

Using Unobtrusive Sensors to Measure and Minimize Hawthorne Effects: Evidence from Cookstoves

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People act differently when they know they are being observed. This phenomenon, the Hawthorne effect, biases estimates of program impacts. Unobtrusive sensors substituting for human observation can remove this bias. To demonstrate this potential, we used temperature loggers to measure fuel-efficient cookstoves as a replacement for three-stone fires. We find a large Hawthorne effect: when in-person measurement begins participants increase fuel-efficient stove use approximately three hours/day (54%) and reduce three-stone fire use by approximately two hours/day (32%). When in-person measurement ends, participants reverse those changes. Our results reinforce concerns about Hawthorne effects, and demonstrate that sensors can sometimes provide a solution.

Keywords: observation bias, Hawthorne effect, sensors, improved cookstoves, monitoring and evaluation, impact evaluation

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Introduction

The validity of empirical research depends on the quality of the underlying data. Unlike the physical sciences, for which data often is generated in controlled laboratory settings, the social sciences construct variables involving human behaviors that make ensuring high data quality a challenge. Respondents often do not answer surveys candidly (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2001) and the act of surveying can change later behaviors of those being surveyed (Zwane et al. 2011). These drawbacks to surveys have been one factor contributing to a push for more experiments in social science research (Falk and Heckman 2009; Banerjee and Duflo 2009; Duflo, Glennerster, and Kremer 2008). While much has been learned from social science experiments they are prone to issues less prevalent in the physical sciences, such as observation bias or Hawthorne effect.

We explore an emerging class of technology—small, inexpensive, and unobtrusive sensors—as a remedy to the Hawthorne effect. A growing variety of sensors have become available to researchers. GPS trackers and motion detectors, for example, allow non-obtrusive measurement of subject location and body movements (Ermes et al. 2008). Medical doctors wear badges with sensors that detect the scent of alcohol used in hand sanitizers to alert the doctor and/or patient if the doctor has not washed his or her hands recently (Smith 2014). Loop detectors installed in the lanes of freeways allow monitoring of congestion and driver behavior (Bento et al. 2014).

The degree to which these sensors interfere with subjects' behavior can vary widely. In some cases, individuals may self-select to be observed to intentionally motivate a behavioral response. For example, long-distance bikers and runners can opt into programs that will report the location, time, and speed of excursions to a website that others can monitor (Mueller et al. 2010). Such schemes are intended to use peer observation as a motivation aid. In other cases, such as room occupancy detectors that control lighting and climate control, the sensor may be far more unnoticed (Buchanan, Russo, and Anderson 2014).

We demonstrate a technique to remedy the Hawthorne effect that uses unobtrusive temperature sensors to conduct a small-scale evaluation of technology adoption within a set of households in Uganda. We use minimally invasive temperature sensors to measure usage of the new technology, fuel-efficient cookstoves, and the old technology, traditional three-stone fires.¹ We then compare usage in periods when observers visit the households each day with periods when no observers are present. A major challenge for direct observational studies is that they alter participants' behavior (as noted in the cookstove literature (Ezzati, Saleh, and Kammen 2000; Smith-Sivertsen et al. 2009) and in social sciences more broadly (Schwartz et al. 2013; Leonard and Masatu 2010; Das, Hammer, and Leonard 2008; Leonard 2008; Levitt and List 2007; Leonard and Masatu 2006)). We find a large

¹ A three-stone fire is simply three large stones, approximately the same height, on which a cooking pot is balanced over a fire.

Hawthorne effect: households increase the use of the fuel-efficient stove and decrease the use of three-stone fires when observers are present.

In our setting, the daily observers measured wood use and household exposure to particulate matter. Thus, those observations will be affected by changes in cooking patterns due to the presence of observers. Once the magnitude of this Hawthorne effect is known, we can adjust the hours of stove use per day when observers were present, and estimate unbiased impacts of how fuel-efficient stoves affect wood use and exposure to particulate matter.

Methods

We executed a series of randomized control trials in rural areas of the Mbarara District in southwestern Uganda from February to September 2012. Upon arriving in a new parish, staff displayed the fuel-efficient stove (Envirofit G-3300)² and offered it for sale to anyone who wanted to purchase at 40,000 Ugandan Shillings (approximately USD \$16, see (Levine et al. 2013) for an overview of the sales contract). Consumers who wanted to buy the stove were randomly assigned into two groups (early buyers, late buyers). We asked both early buyers and late buyers if they would agree to have a temperature data logger placed on their traditional stoves immediately. Then approximately two weeks later the early buyers received their first Envirofit stove, and approximately four to five weeks after that the late buyers received their first Envirofit stove. In each parish, more than twelve households agreed to join the study; therefore among those that agreed, we randomly selected twelve households per parish for the usage study.

