Developing Students' Understandings and Representations of Statistical Covariation

by

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Abstract

*Statistical covariation* refers to the correspondence of variation of two statistical measures that vary along numerical scales. Reasoning about covariation commonly involves translation processes among three representations: (1) numerical data, (2) graphical representations, and (3) verbal statements such as “taller people tend to be heavier.” Two well-known translations are *graph production* and *graph interpretation*. Less well known is the process of *speculative data generation*, involving translating a verbal statement into a possible graph or other data representation. This study explored school students’ reasoning involving these three translation skills through various tasks in surveys and interviews. Evidence is presented concerning methods to assess these skills, and concerning how students as young as third-grade can engage covariation tasks involving familiar contexts. Interviews involved prompting for cognitive conflict using responses from other students, and provided evidence of limited engagement of ideas that were slightly more sophisticated than their own responses.

Responses for each of the three translation skills were described within assessment frameworks involving four levels – Nonstatistical, Single Statistical Aspect, Inadequate Covariation, and Appropriate Covariation – distinguished by the structure of combining correspondence and variation. Distinguishing features of the levels suggested stages of development that may inform instruction. For development from prior beliefs to data-based judgements, tasks involving counterintuitive covariation were designed to prompt students to engage data. For development from single variables to bivariate data, time was observed as a natural covariate, implicit in statements such as “it’s getting hotter,” with a connotation of order that supported pattern recognition of passing time being associated with
corresponding change in a measured variable. For development from single cases to
global trends, many students represented correspondence in a single pair of values, at
the expense of representing variation. Tasks involving discrete data with few cases,
and the use of case labels in responses, were observed to support the view of two
data values each linked to the same corresponding case label. This consolidated view
of correspondence supported consideration of additional bivariate cases involving
variation. Students tended to articulate covariation using the language of comparison
and change.

Findings were related to issues in the historical development of coordinate
graphing, to findings from educational research in statistics, algebra, science and
psychology, and to recommendations within curriculum documents. Student
representations of statistical covariation were observed to provide a window into
statistical reasoning, and are advocated as a valuable basis for classroom discussions
to help develop statistical literacy.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.01 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.02 STATISTICAL COVARIATION</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.03 UNDERSTANDINGS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF STATISTICAL COVARIATION</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.04 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.05 THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.06 THE EVOLUTION OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.01 HISTORY OF GRAPHING AND COVARIATION</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01.01 Development of Coordinates and Functions</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01.02 Empirical Data of the 17th and 18th Centuries</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01.03 Playfair’s Works</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01.04 Increasing Recognition of the Power of Graphics</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01.05 Contemporary Uses of Graphs</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01.06 Historical Implications</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02 SCHOOL CURRICULUM</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02.01 The Broad Context for Statistics Education</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02.02 Covariation in School Curricula</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02.03 Algebra in School Curricula</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02.04 Data Handling and Graphing in School Curricula</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03 RESEARCH LITERATURE</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.01 Previous Research Reviews and Perceived Gaps</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.02 The Structure of the Review of Research Literature</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.03 Graph Interpretation</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.04 Covariation Interpretation</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.05 Graph Production</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.06 Speculative Data Generation</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.07 Summary of Research and Future Directions</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.08 Prior Research Overlapping this Thesis</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03.09 Summary of Key Terms</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .......................... 3.1

3.01 SUMMARY ............................................................................. 3.1

3.02 RESEARCH AIMS AND EXPECTATIONS .................................. 3.1
  3.02.01 Aim 1 – Assessment Frameworks of Student Responses .... 3.2
  3.02.02 Aim 2 – Evidence of Student Performance ................... 3.3
  3.02.03 Aim 3 – Reasoning and Reactions to Conflicting Responses 3.4
  3.02.04 Aim 4 – Conceptual Development across Skills ............. 3.4

3.03 THEORETICAL ORIENTATION ............................................... 3.5
  3.03.01 Theoretical Developmental Model for Assessment ......... 3.5
  3.03.02 Misconceptions and Cognitive Conflict ....................... 3.7

3.04 DIMENSIONS OF RESEARCH METHODS OF STUDENT ASSESSMENT ............................................................................... 3.12
  3.04.01 Issues in Task Design for Paper-based Questions ......... 3.13
  3.04.02 Issues in Task Design for Interviews ............................ 3.17

3.05 DEVELOPING TASKS ................................................................ 3.20
  3.05.01 Task Development – Data Collection 1 ....................... 3.20
  3.05.02 Task Development – Data Collection 2 ....................... 3.23
  3.05.03 Task Development – Data Collection 3 ....................... 3.24
  3.05.04 Survey Tasks – Data Collection 3 .............................. 3.27
  3.05.05 Interview Tasks – Data Collection 4 ........................... 3.35

