

Preface

Meta-analysis as a systematic method to integrate empirical findings has become a widely adopted technique in various scientific fields. Among the major areas of application of the method are medicine and the social sciences. New statistical developments and methodological advances often happen unrecognized in different substantive fields, or are assimilated with considerable delay. The present volume is intended to bring scholars from medical and social sciences together to present their theoretical advances as well as new applications of the method.

The book is divided in two parts. The first part consists of a collection of chapters that address various important theoretical issues. These chapters focus on the evaluation and systematization of existing procedures that are used in practice, present new developments regarding statistical procedures, describe techniques for the detection of bias in meta-analysis, and provide detailed expositions of the methodological viewpoints on meta-analysis in pharmaceutical, medical as well social science research.

In Chapter 1, Hartung, Argaç, and Makambi present a series of homogeneity tests that are known within the framework of ANOVA but have not been widely adopted in applications of meta-analysis. They expound the underlying logic of the tests and evaluate their performance in a simulation study. Hartung et al. address the problem of testing the homogeneity assumption that is often made in practical applications of meta-analysis, and they show which tests perform best under several conditions.

Schulze, Holling, Großmann, Jütting, and Brocke present a comparison of two meta-analytical approaches for the analysis of correlation coefficients in Chapter 2. It is shown that parallel statistical developments in different subdisciplines of psychology have led to diverse procedural details in approaches often used in practice. These details can in turn lead to differences in results on the basis of the same database. This is demonstrated in a Monte-Carlo study of different homogeneous situations for which the procedures of the approaches – and fixed effects models in general – are supposed to be appropriate.

Random and fixed effects models in meta-analysis play an important role for the data analytic strategy and the interpretation of results. In recent years, the random effects model has been favored over the fixed effects model for theoretical reasons but only few procedures have been proposed for the estimation of the heterogeneity variance. This variance is an important component in the random effects model. Malzahn presents a general principle for its estimation in several meta-analytical models in Chapter 3.

The choice between the random and fixed effects model of meta-analysis has been subject of several debates. Although the random effects model was focused in theoretical discussions of the topic, in practical applications of meta-analysis, especially in the social sciences, the fixed effects model still prevails (see Chapter 2). Several authors have argued that the choice between these models has to be based on theoretical reasons and the inference that is intended with a meta-analysis. Hartung and Knapp present the basics of both the random and fixed effects model as well as commonly used methods in these models in Chapter 4. They also show that there are *theoretical* deficiencies in these models and propose an alternative test procedure which is presented in detail from an analytical point of view. Furthermore, the results of a simulation study that evaluates the performance of this new test procedure is reported.

The issue of bias in meta-analysis poses considerable problems to the interpretation of meta-analytical results. Often, the so-called publication bias is of particular interest. In Chapter 5, Schwarzer, Antes, and Schumacher review several procedures – graphical methods as well as test procedures – for the detection of bias in meta-analysis. They also present the results of a simulation study to evaluate the performance of two statistical tests for the identification of bias.

Apart from statistical issues in a narrower sense like those addressed in the first five chapters, more general methodological discussions have reoccurred in the literature since the advent of meta-analysis. Such methodological issues are addressed in the following four chapters. The different perspectives of medical research and the social sciences are reflected in these chapters and it is shown how analogous problems are dealt with in these areas of research.

In Chapter 6, Sauerbrei and Blettner review and compare different methods for summarizing empirical results from observational studies, including narrative reviews, meta-analysis of literature, meta-analysis of patient data, and prospective meta-analysis. Focusing on applications to medical research problems, the utility of meta-analysis for the evaluation of medical treatments is critically assessed. In addition to a theoretical analysis of the different review methods, several examples from the medical literature are presented. These examples support their arguments for a sceptical view on the utility of meta-analyses that are based on summary reports from the literature.

Koch and Röhmel concentrate in Chapter 7 on the use of meta-analysis in the process of new drug applications, where the method has not played a major role to date. They point out obstacles for the acceptance of meta-analytical results in this area. An analysis of the evaluation process for outcomes from randomized clinical trials on the comparison of different drugs for the same indication is presented, and references to relevant guidelines are given. Also, problems as well as benefits in using meta-analysis are illustrated by giving concrete examples. The characteristics that influence the credibility of meta-analyses in this field of application are highlighted as well. Thereby, Koch and Röhmel provide a constructive account for the enhancement of meta-analytical design.

