

Responsible Data Science

The data science lifecycle

February 27 & March 6, 2023

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This week's reading

contributed articles



Perspectives on the role and responsibility of the data-management research community in designing, developing, using, and overseeing automated decision systems.

BY JULIA STOTANOWICH, SERGE ARTEBOLI,
BILL HORN, K.V. JAGADISH, AND SEBASTIAN SCHELTER

Responsible Data Management

INCORPORATING ETHICS AND legal compliance into data-driven algorithmic systems has been attracting significant attention from the computing research community, most notably under the umbrella of fair and interpretable¹ machine learning. While important, much of this work has been limited in scope to the “last mile” of data analysis and has disregarded both the system’s design, development, and use life cycle. What are we automating and why? Is the system working as intended? Are there any unforeseen consequences post-deployment?; and the data life cycle (Where did the data come from? How long is it valid and appropriate?). In this article, we argue two points. First, the decisions we make during data collection and preparation profoundly impact the robustness, fairness, and interpretability of the systems we build. Second, our responsibility for the operation of these systems does not stop when they are deployed.



Example: Automated hiring systems. To make our discussion concrete, consider the use of predictive analytics in hiring. Automated hiring systems are seeing ever greater use and are at the end of the hiring lifecycle themselves, similar to other revenue streams that data is identifying. Predictive hiring applications let roles and entire analytic tools that facilitate the interview process² and game-based assessments that promote no minor personality traits (such as “firm attitude”, “fun and risks”) describe the hiring process from the employer’s point of view as a series of decisions that form a forest, with strong correspondents

a <http://www.careercoach.com>
b <http://www.dice.com>
c <http://www.predictive.com>

IN DETAIL

To predict and serve?

Predictive policing systems are used increasingly by law enforcement to try to prevent crime before it occurs. But what happens when these systems are trained using biased data?³ Kristian Lum and William Isaac consider the evidence – and the social consequences.



The VLDB Journal (2015) 24:557–588
DOI 10.1007/s00770-015-0340-9

REGULAR PAPER

Profiling relational data: a survey

Gheorghita Abeler¹ · Lukasz Goldk² · Felix Naumann³

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Abstract Profiling data to determine metadata about a given dataset is an important and frequent activity of any IT professional and researcher and is necessary for various use-cases. It encompasses a vast array of methods to examine datasets and produce metadata. Among the simple results are statistics such as the number of null values and distinct values in columns, or the data type, or the most frequent patterns of its data values. Metadata that are more difficult to compute involve multiple columns, round correlations, unique column combinations, functional dependencies, and inclusion dependencies. Further techniques detect conditional properties of the dataset at hand. This survey provides an overview of data profiling tools and comprehensively reviews the state of the art for each class. In addition, we review data profiling tools and systems from research and industry. We conclude with an outlook on the future of data profiling beyond traditional profiling tools and beyond relational databases.

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1 Data profiling: finding metadata

Data profiling is the set of activities and processes to determine the metadata about a given dataset. Profiling data is an important and frequent activity of any IT professional and researcher. We can safely assume that any reader of this article has engaged in the activity of data profiling, at least by eye-balling spreadsheets, database tables, XML files, etc. Possibly, more advanced techniques were used, such as keyword searching in datasets, writing structured queries, or even using dedicated data profiling tools.

Johnson gives the following definition: “Data profiling refers to the activity of creating small but informative summaries of a database” [79]. Data profiling encompasses a vast array of methods to examine datasets and produce metadata. Among the simpler results are statistics, such as the number of null values and distinct values in a column, its data type, or the most frequent patterns of its data values. Metadata that are more difficult to compute involve multiple columns, such as inclusion dependencies or functional dependencies. Also of practical interest are approximate versions of these dependencies in particular because they are typically more efficient to compute. In this survey we provide these and concentrate on exact methods.

Like many data management tasks, data profiling faces three challenges: (i) managing the input, (ii) performing the computation, and (iii) managing the output. Apart from typical data formatting issues, the first challenge addresses the problem of specifying the expected sources, i.e., determining which underlying sources are in which part of the data. In fact, many tools require explicit specification of what to inspect. Other approaches are more open and perform a wider range of tasks, discovering all metadata automatically.

