Trials and Tribulations: Conducting Randomized Experiments in a Socio-Legal Setting

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Introduction

- Around one-third of the population of England and Wales experience one or more ‘difficult to solve' problems.
- People go on to obtain advice to assist in resolving around half of these problems.
- Most people believe that it confers a net benefit. But we do not know how people who receive advice would have fared had they not done so, or vice versa.
Introduction

- The particular problem faced in determining empirically the benefits of advice is that those who obtain it tend to face very different problems from those who do not.
- When comparing the success of those people who obtain advice with the success of those who handle their problems alone, like is not being compared with like.
The benefits of randomization

- Randomized control trials operate on the simple basis that following randomization of participants in a study to ‘intervention' and ‘control' groups.

-- As Orr has described: randomized control trials cut through the clouds of confusing correlations that make the inference of causality so hazardous' in the analysis of non-randomized.
The benefits of randomization

- Among the most important reasons for the relatively low use made of control trials in the social sciences is that the simplicity of the design can be extremely difficult to translate into the complexity of real-life social situations.
To conduct a trial to establish the impact of debt advice, that there is little more to do than:

1. recruit a group of participants who have current debt problems,
2. collect details of their circumstances, randomly allocate half to an advice group, provide them with advice and then
3. collect follow-up details for comparison.
Recruitment of participants

- It was suggested early on that the trial be conducted using participants drawn from Jobcentres.
- The preliminary Jobcentre screening had involved 16 Jobcentres, 8,367 attendees, and 3,163 interviews.
- They yielded 1,657 potential trial participants, of whom 709 were formally screened through subsequent telephone interviews conducted by BMG Social Research.
The intervention

- National Debtline – an independent nationwide provider of free-to-user telephone debt advice – offered to provide the intervention advice.
- The use of National Debtline within the study could ensure a degree of uniformity of intervention.
- It was decided that the intervention should be defined formally as being the offer of advice, rather than the provision of advice.
We were interested in measuring the wider economic, social and health impact of advice. such as health, anxiety, and relationship satisfaction.

For health we adopted the five main questions of the EuroQol EQ-5D43 and

For anxiety we adopted a six-item short form of the State Trait Anxiety Index (STAI-6).

However, in most other cases, we ended up using measures we defined ourselves.
Outcome measures

- With hindsight, we may have been better served seeking fewer details of financial circumstances and incorporating a broader range of detailed reliable validated measures.
Sample Size

- We had originally aimed for 500 participants per group. Our eventual sample size calculation, conducted late in March 2005, deemed the sample should be 154 per group at the time of 50-week follow-up.
- This was based on 80 per cent power of detecting an effect with 95 per cent confidence.
Implementation

- Of the 709 potential trial participants who were formally screened, 402 were found to be eligible for inclusion in the trial.
- Unfortunately, the ‘forces of the real world' worked to limit the reach of the intervention in the IDARP trial.
Implementation

1. As 10 per cent of intervention group participants declined the offer of advice on allocation.
2. Slightly more than this number then declined advice when contacted by National Debtline.
3. Thirteen per cent were successfully contacted by National Debtline, but asked to be called back later and could not subsequently be contacted.
4. Almost 10 per cent of participants in the control group went on to obtain advice of some form.
Implementation

- Over 40 per cent of the sample was lost. Just 234 of the 402 participants remained in the trial at 20-week follow-up.
- Potential explanations:
  1. Some participants allocated to the intervention group may have felt they did not need advice;
  2. More than one-quarter of those who were successfully followed-up after 20 weeks were found to have moved home in the meantime;
  3. Some participants may have been inhibited by the stigma of debt.
Implementation

- As just 234 participants remained in the trial at 20-weeks, the trial was halted in accordance with the stopping rule outlined above.
The ethics of random allocation

- Alongside our early preparations for the IDARP trial there was much debate about whether the trial was ethical.

- A commonly raised ethical objection to the use of random control trials involve denial of a benefit to those individuals allocated to the control group.
The ethics of random allocation

- However, the absence of clear evidence gives rise to an imperative to establish the value of a service, especially where such services are publicly funded.
- After all, the provision of an ineffective (or even an inefficient) service robs the public of the opportunity to generate benefits elsewhere.
Looking to the Future

- The trial did not, because of insufficient power, allow for a clear cost-benefit analysis of the offer of advice.
  1. However, it yielded a statistically significant finding that the intervention increased the likelihood that people would regard their situation as improved.
  2. It also generated evidence that the intervention led to people being more knowledgeable about their financial circumstances, more focused on dealing with priority debt, and more optimistic about their future prospects.
Looking to the Future

What are the lessons to take from the IDARP trial?

1. It is clear that a timetable should be adopted that allows for extensive developmental and piloting work.

2. Careful attention should be paid not only to defining and identifying the means to attain the population eligible for inclusion in the trial, but also to external validity.

3. Power calculations should factor in likely intervention ‘fidelity' and sample attrition - both of which greatly influence the ultimate power of a study.