3.06 DESIGN AND PROCEDURES .................................................. 3.35
  3.06.01 Participants and Procedures Common Across Data Collections 3.35
  3.06.02 Data Collection 1 ............................................................. 3.37
  3.06.03 Data Collection 2 ............................................................. 3.40
  3.06.04 Data Collection 3 ............................................................. 3.40
  3.06.05 Data Collection 4 – Interviews ...................................... 3.42
  3.06.06 Presentation of Results of Investigations ..................... 3.44
  3.06.07 Summary of Research Design ....................................... 3.45
4.07 INVESTIGATION 3B: HEIGHT VERSUS AGE (INTERVIEWS) .........................................................................................4.59
4.07.01 Introduction and Aims .................................................................................................................................4.59
4.07.02 Task ....................................................................................................................................................................4.59
4.07.03 Participants and Method .................................................................................................................................4.61
4.07.04 Results – Overview ...........................................................................................................................................4.62
4.07.05 Results – Interview Dialogue ..........................................................................................................................4.65
4.07.06 Discussion of Investigation 3B ........................................................................................................................4.69

4.08 INVESTIGATION 4A: TEST SCORES VERSUS STUDY TIME (SURVEYS) ................................................................................................................................................4.72
4.08.01 Introduction and Aims ........................................................................................................................................4.72
4.08.02 Task .....................................................................................................................................................................4.72
4.08.03 Participants and Method .......................................................................................................................................4.73
4.08.04 Quantitative Results ..............................................................................................................................................4.75
4.08.05 Results – Negative Covariation (Q1) ..................................................................................................................4.78
4.08.06 Results – Positive Covariation (Q1*) ...................................................................................................................4.88
4.08.07 Results – No Covariation (Q2) ............................................................................................................................4.90
4.08.08 Discussion of Investigation 4A ..........................................................................................................................4.93

4.09 INVESTIGATION 4B: TEST SCORES VERSUS STUDY TIME (INTERVIEWS) ................................................................................................................................................4.94
4.09.01 Introduction and Aims ........................................................................................................................................4.94
4.09.02 Task .....................................................................................................................................................................4.94
4.09.03 Participants and Method .......................................................................................................................................4.97
4.09.04 Results – Overview ..............................................................................................................................................4.97
4.09.05 Results – Interview Dialogue ............................................................................................................................4.100
4.09.06 Discussion of Investigation 4B ..........................................................................................................................4.105

4.10 INVESTIGATION 5A: HEART DEATHS VERSUS USE OF MOTOR VEHICLES (SURVEYS) ................................................................................................................................................4.107
4.10.01 Introduction and Aims ........................................................................................................................................4.107
4.10.02 Task .....................................................................................................................................................................4.108
4.10.03 Participants and Method .......................................................................................................................................4.109
4.10.04 Quantitative Results ..............................................................................................................................................4.110
4.10.05 Results – Survey Responses ..............................................................................................................................4.111
4.10.06 Discussion of Investigation 5A ..........................................................................................................................4.114
CHAPTER 7. ASSOCIATIONS AMONG SKILLS ........................................... 7.1
  7.01 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................... 7.1
  7.02 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AMONG ASSESSMENT
      FRAMEWORKS ............................................................................. 7.1
  7.03 ASSOCIATION OF TASK 1 (HEART DEATHS) AND TASK 2
      (TELEPHONE CALL RATES) ............................................................. 7.3
  7.04 RESPONSE COUNTS AMONG TASKS FOR SPECULATIVE DATA
      GENERATION ................................................................................ 7.6
  7.05 RESPONSE COUNTS AMONG SKILLS ........................................... 7.10
  7.06 EXAMPLES OF ASSOCIATIONS AMONG RESPONSES .............. 7.15
  7.07 DISCUSSION ............................................................................. 7.25

CHAPTER 8. GENERAL DISCUSSION ...................................................... 8.1
  8.01 ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS ..................................................... 8.1
  8.02 TASKS TO ASSESS THE SKILLS ................................................ 8.3
  8.03 PERFORMANCE BY GRADE LEVEL AND ACROSS TASKS .......... 8.4
  8.04 COGNITIVE CONFLICT ............................................................ 8.7
  8.05 EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS .................................................. 8.8
      8.05.01 From Single Data Points to Global Trends ......................... 8.9
      8.05.02 Ordering Variation to Establish Correspondence ............... 8.11
      8.05.03 From Single Variables to Bivariate Data ......................... 8.13
      8.05.04 From Prior Beliefs to Data-Based Judgments ................. 8.15
      8.05.05 Selecting Variables and Structuring Representations ......... 8.16
      8.05.06 Graphing Conventions .................................................... 8.18
      8.05.07 Broader Statistical Literacy ............................................. 8.21
  8.06 LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY ................................... 8.22
  8.07 FUTURE RESEARCH .................................................................. 8.24
  8.08 CONCLUSION ........................................................................... 8.26

REFERENCES ..................................................................................... R.1

LIST OF APPENDICES ON CD-ROM .................................................. A.1