The second challenge is the main focus of this survey and also of most research in the area of data profiling. The com-

Springer

Recall: Bias in computer systems

Pre-existing is independent of an algorithm and has origins in society

Technical is introduced or exacerbated by the technical properties of an ADS

Emergent arises due to context of use

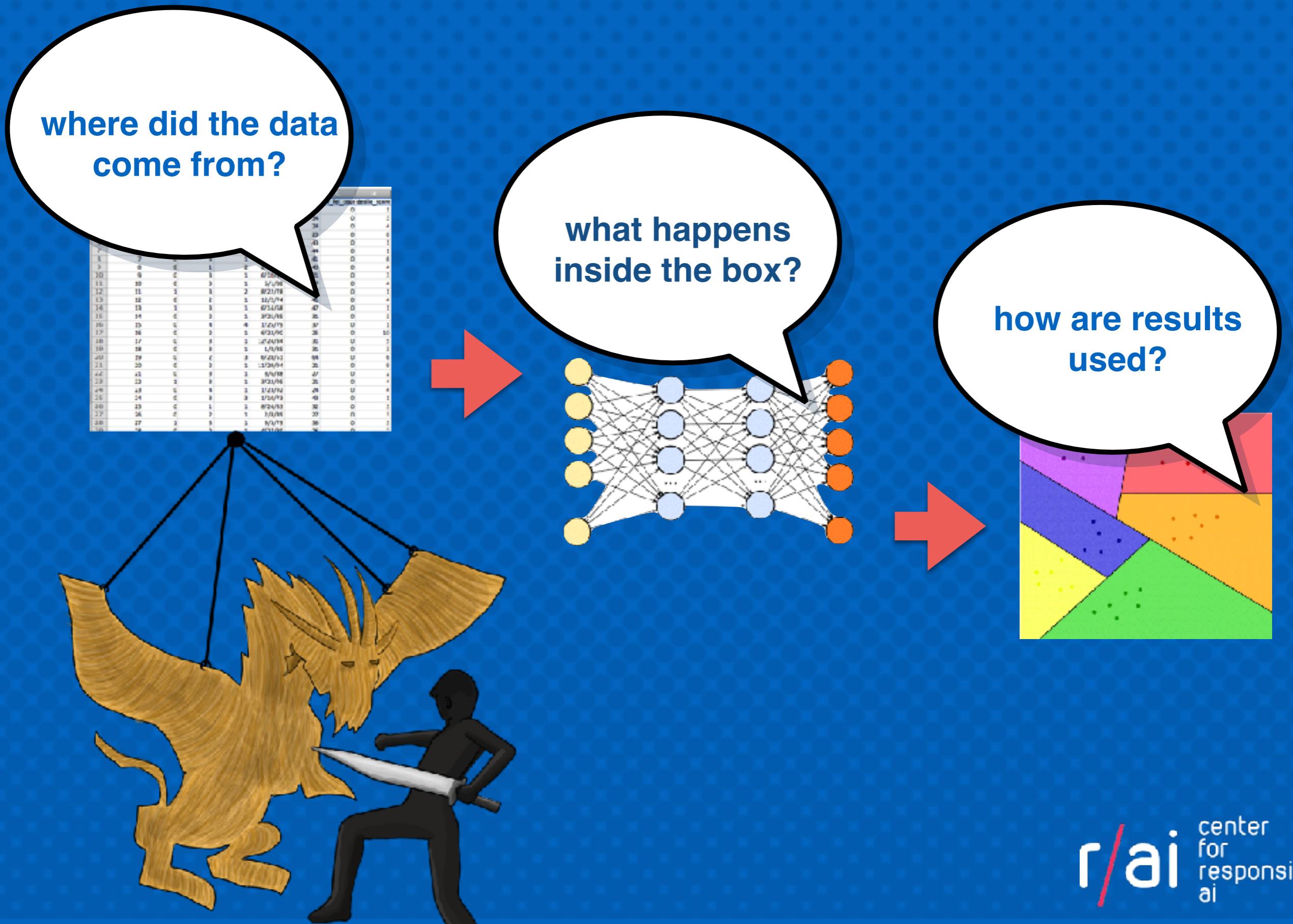


[Friedman & Nissenbaum (1996)]

