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# Estimating the approximation error when fixing unessential factors in global sensitivity analysis

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One of the major settings of global sensitivity analysis is that of fixing non-influential factors, in order to reduce the dimensionality of a model. However, this is often done without knowing the magnitude of the approximation error being produced. This paper presents a new theorem for the estimation of the average approximation error generated when fixing a group of non-influential factors. A simple function where analytical solutions are available is used to illustrate the theorem. The numerical estimation of small sensitivity indices is discussed.

*Keywords:* Sobol' method; Approximation error; Sensitivity analysis by groups; Sensitivity indices

## 1. Introduction

This work is related to global sensitivity analysis based on the use of ANOVA decomposition and global sensitivity indices (see [1,6–8] for theory, and [3,4] for applications). Definitions of the sensitivity indices can be found in Section 2.

Different settings for sensitivity analysis are available, depending on the modeler's needs. One of these is the factors fixing setting. It is used for identifying non-influential factors in the model (those factors that can be fixed at any value in their domains without significantly reducing the output variance). A limit with factor fixing is that of fixing unessential factors without knowing the magnitude of the approximation error that is being produced. In Section 2, we prove one new theorem which quantifies this approximation error of the model output when one factor or a group of factors is fixed. So, once we

know from total indices that a factor is unessential, we will also have an estimate of the error that is generated by fixing it.

In this paper we study a model function  $f(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ , where the factors  $x_1, \dots, x_n$  are non-random independent scaled variables:  $0 \leq x_1 \leq 1, \dots, 0 \leq x_n \leq 1$ . Thus the point  $x = (x_1, \dots, x_n)$  is defined in the  $n$ -dimensional unit hypercube with Lebesgue measure. Clearly the factors  $x_1, \dots, x_n$  can be regarded as independent random variables uniformly distributed in the unit interval  $[0, 1]$ . In this case the quantities that are called variances are real variances of certain random variables.

The sensitivity analysis based on ANOVA decomposition and global sensitivity indices can be easily (mutatis mutandis) generalized to independent random factors  $x_1, \dots, x_n$  with arbitrary distribution functions  $F_1(x_1), \dots, F_n(x_n)$  (e.g., [8]). However, the requirement of independence is important.

Section 2 contains a new theorem, Section 3—an illustration of the theorem, and in Section 4 numerical estimation of small sensitivity indices is discussed.

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## 2. The proposed theorem

Let  $x = (x_1, \dots, x_n)$  be a point in the  $n$ -dimensional unit hypercube with Lebesgue measure. We denote by  $y$  an arbitrary subset consisting of  $s$  variables and let  $z$  be the set of  $n-s$  complementary variables,  $1 \leq s \leq n-1$ . Thus  $x \equiv (y, z)$  and  $dx = dy dz$ . All the integrals below are from 0 to 1 in each variable. The set of variables  $z$  can be regarded as non-essential if the sensitivity index  $S_z^{\text{tot}} \ll 1$ . The common practice in such a situation is to fix somehow a value  $z_0$  and to use  $f(y, z_0)$  as an approximation to  $f(x)$ . The approximation error depends on the choice of  $z_0$ :

$$\delta(z_0) = \frac{1}{D} \int [f(x) - f(y, z_0)]^2 dx, \quad (1)$$

where  $D$  is the variance of  $f(x)$ :  $D = \int f^2 dx - f_0^2$ ,  $f_0 = \int f dx$ . The model function is assumed to be square integrable.

The following theorem shows that  $\delta(z_0)$  is of the same order as  $S_z^{\text{tot}}$ .

**Theorem.** *For an arbitrary  $z_0$  the error  $\delta(z_0) \geq S_z^{\text{tot}}$ . If  $z_0$  is assumed to be random and uniformly distributed, then the expected value is  $E\delta(z_0) = 2S_z^{\text{tot}}$ .*

A corollary of the theorem is the following assertion from [5]: for an arbitrary  $\varepsilon > 0$  with probability exceeding  $1-\varepsilon$

$$\delta(z_0) < \left(1 + \frac{1}{\varepsilon}\right) S_z^{\text{tot}}.$$

In particular (at  $\varepsilon = 0.5$ ), the inequality  $\delta(z_0) < 3S_z^{\text{tot}}$  holds with probability exceeding 0.50.

