily from his new techniques of statistical data analysis. In both his discussion of the tea experiment, where random ordering was at issue, and in his next chapter on a comparative study of cross-fertilized and self-fertilized plants, where

40 Ibid. I do not know whether McCall was aware of randomization of order in psychophysics or psychical research. In his introduction of random grouping, he referred to a third kind of randomization (not yet discussed in this essay): randomly drawing a representative sample. “Just as representativeness can be secured by the method of chance, . . . so equivalence can be secured by chance”: ibid., p. 41. Once again the role of psychology in the development of contemporary standard research techniques seems to have been more significant than is generally acknowledged. McCall had discussed this third kind of randomization in an earlier book on psychological test construction, where he explained that composing a psychological aptitude test involves drawing random samples of the ability to be tested: William Anderson McCall, How to Measure in Education (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 201–202. Historical studies of random sampling in scientific research report only two Scandinavian “pre-McCall” examples of random sampling; they do not mention any work in psychology. See F. F. Stephan, “History of the Uses of Modern Sampling Procedures,” J. Amer. Statist. Assoc., 1948, 43:12–39, on p. 21; W. C. Kruskal and Frederick Mosteller, “Representative Sampling, IV: The History of the Concept,” Statistical Review, 1980, 48:169–195, on p. 179 n 6; and Alain Desrosières, “The Part in Relation to the Whole: How to Generalize? The Prehistory of Representative Sampling,” in The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940, ed. Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 217–245.


42 Fisher did not mention that the example was derived from his own life. This has been revealed by his daughter and biographer: see Joan Fisher Box, “R. A. Fisher and the Design of Experiments, 1922–1926,” American Statistician, 1980, 34:1–7.
random grouping was involved, Fisher strongly emphasized that randomization is part of his techniques of statistical significance testing.43

Whereas the impact of psychology on Fisher may be uncertain, an arrow may certainly be drawn in the opposite direction. As Alexander Lovie has argued, by the 1930s the psychologists’ experimental designs had become so complex that the resulting data were hard to manage and interpret. Fisher’s solutions reached them via several routes.44 Some psychologists began to translate them into the language of their own field, which led to some painstaking prose: “To understand better the meaning of the experimental group in terms of blocks and plots, let us examine the two possible arrangements: (1) where a single individual or a group is a block, and (2) where a single individual or group is a plot.” Soon a range of handbooks on statistics, many of them written by educational psychologists from the Stanford-Columbia network, passed on Fisher’s instructions to wider circles. As one of these psychologists would observe some years later, Fisher’s ways quickly “became epidemic just as though psychologists had never previously planned an experiment.”45

Although McCall was no stranger to the psychology community, the introduction of the experimental design with randomly composed experimental and control groups has been attributed to Fisher ever since.46

43 This is not to suggest that Fisher was the stereotypical aloof mathematician. His main sources of inspiration were eugenics and biometrics. On the merging of Fisher’s eugenic and agricultural interests see MacKenzie, Statistics in Britain (cit. n. 2). On his familiarity with psychophysical experimentation see Hacking, “Telepathy” (cit. n. 4), pp. 449–450. Stigler drew a straight line between Fechner’s 1860 Elemente der Psychophysik and Fisher’s 1935 Design of Experiments, saying that Fechner’s book on experimental design is “the most comprehensive treatment of that topic” before the one by Fisher: Stigler, History of Statistics (cit. n. 2), p. 244.


