Estimating the reproducibility of psychological science

Structured Abstract

INTRODUCTION

Reproducibility is a defining feature of science, but the extent to which it characterizes current research is unknown. Scientific claims should not gain credence because of the status or authority of their originator but by the replicability of their supporting evidence. Even research of exemplary quality may have irreproducible empirical findings because of random or systematic error.

RATIONALE

There is concern about the rate and predictors of reproducibility, but limited evidence. Potentially problematic practices include selective reporting, selective analysis, and insufficient specification of the conditions necessary or sufficient to obtain the results. Direct replication is the attempt to recreate the conditions believed sufficient for obtaining a previously observed finding and is the means of establishing reproducibility of a finding with new data. We conducted a large-scale, collaborative effort to obtain an initial estimate of the reproducibility of psychological science.

RESULTS

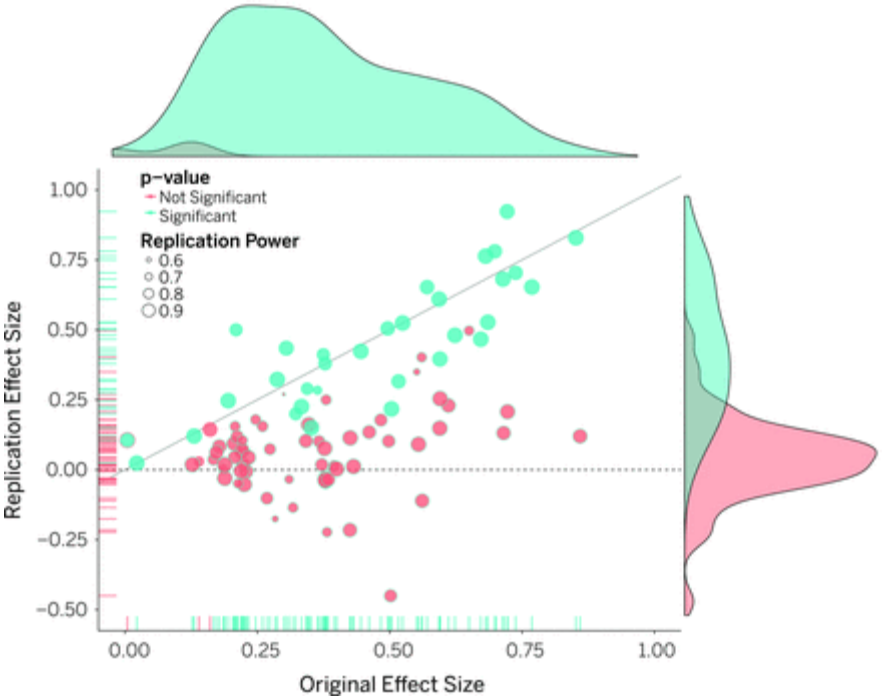
We conducted replications of 100 experimental and correlational studies published in three psychology journals using high-powered designs and original materials when available. There is no single standard for evaluating replication success. Here, we evaluated reproducibility using significance and *P* values, effect sizes, subjective assessments of replication teams, and meta-analysis of effect sizes. The mean effect size (r) of the replication effects (M_r = 0.197, SD = 0.257) was half the magnitude of the mean effect size of the original effects (M_r = 0.403, SD = 0.188), representing a substantial decline. Ninety-seven percent of original studies had significant results ($P < .05$). Thirty-six percent of replications had significant results; 47% of original effect sizes were in the 95% confidence interval of the replication effect size; 39% of effects were subjectively rated to have replicated the original result; and if no bias in original results is assumed, combining original and replication results left 68% with statistically significant effects. Correlational tests suggest that replication success was better predicted by the strength of original evidence than by characteristics of the original and replication teams.

CONCLUSION

No single indicator sufficiently describes replication success, and the five indicators examined here are not the only ways to evaluate reproducibility. Nonetheless, collectively these results offer a clear conclusion: A large portion of replications produced weaker evidence for the original findings despite using materials provided by the original authors, review in advance for methodological fidelity, and high statistical power to detect the original effect sizes. Moreover, correlational evidence is consistent with the conclusion that variation in the

strength of initial evidence (such as original *P* value) was more predictive of replication success than variation in the characteristics of the teams conducting the research (such as experience and expertise). The latter factors certainly can influence replication success, but they did not appear to do so here.

Reproducibility is not well understood because the incentives for individual scientists prioritize novelty over replication. Innovation is the engine of discovery and is vital for a productive, effective scientific enterprise. However, innovative ideas become old news fast. Journal reviewers and editors may dismiss a new test of a published idea as unoriginal. The claim that "we already know this" belies the uncertainty of scientific evidence. Innovation points out paths that are possible; replication points out paths that are likely; progress relies on both. Replication can increase certainty when findings are reproduced and promote innovation when they are not. This project provides accumulating evidence for many findings in psychological research and suggests that there is still more work to do to verify whether we know what we think we know.



Original study effect size versus replication effect size (correlation coefficients).

Diagonal line represents replication effect size equal to original effect size. Dotted line represents replication effect size of 0. Points below the dotted line were effects in the opposite direction of the original. Density plots are separated by significant (blue) and nonsignificant (red) effects.

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