**Proof.** The ANOVA decomposition of  $f(x)$  can be written in the form

$$f(x) = f_0 + g_1(y) + g_2(z) + g_{12}(x), \quad (2)$$

where  $g_1(y)$  is the sum of all terms that depend on  $y$  variables only and similarly  $g_2(z)$  is the sum of all terms that depend on  $z$  only;  $g_{12}$  is the remainder.

From the definition of ANOVA, one can see that  $\int g_1 dy = \int g_2 dz = \int g_{12} dy = \int g_{12} dz = 0$ .

Consider the variances  $D_y = \int g_1^2 dy$ ,  $D_z = \int g_2^2 dz$ ,  $D_{yz} = \int g_{12}^2 dx$ .

Squaring (2) and integrating over  $dx$  we obtain the relation  $D = D_y + D_z + D_{yz}$  that allows a direct definition of the sensitivity indices for the sets  $y$  and  $z$ :

$$S_z = \frac{D_z}{D}, \quad S_z^{\text{tot}} = \frac{D_z + D_{yz}}{D}, \quad S_y = \frac{D_y}{D}, \quad S_y^{\text{tot}} = \frac{D_y + D_{yz}}{D}.$$

From these definitions one can see that  $S_z^{\text{tot}} = 1 - S_y$ ,  $S_y^{\text{tot}} = 1 - S_z$ .

Now an expression for  $\delta(z_0)$  can be derived:

$$\begin{aligned} \delta(z_0) &= \frac{1}{D} \int [g_2(z) + g_{12}(x) - g_2(z_0) - g_{12}(y, z_0)]^2 dx \\ &= \frac{1}{D} \int [g_2^2(z) + g_{12}^2(x) + g_2^2(z_0) + g_{12}^2(y, z_0)] dx \\ &= \frac{1}{D} \left[ D_z + D_{yz} + g_2^2(z_0) + \int g_{12}^2(y, z_0) dy \right]. \end{aligned}$$

The final result is  $\delta(z_0) = S_z^{\text{tot}} + (1/D)[g_2^2(z_0) + \int g_{12}^2(y, z_0) dy]$ .

Both assertions of the theorem follow immediately:  $\delta(z_0) \geq S_z^{\text{tot}}$  and  $\int \delta(z_0) dz_0 = 2S_z^{\text{tot}}$ .

**Proof of the Corollary.** Consider a non-negative random variable  $\eta = \delta(z_0)/S_z^{\text{tot}} - 1$ . Clearly,  $E\eta = 1$ . A well-known Chebyshev inequality for non-negative random variables with finite expectation can be applied: for an arbitrary  $h > 0$  the probability  $P\{\eta \geq h\} \leq E\eta/h$ .

We put  $\varepsilon = 1/h$  and turn to the opposite event:  $P\{\eta < 1/\varepsilon\} > 1 - \varepsilon$ .

The last relation is equivalent to the assertion of the corollary.

## 3. Analytic example: the $g$ -function

We illustrate the theorem by using the  $g$ -function of Sobol', which is often used as a benchmark for sensitivity analysis exercises (see e.g., [2]) as the exact analytical values can be easily calculated. The function is defined as

$$f = \prod_{i=1}^n g_i(x_i), \quad (3)$$

where  $n$  is the number of independent input factors and  $g_i(x_i)$  is

$$g_i(x_i) = \frac{|4x_i - 2| + a_i}{1 + a_i}, \quad (4)$$

for  $0 \leq x_i \leq 1$  and  $a_i \geq 0$ .

The parameter  $a_i$  is set to determine the importance of the input factor  $x_i$ , given that the range of variation of  $g_i(x_i)$  depends exclusively on the value of  $a_i$ . If  $a_i = 0$ , the corresponding factor  $x_i$  is important; if  $a_i = 1$ ,  $x_i$  is relatively important, while for  $a_i = 9$  it becomes non-important and for  $a_i = 99$  non-significant.

For the function (3) the first-order partial variances are  $D_i = 1/3(1 + a_i)^2$ , the higher order partial variances are products  $D_{i_1 \dots i_s} = D_{i_1} \dots D_{i_s}$ , and the total variance  $D = \prod_{i=1}^n (D_i + 1) - 1$ .

