

DISSEMINATING QUANTITATIVE STUDIES TO THE MEDIA

Paper on virginity pledges published in *Pediatrics* on December 29, 2008.

- Used 3:1 exact and nearest-neighbor matching within propensity score calipers using R Matchit package and verified balance on 120 variables.
- Control variables at wave 1, pledge at wave 2, outcomes at wave 3.
- Data: nationally-representative sample of 289 virginity pledgers and 3400 non-pledgers. After matching, 645 non-pledgers.

Media interviews mainly December 22, 2008 –January 6, 2009. High profile media sources mentioned statistics.

- NBC’s Today Show, December 29, 2008. PhD psychologist Laura Berman presented paper:

“This was a much more comprehensive study that used much more complicated statistics than just a simple regression analysis than prior studies had used. Most importantly, the prior studies did not match the teens on other variables so they compared pledgers and non-pledgers, but there were no other similarities on religious background, sexual attitudes and other social attitudes. In this study, they were similar on 120 social and emotional variables. The main difference was that they took the pledge versus didn’t take the pledge, so in this study they were looking at like teens.”
- Wall Street journal op-ed, William McGurn, January 6, 2009.

“[T]he only way the study’s author, Janet Elise Rosenbaum of Johns Hopkins University, could reach such results was by comparing teens who take a virginity pledge with a very small subset of other teens: those who are just as religious and conservative as the pledge-takers.”
- Christianity Today, January 7, 2009. S Illinois University political science professor Tobin Grant describes “a newer, more effective method to analyze data.”

“Rosenbaum uses a newer, more appropriate method for this type of research called ‘propensity score matching.’ The method has become very popular in the social and behavioral sciences because it allows the researcher to have much more confidence that the differences in outcomes (in this case, of sexual behavior) are due to different ‘treatments’ (taking a pledge or not). Rosenbaum is able to test whether virginity pledges per se make a difference in sexual behavior, or if the differences between pledge takers and all other teenagers are due to some other cause... In contrast [to previous research], Rosenbaum’s research provides a more rigorous test of the effects of taking a virginity pledge.”

MEDIA INTERVIEW

Journalists gather evidence. They hold your paper in their hand, so they want to focus interview on issues beyond the paper.

Typical questions:

- Summarize the paper: background, method, result, implications.
- What's most important? Is the finding surprising?
- How did you come to study this subject? Why was this study conducted?
- **What's the take home point?** How should the average person act differently due to your research? This answer influences the framing of story.
- Note that only the first question is within the paper itself. The rest is educated speculation.

HOW TO TALK TO THE MEDIA

- Before you go beyond the paper, make sure they understand the paper itself.
 - You know what they need to know. Direct the interview. E.g., “Let’s back up so I can tell you the background.”
 - Today Show interview began with producer saying that everything was self-explanatory because she had read the paper. Without backing up, the segment would not have mentioned the statistical method.
- Write talking points both on the study itself and beyond the study. Make sure your quotes are quotable.
- Use vivid terms and analogies to describe statistics. E.g., “matching is comparing apples to apples, while regression uses arithmetic to try to turn an orange into an apple.”
- Avoid jargon and clichés (e.g., “controlling for”). They all get tuned out.
- As a last resort, you can invoke statistical authority. E.g., “Is sample big enough to be representative?”
- Avoid long and compound sentences. Structure thoughts according to listeners’ interests: e.g., start with motivation and then say what you did.
- Practice, practice, practice. All of this is easier said than done. Formats: 10, 30, 60 seconds, 5 minutes, 20-60 minutes.
- Again: make sure you have at least one lively punchy quote.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLITICALLY SENSITIVE ISSUES

- Avoid negative language and ask journalists to avoid.
- Send note and press release to “the other side” if they have helped you.
- Consideration is rewarded with better coverage or, if they can’t say anything nice, no coverage. (E.g., Fox News, Baptist Press, Christianity Today, Family News in Focus radio.)