🌻 Granularity, generalisability and chunking are coding problems for causal mapping too

> From (Powell et al. 2024)

An illustrative example

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A positive feature of causal maps, illustrated by the Figure, is that they capture a lot of information in a way that is quick and easy to understand. This example reveals that Source S provided a narrative that connects the intervention to improved feeling of wellbeing as a direct consequence of taking more exercise and via the effect of this on their health. This source also suggests a positive feedback loop, with more exercise making them more physically fit and encouraging even more exercise. The information from Source T is more fragmented; there are two causal statements claiming that improved feeling of wellbeing can result from more exercise and improved health, although T does not link the two causally, nor make any causal link back to the intervention. In addition, T suggests that an additional factor, 'more confidence in the future', also contributes to improved feeling of wellbeing. The two sources of evidence do agree on certain points; there is scope for generalisation beyond either individual source (and can be scaled up from here), both in assessing the multiple outcomes of the intervention and in understanding what explains improved feeling of wellbeing. Generalisability is strengthened when a link is reported by different sources in different contexts. We believe that within causal mapping, we should never make the mistake of thinking that stronger evidence for a causal link is evidence that the causal link is strong; only that there is more evidence for it.

Relevant page: Strong evidence for a link is not evidence of a strong link ▸

. The example also reveals some potential weaknesses of causal maps. First, there is ambiguity about the precise meaning of the labels and the extent to which their use is conceptually equivalent between the two sources. There is also ambiguity about whether they are referring to their own personal experience (and if so, over what period) or speaking in more general terms. Furthermore, the diagram sacrifices details, including how the statements shown relate to the wider context within which each source is situated. To mitigate this, an important feature of any causal mapping procedure is how easily it permits the user to trace back from the diagram to the underlying transcripts and key information about the source (e.g. gender, age, location etc.). Where this is possible, the diagram can be regarded in part as an index or

contents page – an efficient route to searching the full database to pull out all the data relating to a specific factor or causal link, in order to validate any conclusions we draw. In particular, we recommend as a technique to mitigate this danger.

Relevant page: The transitivity trap ▸

Related

- chapter intro

References

Powell, Copestake, & Remnant (2024). *Causal Mapping for Evaluators*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890231196601.