The group variances  $D_y$ ,  $D_z$ ,  $D_y^{\text{tot}} = D_y + D_{yz}$ ,  $D_z^{\text{tot}} = D_z + D_{yz}$  are sums of partial variances. However, integral representations for these variances allow direct numerical computation of their values [6,8].

**Test 1.** *We consider a model with eight input factors, where  $a_i = \{0, 1, 4.5, 9, 99, 99, 99, 99\}$ ,*

so that the eight factors are in decreasing order of importance. Table 1 contains total indices  $S_i^{\text{tot}} = D_i^{\text{tot}}/D$  (the set contains one variable  $x_i$ ).

Let us assume that one of the non-influential factors (e.g.  $x_4$ ) is fixed at  $z_0$ . By substituting (3) into (1) we obtain the expression for  $\delta(z_0)$ :

$$\delta(z_0) = \frac{1}{D} \left[ \frac{1}{(a_4 + 1)^2} (4/3 + 2a_4 + a_4^2) - 2 \frac{|4z_0 - 2| + a_4}{1 + a_4} + \left( \frac{|4z_0 - 2| + a_4}{1 + a_4} \right)^2 \right] \prod_{i=1, i \neq 4}^8 \frac{1}{(1 + a_i)^2} (4/3 + 2a_i + a_i^2).$$

The values of  $\delta(x_4)$  are shown in Fig. 1.

If we calculate  $E[\delta(z_0)]$  we obtain 0.020, which is twice the total index of factor 4. It means that when fixing factor 4, we commit an average error corresponding to 2% of the variance of the original  $g$ -function.

We have selected 100 values  $x_4 = 0.01(k-0.5)$ ,  $1 \leq k \leq 100$ , and computed the corresponding errors  $\delta(x_4)$ . The average of these 100 errors was 0.020—in full agreement with the analysis above. The graph in Fig. 1 is rather sophisticated, with two minimum values, and depends strongly on the behavior of  $f(x)$ .

**Test 2.** Consider the factor  $x_8$ . We have selected 100 values of  $x_8$  and calculated the corresponding errors  $\delta(x_8)$ . The behavior of  $\delta(x_8)$  is similar to  $\delta(x_4)$  in Fig. 1 but the numerical values are completely different and the average of these 100 errors was 0.00021 which is twice  $S_8^{\text{tot}}$ .

Table 1  
Total indices

Factor	Total index
1	0.787
2	0.242
3	0.034
4	0.010
5	1.05e-04
6	1.05e-04
7	1.05e-04
8	1.05e-04

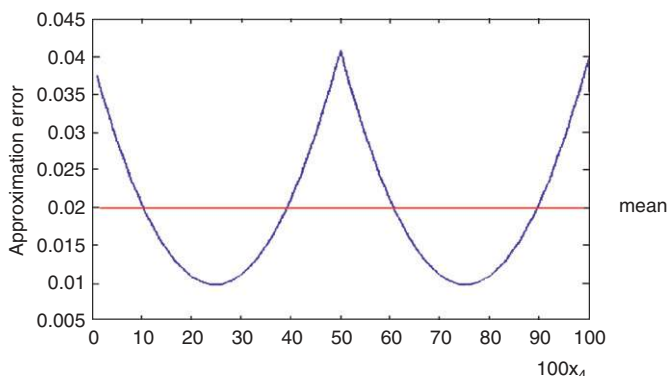


Fig. 1. Approximation error  $\delta(x_4)$  versus  $x_4$ .

**Test 3.** We now illustrate the theorem in the case where a group of factors is fixed; this is particularly useful for models with a high number of factors.

One characteristic of variance-based methods is in fact the capability of treating grouped factors as if they were single factors. This property of synthesis is essential for the agility of the interpretation of results (see [4] for applications).

We consider the five non-important factors (from 4 to 8) as a single group  $z$ , and the remaining three in another group  $y$ . We fix group  $z$  at  $z_0$ .

Estimating  $E[\delta(z_0)]$ , we obtain 0.022 which is twice the total index of group  $z$ :  $S_z^{\text{tot}} = 0.011$ .

It is worth noticing that by fixing all the factors of group  $z$ , the approximation error is 2.2% of the variance of the  $g$ -function, i.e. only 0.2% more than when fixing factor 4 alone.

