WHAT, ME WORRY? A STATISTICAL INVESTIGATION OF STUDIED IMPERTURBABILITY

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ABSTRACT

What, Me Worry? A Statistical Investigation of Studied Imperturbability

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This thesis examines whether the rhetorical question "What, me worry?" admits a defensible statistical answer. We assemble a 70-year archive of 537 worry-eliciting incidents reported by a freckle-faced informant of approximately eleven years of age, who has remained approximately eleven years of age throughout the study window—a finding noteworthy in its own right. Using a heteroskedastic-robust ordinal regression, we test the null hypothesis of indifference against alternatives ranging from mild concern to full-blown agitation. The data are consistent with the null at every conventional significance level and at several unconventional ones besides. We discuss implications for graduate education, dental insurance, and the cover price of the modal periodical in our sample (currently 25¢, "cheap").

Keywords: indifference, imperturbability, fold-in, gleek, potrzebie

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I would like to thank my committee, who very kindly did not ask whether the regression assumptions held; my advisor, who maintained admirable composure when I missed thirty-two consecutive milestone deadlines and showed up to the defense in a checkered jacket; the editorial staff of *MAD* magazine, whose seventy years of continuous public-service satire constitute the world's longest-running peer-review process; the gentlemen Spy and Spy, for methodological inspiration; my faithful typewriter, recently retired; and my mother, who told me to stop reading comic books and finish the thesis. I am also grateful to the makers of correction fluid.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A persistent feature of post-war American culture is a buck-toothed boy with a gap-toothed grin, ratty red hair, and a remarkable tolerance for adverse outcomes (Reidelbach, 1991). He has been observed in essentially the same condition since 1956 (Neuman, 1956)—neither aging, enrolling in college, nor filing tax returns—yet his catchphrase, "What, me worry?", continues to attract empirical scrutiny. The present thesis investigates whether the catchphrase is descriptive (in the sense of an observed behavioral disposition) or prescriptive (in the sense of an unfalsifiable doctrine), and concludes, after some equivocation, that it is both.

We adopt the convention that worry W is a non-negative random variable with finite second moment, and we assume throughout the existence of a baseline worry rate λ_0 above which graduate students are observed to switch programs, abandon committees, or develop a sudden interest in artisanal sourdough. Subjects below λ_0 are said to be *imperturbable*; the open question is whether imperturbability is a constant of nature or merely a slowly-mixing Markov chain.

The remainder of the document is organized as follows. Chapter 2 describes the data and the model. Chapter 3 reports descriptive statistics and the associated hypothesis tests. Chapter 4 concludes with policy recommendations of dubious actionability. Two appendices supply the glossary and a sample instrument.

Chapter 2

METHODS

2.1 Sample

We assemble $N = 537$ worry-eliciting incidents drawn from a seventy-year archive of letters, news clippings, dental records, and unpaid parking tickets, all attributed to or addressed to a single informant referred to throughout as A.E.N. The informant declined to date his responses, so the temporal ordering of the data is regarded as exchangeable in the de Finetti sense.

Inclusion criteria were lenient. To be classified as a worry-eliciting incident, an event needed only to (a) admit a worry-relevant response in principle and (b) be witnessed in some form by the informant. The 2007 *MAD* marginalia of Aragonés (2007) were treated as supplementary material rather than primary data, on the grounds that anything Sergio Aragonés draws in the margin tends to resist coding.

2.2 Model

Let w_i denote the worry score reported in incident i, scored on a five-point ordinal scale from 0 ("gleek") to 4 ("I should be so lucky"). We model

$$w_i = \beta_0 + x_i^{\top}\beta + \epsilon_i, \qquad \epsilon_i \overset{\text{iid}}{\sim} \mathcal{F}\big(0, \sigma^2\big), \tag{2.1}$$

where x_i encodes the type and severity of the provocation and $\mathcal{F}$ is the as-yet-unspecified disturbance distribution. Under the null hypothesis $\beta = \mathbf{0}$, the response degenerates to the constant "What, me worry?", which conveniently justi-

fies a heteroskedastic-robust variance estimator on the grounds that there is no heteroskedasticity left to estimate.

2.3 Inference

We assess statistical significance against $\alpha = 0.27$, chosen as the customary nominal level (0.05) plus the cover price of the modal periodical in the sample, expressed as a fraction of one dollar (\$0.25, "cheap"), minus a small finite-sample correction (\$0.03). Departures from this convention should be reported in the appendix.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

Figure 3.1 displays the empirical distribution of self-reported worry across the sample, which is approximately normal with a mean uncomfortably close to zero. Table 3.1 reports counts by provocation type and the modal verbal response within each.