Approximately four weeks after late buyers received their Envirofits, both groups were surprised with a second Envirofit stove. Common cooking practices in the area require two simultaneous cooking pots (for example rice and beans, or *matooke* (starchy cooking banana) and a sauce); therefore, because the Envirofit is sized for one cooking pot, we gave a second Envirofit to enable normal cooking behavior as much as possible. The experimental analysis of how the new stoves affected stove usage and other outcomes (wood use, exposure to particulate matter, and so forth) are not the focus on this paper and are analyzed elsewhere. The study tracked stove usage both before and after the purchase of a fuel-efficient stove in fourteen rural parishes in Mbarara (168 total households).

To track usage, we used small, inexpensive and unobtrusive sensors: stove use monitors (SUMs) that record stove temperatures without the need for an observer to be present.³ Using SUMs to log stove temperatures was suggested by (Ruiz-

² Product manufacturer states that the Envirofit G-3300 reduces smoke and harmful gasses by up to 80%, reduces biomass fuel use by up to 60% and reduces cooking time by up to 50%. For more details see: <http://www.envirofit.org/products/?sub=cookstoves&pid=10>.

³ The SUMs used for our project, iButtons™ manufactured by Maxim Integrated Products, Inc., are small stainless steel temperature sensors about the size of a small coin and the thickness of a watch battery which can be affixed to any stove type. Our SUMs record temperatures with an accuracy of +/- 1.3 degrees C up to 85°C. For additional details see the product description website at: <http://berkeleyair.com/services/stove-use-monitoring-system-sums/> The SUMs cost approximately

Mercado et al. 2008). We installed SUMs on two Envirofits and the primary three-stone fire (a few households had a second SUM on the secondary three-stone fire, we examine those data in robustness checks).

We also performed standard kitchen performance tests (KPT) (Bailis, Smith, and Edwards 2007) in each household to measure the quantity of fuel wood used, record detailed food diaries, and measure household air pollution. The KPT lasts approximately a week and involves daily visits by a small team of researchers weighing wood, monitoring household air particulate monitors, and collecting survey data on stove usage over the last 24 hours and related topics. Comparing stove usage calculated from the temperature data collected by the SUMs in the week while KPT measurement teams are present versus stove usage in the week before and after the measurement week provides a test of a Hawthorne effect.

We use an algorithm to convert temperature data into daily minutes of stove use (Simons et al. 2014).⁴

Specification

Assign the subscripts $t=-1$ to the week prior to measurement week, $t=0$ to the measurement week, and $t=1$ to the week after the measurement week. Let the coefficient on stove type $s = TSF$ for three-stone fire or ENV for Envirofit, and $Adjacent_Week$ be a dummy variable for an adjacent week ($t=-1$ or $t=1$). The regression is modeled using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) as:

$$H_{it}^S = B^S * Adjacent_Week + I_i + e_{it} \quad (1)$$

where H_{it}^S is the total hours cooked per day on stove type s for household i during the week, I_i is fixed effects for the individual household (controls for household level characteristics that don't change over these three weeks like family size, income, housing, etc.), and e_{it} is an error term. The coefficient B^S is the estimate of how different (in hours cooked per day) the average adjacent week is compared to a measurement week on stove type s . Standard errors are clustered at the household.

To test the weeks separately, we use a slightly different specification. Let H_{it-1}^S be a dummy variable equal to 1 for the week before the measurement week (when $t=-1$) and 0 otherwise, and let H_{it+1}^S be a dummy variable equal to 1 for the week after the measurement week (when $t=1$) and 0 otherwise. Then the regression is modeled using OLS as:

USD\$16 each and could record temperature data for 24 hours a day for six weeks in a household before needing minimal servicing from a technician. After the data download they can be reset and re-used.

⁴ Overnight, while most participants report sleeping, SUMs record the residual heat absorbed in the large stones of the three stone fires and/or from coals banked overnight. Therefore our algorithm overestimates overnight cooking of three stone fires. We adjust for this in the subsequent analysis. For further discussion and a description of the technical adjustment see Harrell et al. (2014).

$$H_{it}^S = \gamma_1^S * H_{it-1}^S + \gamma_2^S * H_{it+1}^S + I_i + e_{it} \quad (2)$$

where I_i is household fixed effects and γ_1^S is the estimate of the difference (in hours cooked per day) of the week before the measurement week compared to the measurement week. The coefficient of γ_2^S is the estimate of the difference cooked in the week after the measurement week compared to the measurement week. Standard errors are clustered at the household.

Results

In the week before the observers arrived (when $t=-1$), primary three-stone fires were used 5.99 hours per day (95% CI = [4.77 to 7.21]) and combined usage on Envirofits was 5.53 hours per day (95% CI = [4.36 to 6.71]). Regression results are in Table 1. On average, usage of the Envirofit stoves is 2.97 hours higher during the measurement week than during the adjacent weeks (95% CI = [1.79 to 4.15], $p<0.01$, column 3). This increase is matched by a reduction of 1.78 hours in usage of the three-stone fire (95% CI = [0.86 to 2.70], $p<0.01$, col. 1).