46 Nevertheless, I traced McCall because he was honored in at least one text on educational experimentation for introducing the random group design before Fisher did: Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, “Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research on Teaching,” in Handbook of Research on Teaching, ed. N. L. Gage (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), pp. 171–247; rpt. as Campbell and Stanley, Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research (cit. n. 1). As to his further history: in 1927, McCall had become a professor of measurement and statistics. In the same year he caught tuberculosis, which took years to cure and confined him to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. After his return to work, he did not join forces with the other statisticians who passed on Fisher’s statistical techniques to psychologists. He devoted most of his time to educational test construction and to cooperation with universities in China. In 1939 he published a revised version of How to Measure in Education under the title Measurement (New York: Macmillan). In his spare time, he fought for a world government in which all nations had two votes, “one proportional to population and another proportioned to gross national product or degree of education of the citizenry”: Special Collections, Teachers College, Columbia University, Box 44, letter by McCall, 17 Oct. 1970.
TRUDY DEHUE

EPILLOGUE: THE MARCH OF THE UNCONTROLLED VARIABLES

In addition to the gradual emergence of the random group design, this essay demonstrates that its development was connected to the instrumental turn of experimental psychology. It originated during the transition of academic psychophysical experimentation into research serving administrative decision making in education. Thus the story of the development of the present-day ideal design is another significant example supporting a central thesis in contemporary historiography of statistics and methodology: that the increase of rules and numbers in the sciences reflects the increase of rules and numbers in bureaucratic management. Theodore Porter, in particular, has recognized that the widespread reliance on overt procedures and quantitative data in the sciences has been strongly encouraged by the needs of twentieth-century democratic societies. The bureaucratic organizations that arise in tandem with these societies, Porter argues, are run by expanding groups of policymakers and administrators. Unlike the authoritative elites of the old days, these officials cannot count on public trust in their personal wisdom or refer to their personal intuition in making decisions. In order to avoid charges of arbitrariness and to gain support for their policies, they have to offer assurance of the impartiality of their views. Thus they have increasingly come to appeal to the sciences, most notably the social sciences, for an impersonal basis of authority. In their turn, these sciences have developed intricate systems of standard procedures for administrative knowledge production.47

The random group design is clearly a result of these processes. The story of its origins is an account of methods, initially developed for isolated laboratory research, that were transported into the realm of bureaucratic management in education. There they proliferated and were minutely codified in order to ensure as much algorithmic rationality as possible.48 I will conclude with a rough sketch of developments from the 1930s to the 1970s. On the one hand, this condensed history will demonstrate that the discipline of psychology was a vital factor in the design’s dissemination in other social sciences and other areas of human management and control.49 On the other hand, it will show that, far from settling methodological issues, the establishment of the ideal of random group design gave impetus to substantial extension of the set of codified routines in the social sciences.

In the 1930s, American social science was booming. More than ever, social amelioration


48 It should be noted, though, that in a sense American psychology was directed by technosocial ideals from the very early stage of psychophysical laboratory research; see Deborah J. Coon, “Standardizing the Subject: Experimental Psychologists, Introspection, and the Quest for a Technoscientific Ideal,” Technology and Culture, 1993, 34:757–783.

49 Of course, there is much more to say about the dissemination of the random group design in other disciplines. For a somewhat different account of its route from psychology to other social sciences see Robert Brown, “The Delayed Birth of Social Experiments,” History of the Human Sciences, 1997, 10:1–23, on pp. 17–19. In a history of its introduction in American medicine, Harry Marks has shown that randomization was applied briefly after World War II. As Marks argues, here the design was chiefly seen as a means of disciplining clinicians in their decisions about which patients should be given and which denied a particular treatment: Harry M. Marks, “Notes from the Underground: The Social Organization of Therapeutic Work,” in Grand Rounds: One Hundred Years of Internal Medicine, ed. Russell C. Maulitz and Diana E. Long (Philadelphia: Univ. Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 297–336. See also Lilienfeld, “Ceteris Paribus” (cit. n. 31); Winston and Blais, “What Counts as an Experiment?” (cit. n. 41); and Trudy Dehue, “De beleidsmaker: Maatschappelijke experimenten en het dilemma van de verzorgingsstaat [The policy-maker: Social experiments and the dilemma of the welfare state],” in Met zachte hand: Opkomst en verbreiding van het psychologisch perspectief [With gentle force: The emergence and establishment of the psychological perspective], ed. Jeroen Jansz and Peter van Drunen (Utrecht: Lemma, 1996), pp. 241–259.
was seen as a matter of centralized government and scientific control. Economists, sociologists, and political scientists such as William Ogburn, Charles Merriam, and Samuel Stouffer were engaged as advisors on Roosevelt’s governmental initiatives. These highly influential men introduced psychological methods into the realm of social policy. For instance, Charles Merriam (“Uncle Charley” to the president) brought psychologists to his meetings and conferences and “bombarded” his colleagues in the political science department of the University of Chicago with texts on psychological methods. Through such connections, psychologists became involved with administrative research projects outside their traditional province of education. Psychologists like Louis Thurstone and Paul Lazarsfeld were employed in social science departments, where they devised methods not only for measuring people’s attitudes and opinions but also for assessing the success of radio talks and movies in influencing their feelings and beliefs on subjects like immigration, voting, bootlegging, and war. The investigative routines of educational psychology seemed applicable in these contexts, and here too random group design was seen as the paragon procedure. However, this ideal soon proved to be more of a guiding than a practicable principle. Its unfeasibility became particularly clear during World War II in the research branch of the army’s Morale Division.