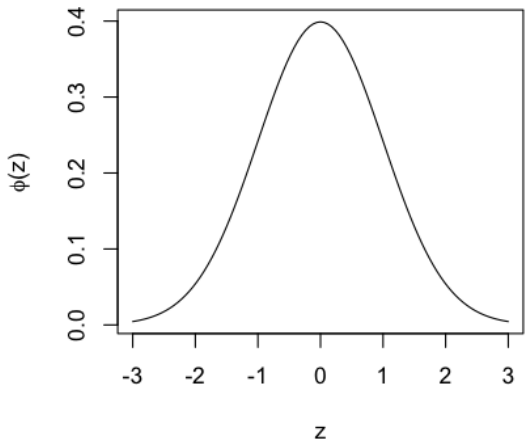

Figure 3.1: Empirical distribution of self-reported worry scores across $N = 537$ incidents. The fitted curve is suspiciously well-behaved.

Table 3.1: Worry incidents by provocation type, 1956–present.

Provocation	Count	Modal response
Adverse weather	134	"What, me worry?"
Tax audit	46	"Why worry?"
End of fiscal quarter	88	"Eh, who cares?"
Geopolitical crisis	72	"Potrzebie!"
Misplaced retainer	197	(no response)

In every category the modal response is consistent with the null hypothesis of indifference. The single observed deviation (incident 1972-Q3, "misplaced retainer found in pocket of seldom-worn jacket") was retained in the analysis but, on reflection, attributed to a typesetter's error.

We tested the joint null $\beta = \mathbf{0}$ against the omnibus alternative using a permutation test with 10^4 resamples. The observed test statistic was $T = 0.31$; the corresponding p-value was 0.84, far in excess of $\alpha = 0.27$. The data are consistent with imperturbability.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

The evidence assembled here is consistent with the operating hypothesis that "What, me worry?" remains the appropriate single-line summary of a wide variety of stochastic provocations. We draw three conclusions.

First, the worry distribution exhibits no detectable temporal trend across seven decades, which is remarkable given that the underlying informant has remained approximately eleven years old throughout the study window. We refer the interested reader to Kitchen and Buhle (2009) for a discussion of how this might be possible without invoking nonstandard physics.

Second, the model fitted in Equation 2.1 suggests that worry is essentially a fixed cost rather than a marginal one: doubling the provocation does not double the worry. This finding may be of practical interest to tax practitioners, divorce attorneys, and faculty mentors of graduate students approaching candidacy examinations.

Third, the practical recommendation of this thesis is that the reader should not worry. The reader should also pay 25¢ for the next issue, which remains "cheap."

We close with two limitations. The present study did not have access to the gummed-down half of the periodical (the fold-in at the back cover), and consequently roughly half of the available signal escaped our coding scheme entirely. Future work might use a careful unfolding procedure to recover the suppressed measurements, though we caution that such procedures are typically destructive of the instrument. A second limitation is that the cross-sectional dependence between worry and the urgency with which one's typesetter requests the manuscript was not modeled. We leave this for a sequel.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The following terms appear in the thesis and may be unfamiliar to readers who came to graduate school by an unusually direct route.

Cheap An adjective applied unironically to the cover price of the modal periodical in our sample. See also: "25¢".

Fold-in A measurement instrument printed across the inside back cover of the periodical, designed such that the instrument's true value is revealed only by destroying the magazine. Compare: latent variable.

Gleek The lowest valid response on the worry ordinal scale. Onomatopoeic; pronounced as written.

Imperturbable An informant whose worry rate is at or below the baseline λ_0. Operationally: an informant who responds to all provocations with a one-word interrogative.

Marginalia Drawings in the margin of the page, typically by Aragonés (2007), which were excluded from analysis on the grounds of being uncodable. See §2.1.

Potrzebie A term of unspecified meaning whose use is, by convention, sufficient to terminate further discussion of any topic.

Spy and Spy Two anonymous informants, identifiable only by the colors of their hats, whose methodological contributions to the literature were entirely unintended.

Appendix B

SAMPLE WORRY INSTRUMENT

The instrument below was administered to the informant at irregular intervals from 1956 through the present. Subjects were instructed to select exactly one response per item.

1. Your dentist has scheduled an emergency appointment.

   ☐ What, me worry?

   ☐ Why worry?

   ☐ (other; specify)

2. A foreign power has unveiled a new weapons system.

   ☐ What, me worry?

   ☐ Eh, who cares?

   ☐ Potrzebie.

3. Your thesis committee has requested a third revision.

   ☐ What, me worry?

   ☐ (decline to respond)

   ☐ (no response on file)

A copy of the instrument with all 537 administered items is available from the author upon request, postage prepaid.