In the subsequent chapter, Matt presents a comprehensive treatment on the possibilities to draw generalized causal inferences based on the results of meta-analysis. Here, like in other chapters in this volume, it is acknowledged that methods of meta-analysis are comparable to quasi-experiments or observational studies in methods of primary research. Drawing on principles developed in the context of generalization in quasi-experimentation, he demonstrates how these principles can be fruitfully applied to methods of meta-analysis. In his detailed exposition Matt also refers to general principles of generalization and provides examples of their successful application in practice. The presentation in Chapter 8 by Matt shows how questions of generalization are treated in the social sciences, and this view stands – at least partly – in contrast to treatments from the perspective of medical research (see e.g., Chapter 6 by Sauerbrei and Blettner).

The last chapter of the first part addresses the utility of tests of moderator hypotheses in meta-analysis. In Chapter 9 by Czienskowski, an example from social cognition research on the so-called self-reference effect is given to illustrate the application of moderator-analysis. Potential conclusions on the basis of the results are discussed, and it is shown how and why moderator analyses can and should be supplemented by follow-up experiments.

In the second part of the book applications of meta-analysis to different problems in medical, pharmaceutical and social science research are presented. A series of six chapters illustrates the breath of potential fields of application for meta-analytic methods.

An innovative field of application for meta-analysis is quality control in pharmaceutical production. In Chapter 10, Böhning and Dammann provide an overview and an example on how methods of meta-analysis can be applied in this new area of application. They extend an approach of mixture modeling of heterogeneity in meta-analysis and show its potential for an improvement of production processes in pharmaceutical industry.

In the following Chapter 11 by Greiner, Wegscheider, Böhning, and Dahms, an application of meta-analysis to explore and identify factors that influence the sensitivity and specificity of a medical test for the detection of trichinella antibodies is presented. They illustrate how adequate statistical methods of meta-analysis (e.g., mixed logistic regression) can contribute new knowledge that is of practical concern.

In Chapter 12, Dietz and Weist introduce a method based on finite mixed generalized linear models as a means for modeling heterogeneity in meta-analytic data. They present a detailed account of the model, methods for the estimation of parameters, and also give two examples of its application. The authors thereby demonstrate how advanced flexible methods of meta-analysis can provide useful results for the explanation of heterogeneity that go well beyond information gained from ordinary applications of meta-analysis.

Franklin also uses the generalized linear model in Chapter 13 to assess the impact of explanatory variables on the variability in a meta-analytical database. He examines, among other influential factors, the differences between treatment results in paediatric and adult clinical trials on Hodgkin's disease.

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In a meta-analysis on the results of controlled clinical trials on antidepressants, Schöchlin, Klein, Abraham-Rudolf, and Engel examine the potential moderating influence of design variables. They report results in Chapter 14 that stress the important role of design variables – especially the inclusion of placebo conditions – in this area of clinical applications.

One of the major research fields in social psychology, attitude research, is the subject of Chapter 15 by Schulze and Wittmann. The authors first provide an exposition of the two most often applied theories in this area. Additionally, moderator hypotheses concerning the relationships between the theory's components are substantiated that reflect standard assumptions of the theories as well as new hypotheses not previously tested in a meta-analytical framework. The results of a meta-analysis are also presented to assess overall effects as well as tests of pertinent moderator hypotheses in a random effects model.

Finally, Schlattmann, Malzahn, and Böhning present a new software package called META for the application of meta-analysis in Chapter 16. META enables the user to perform not only standard analysis to integrate research results but also includes procedures to apply the latest developments in mixture modeling of heterogeneity in meta-analysis as presented in this volume (see also Chapter 10).

The new developments and applications described in these chapters are contributions from different fields of research. Our hopes are that bringing together the contributions from these scholars in a single volume adds new knowledge to the different fields, counteracts fragmentation of statistical and substantial developments, and encourages potential users of the procedures to apply the latest methods of meta-analysis in their field of interest.

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