At first the research branch, led by Samuel Stouffer, specialized in gathering information about soldiers’ opinions and attitudes; somewhat later it was also charged with improving morale and with evaluating the results of such educational attempts. A film series, Why We Fight, was devised, and an experimental section staffed mostly by psychologists was set up for the objective assessment of the films’ effects. It was agreed that the movies should be evaluated by comparing randomly composed groups of soldiers that had and had not seen them. However, a problem arose because the soldiers became suspicious when some of them were summoned to view a movie and others were not. Random assignment appeared to cause an unexpected new kind of experimental bias. Although pretesting showed that existing army units differed in many consequential respects, these units nonetheless had to constitute the experimental and the control groups. And that was only one of many methodological trespasses. After the war, researchers published four volumes entitled Studies in Social Psychology in World War II. The third, on the activities of the experimental section, was hardly a self-assured presentation of collected knowledge. Rather, the volume offered an overview of dilemmas researchers face when experimental research moves out of the laboratory into real life.

Nevertheless, the experimenters insisted that amateur assessments of the effectiveness of psychological training were superior to professional analyses and expert judgments. At first they were not inclined to consider experimental bias in their reports. But as their work extended beyond the laboratories and into new contexts, they had to confront the “new kind of experimental bias” caused by random assignment.


of social policies are always worse than professionally devised second-best procedures. As Stouffer put it, in the absence of professional experimental design “there is all too often a wide-open gate through which uncontrolled variables can march.”53 In the 1950s, methodological treatises began to appear that still advanced the random group design as the ideal experiment but simultaneously recognized that generally people cannot be assigned to experimental conditions as haphazardly as plants can be randomly assigned to plots. As a remedy they presented long series of alternative designs. To continue Stouffer’s metaphor, these methodological texts catalogued an ever more sophisticated and proliferating armory against a continuing invasion of belligerent variables.

Among the first methodologists to write in this vein was the young psychologist Donald T. Campbell, who had started his career as an army attitude and propaganda researcher. In 1957 Campbell established his reputation as a keen methodologist with an astute article on a variety of experimental designs and accompanying factors that may bias the results. With the statistical assistance of Julian C. Stanley, he subsequently published an essay entitled “Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research on Teaching” that introduced the term quasi experiments for designs that do not meet the requirement of random assignment. In 1966 the essay was reprinted as a separate book under the briefer and more embracing title Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research.54

This book, now widely known as “Campbell and Stanley,” established Campbell’s status as a routinely consulted methodologist of the social sciences. Other publications by Campbell, on ranges of quasi-experimental designs, were to follow, some under flamboyant titles like “The Social Scientist as Methodological Servant of the Experimenting Society” and “Reforms as Experiments” that by themselves testify to the close relation between elaborate methodology and social administration.55