Random Control Groups Are Not Attribution

We should be careful in our use of the word “attribution”. That word does not apply to RCTs.

The dictionary definition of “attribution” is:

- the action of **regarding** something as being caused by a person or thing.
  "the electorate was disillusioned with his immediate attribution of the bombings to a separatist group"
- the action of **ascribing** a work or remark to a particular author, artist, or person.
  "the study of Constable is fraught with problems of attribution"
- the action of **regarding** a quality or feature as characteristic of or possessed by a person or thing.
  "the attribution of human emotions to inanimate objects"

In other words, attribution is **suppositional**. **Suppose** X is the cause of Y. **What if** X were the cause of Y? Attribution is **subjunctive** – dictionary defined as “relating to or denoting a mood of verbs expressing **what is imagined or wished or possible**”.

So, my point is that we should not fall into the sloppy habit of treating the word “attribution” as if it is the umbrella supercategory that sits over and includes RCTs as well as MMM, MTA, and singlesource. RCT is in a class by itself – it is not *regarding* X *as* a cause, it is *proving* that X *is* a cause. It is establishing scientific fact.

This is not a trivial epistemological distinction – it is the whole point of using attribution to generate testable hypotheses, and then using RCTs to test those hypotheses, before committing millions of dollars to a specific media/creative combination called a campaign.

If RCT were attribution too, there would be no point in using it to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses drawn from attribution.

Best to all,

Bill