

17.871

Spring 2015

Hard-Nosed Empiricist Assignment

Assignment

Write a paragraph or two about a causal claim that you believe (or someone you know believes), but for which you are unaware of any scientific evidence. Briefly, look up and describe one or two studies on your causal claim.¹ You can choose causal claims about politics or about humans more generally. (E.g., “Romney lost because he was out of touch” or “People get sick because of cold weather.”)

Two days before you make your presentation, e-mail me the study you will discuss. (Be prepared for me to say it doesn’t fit the assignment.)

On the day of your presentation, turn in your paragraph to me.

In your paragraph, briefly answer the following questions:

1. What is the causal claim? That is, what x is causing what y ?
2. What have researchers found? Check Google scholar, etc.
3. Did researchers use experimental studies? Or are the studies merely observational?
4. Are there any obvious problems with the studies?

Your causal claim must be at least somewhat widely believed and non-trivial. If in doubt, search for it using a search engine or peruse skeptical.com or snopes.com.

¹ One type of study I do **not** want you discussing is a clinical trial. Also, please choose a topic and a study that can be explained quickly to the class.