In columns 2 and 4 we relax the assumption that stove usage is the same in the week prior to and the week after our measurement period. Contrasted with the measurement week, households use their primary three-stone fire 1.17 hours per day more in the prior week (95% CI = [0.10 to 2.24], $p<0.05$, col. 2) and 2.37 hours more in the following week (95% CI = [1.12 to 3.62], $p<0.01$). These coefficients are jointly significantly different than zero ($p<0.01$), but not statistically significantly different from each other ($p=0.10$).

The total usage of Envirofits follows a mirror image (col. 4), and is 2.58 hours per day lower in the week prior to measurement week than in measurement week (95% CI = [1.21 to 3.94], $p<0.01$) and 3.30 hours per day lower the following week (95% CI = [2.04 to 4.57], $p<0.01$). These coefficients are jointly significantly different from zero ($p<0.01$), but not statistically significantly different from each other ($p=0.20$).

Adjusting for the Hawthorne effect

Because the kitchen performance test is widely used to measure the effects of new cookstoves on fuel usage and household air pollution (Smith et al. 2007), estimates of how new stoves affect fuel use and carbon emissions may be substantially biased. The same bias can arise in studies, such as ours, that measure household air pollution or health effects with repeated household visits.

The field of epidemiology has efficacy trials (testing the effects of an intervention under ideal conditions) and effectiveness trials (testing the effects of an intervention under realistic conditions) (Flay 1986). In the context of cookstoves, the kitchen performance test provides a valid measure of how the new stove affects wood usage during the measurement week (efficacy); however, we need to adjust for the gap in usage between measurement weeks and weeks when no observers are influencing behaviors to generalize to weeks without daily visits (that is, to estimate effectiveness).

Consider the following illustrative example. Assume that households without Envirofits use three-stone fires twelve hours per day and households with Envirofits use three-stone fires nine hours a day and Envirofits four hours a day. During the KPT, households with Envirofits use three-stone fires seven hours a day and Envirofits six hours per day. Assume that three-stone fires create one unit and Envirofits create a half unit of pollution per hour.

With these illustrative assumptions, pollution per day declines from twelve units prior to the introduction of an Envirofit to eleven units of pollution ($9 + (\frac{1}{2} \cdot 4) = 11$) once the Envirofit is present, a decline of 8.33%. However, if instead we used the data from the kitchen performance test, we would estimate a decline in pollution from twelve units to ten units ($7 + (\frac{1}{2} \cdot 6) = 10$), a decline of 16.67%, or twice the true decline. While these figures are merely illustrative, they show the importance of adjusting data to minimize bias caused by Hawthorne effects.

Discussion

We demonstrate a technique to measure the magnitude of a Hawthorne effect in an experimental setting in the developing world and remove it. While other forms of unobtrusive objective monitoring exist—such as using administrative records when reliable (Angrist, Bettinger, and Kremer 2006) or tracking take up at a remote location via redeemed vouchers (Dupas 2009; Dupas 2014)—the recent explosion of small, inexpensive, and unobtrusive sensors expands researchers' ability to quantify and remove observation bias. A wide variety of emerging technologies can be utilized, a partial list includes: smart phones tracking locations through GPS, remote sensors that detect latrine usage (Clasen et al. 2012), sensors to remotely detect the use of water filters (Thomas et al. 2013), medical devices to monitor the hand hygiene of medical professionals (Boyce 2011), smart grid or other energy monitors (Darby 2010), and pedometers or other devices that monitor physical activity (Bravata et al. 2007). Adjusting for Hawthorne effects is important if the results of impact evaluations are intended to generalize beyond periods of intense in-person observation.

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Table 1

Regressions testing for Hawthorne effect: estimates of effects of the presence of measurement team in primary three stone fire (TSF) usage and combined Envirofit usage, the coefficients represent the change in hours cooked per day compared to hours cooked per day in the measurement week

	Primary TSF		Combined Envirofit	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Week prior to and after measurement week constrained to be equal	1.78*** (0.46)		-2.97*** (0.60)	
Week prior to measurement week		1.17** (0.54)		-2.58*** (0.69)
Week after measurement week		2.37*** (0.63)		-3.30*** (0.64)
Household fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	316	316	229	229
R-squared	0.82	0.82	0.79	0.79
Household clusters	118	118	89	89

Standard errors clustered at household level in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: The unit of analysis is a measurement “week” (approximately 72 hours) at a household. The specification in columns 1 and 3 imposes that the weeks prior to and after the measurement week are equal. The specification in columns 2 and 4 tests usage in the week prior to and after the measurement week separately. The coefficient estimates in column 2 are jointly significantly not equal to zero (p<0.01), but not statistically different from each other (p=0.10). The coefficient estimates in column 4 are jointly significantly not equal to zero (p<0.01), but not statistically different from each other (p=0.20).