

Moderated Regression Analysis and Likert Scales: Too Coarse for Comfort

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One of the most commonly accepted models of relationships in applied industrial and organizational psychology is the simple moderator effect. However, many authors have expressed concern over the general lack of empirical support for interaction effects reported in the literature. We demonstrate in the current sample that use of a continuous, dependent-response scale instead of a discrete, Likert-type scale, causes moderated regression analysis effect sizes to increase an average of 93%. We suggest that use of relatively-coarse Likert scales to measure fine dependent responses causes information loss that, although varying widely across subjects, greatly reduces the probability of detecting true interaction effects. Specific recommendations for alternate research strategies are made.

Saunders (1955, 1956) was the first to describe stepwise or hierarchical moderated regression analysis as a means of empirically detecting how a variable "moderates" or influences the nature of a relationship between two other variables. Statistical textbooks (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983) have introduced later generations of investigators to the procedure. A simple count of the number of studies examining moderator effects in major applied psychology journals indicates that moderated regression analysis is the preferred statistical procedure for detecting interaction effects. Most applications involve random-effects designs in field settings where surveys are used to measure individual and organizational characteristics of interest. Furthermore, many theories in psychology and organizational settings postulate moderator or interactive relationships. Unfortunately, many authors have noted how rare it is for investigations to report strong, unambiguous results in support of a moderator effect (Bobko, 1986; Cronbach, 1987; Drazin & Van de Ven, 1985; Sockloff, 1976a, 1976b; Venkataraman, 1989; Zedeck, 1971). For example, one of the oldest and almost universally accepted models of work performance involves an interactive function of motivation and ability (Maier, 1955). Terborg (1977) reviewed 14 articles containing 20 tests of this interaction, finding only five results supportive of the interaction effect. Cronbach (1987) suggested that investigators redirect their attention to basic research design issues if they wish to detect true interaction effects.

The current study focused on how characteristics of the response scale affect the power of moderated regression. Specifi-

cally, a basic assumption in field studies is that the relationship between the "true" or latent variable of interest and the observed questionnaire response (for both independent and dependent variables) is linear. Busemeyer and Jones (1983) examined this assumption in "observational" or random-effects designs typically found in applied organizational research. They demonstrated that when relationships between the latent and observed variables follow some unknown, nonlinear monotonic function, moderated regression results are uninterpretable. Assumptions of linear relationships between latent constructs and observed scale scores are so common that they are rarely noted in even the most empirically oriented journals.

Pursuant to Cronbach's (1987) suggestion, Russell, Pinto, and Bobko (1991) investigated how a basic assessment design issue may be forcing subjects to operationalize latent dependent responses in a nonlinear manner. Specifically, Russell et al. considered the possibility that discrete Likert-type scales used to obtain subjects' dependent responses in interactive models may result in information loss. If five levels of the predictor (x) and moderator (z) are presented to subjects in an orthogonal fixed-effects design, the dependent response (y) produced by a "true" moderator effect will contain $5 \times 5 = 25$ conceptually distinct latent responses. (These "latent responses" do not constitute an observable random variable [y] but instead represent psychological representations of the construct of interest.) Russell et al. used a 5×5 fixed-effects design for purposes of exposition. Use of fixed-versus random-effects designs is irrelevant to conclusions drawn concerning the effects of Likert scales on measurement of the dependent variable, because the concern is with the effect of Likert scales on dependent responses.

Now, suppose subjects are provided with a 5-point Likert scale with which to portray their dependent response (y): an observable random variable that can assume only five values). Then, the relatively coarse 5-point Likert scale will be associated with information loss, because the latent dependent response has 25 possible distinct values. Russell et al. (1991) speculated that the Likert scale requires subjects to somehow squeeze or otherwise reduce their latent response in order to

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