**Remark.** The analytical values from Table 1 were reproduced numerically by the Monte Carlo method. The sample size was  $N = 7 \times 10^4$ .

#### 4. On the numerical estimation of small sensitivity indices

According to [6], the integral representation,

$$D_y = \int f(x)f(y, z') dx dz' - f_0^2, \quad (5)$$

was used for defining a Monte Carlo algorithm for the estimation of  $S_y = D_y/D$ . For the  $k$ th Monte Carlo trial two independent random points  $x_{(k)}$  and  $x'_{(k)}$  are used,  $1 \leq k \leq N$ . If the number of trials  $N$  is sufficiently large, then

$$f_0 \approx \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^N f(x_{(k)}), \quad (6)$$

$$D + f_0^2 \approx \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^N f^2(x_{(k)}), \quad (7)$$

$$D_y + f_0^2 \approx \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^N f(x_{(k)})f(y_{(k)}, z'_{(k)}). \quad (8)$$

However in the case when  $D_y \ll f_0^2$ , the computation of  $D_y$  from (8) is spoiled by a loss of accuracy.

For improving the situation, Saltelli [1] proposed a direct estimation of  $f_0^2$ . From the identity

$$f_0^2 = \int f(x)f(x') dx dx', \quad (9)$$

the approximation

$$f_0^2 \approx \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^N f(x_{(k)})f(x'_{(k)}), \quad (10)$$

can be derived. Despite the fact that the statistical error produced by (10) is larger than the statistical error of (6), the use of (8) and (10) reduces the loss of accuracy in the computation of  $D_y$ .

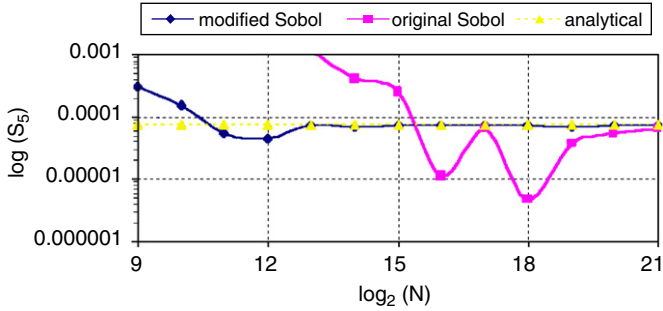


Fig. 2. Numerical evaluation of  $S_5$  using modified and original formulas.

We made a further step in this direction: substituting (9) into (5) we obtained a new integral representation for  $D_y$ :

$$D_y = \int f(x)[f(y, z') - f(x')] dx dx', \quad (11)$$

and the corresponding approximation

$$D_y \approx \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^N f(x_{(k)}) [f(y_{(k)}, z'_{(k)}) - f(x'_{(k)})], \quad (12)$$

which is a combination of (8) and (10).

Despite the fact that the dimension of the integral in (11) is higher than the dimension of the integral in (5), the modified Monte Carlo algorithm (6)+(7)+(12) is less sensitive to the loss of accuracy and allows to reduce the number of trials  $N$ .

Fig. 2 shows the numerical evaluation of  $S_5$  for the  $g$ -function at different  $N$  using both Monte Carlo algorithms. The performance of the modified algorithm (6)+(7)+(12) is much more stable than that of the original algorithm (6)+(7)+(8). The exact value is  $S_5 = 7.15 \times 10^{-5}$ .

The representation (11) makes possible a standard statistical error evaluation for the approximation (12).

**Remark 1.** In [1] instead of (5) the representation  $D_y = \int f(x')f(y', z) dz dx'$  was used. In this case our modification can be applied also.

**Remark 2.** In [5], another way to deal with loss of accuracy was proposed: to choose a constant  $c \approx f_0$  and to carry out the calculations with  $f(x) - c$  instead of  $f(x)$ .

## 5. Conclusions

This work shows how to estimate the approximation error committed when fixing non-important factors.

In our example the sensitivity indices were estimated both analytically and numerically; in general, they can be computed numerically.

The proposed theorem can be easily applied to global sensitivity methods that provide estimates of total indices; we have shown the applicability of the procedure also in cases where factors are treated by groups.

For numerical computation of small sensitivity indices a modified Monte Carlo algorithm was studied that reduces the loss of accuracy.

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