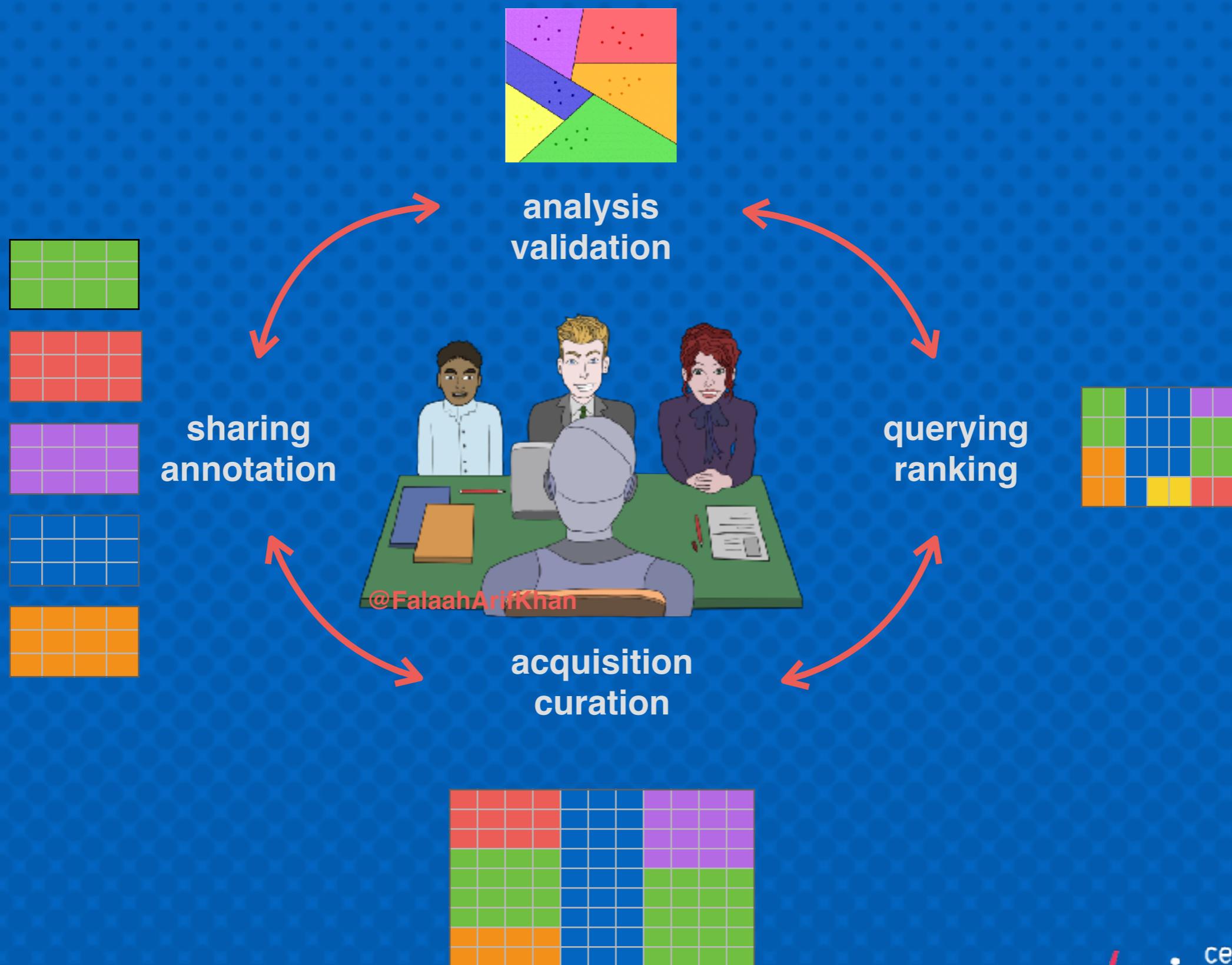


to fight bias, state
beliefs and
assumptions
explicitly

The “last-mile” view of responsible AI



Data lifecycle of an ADS

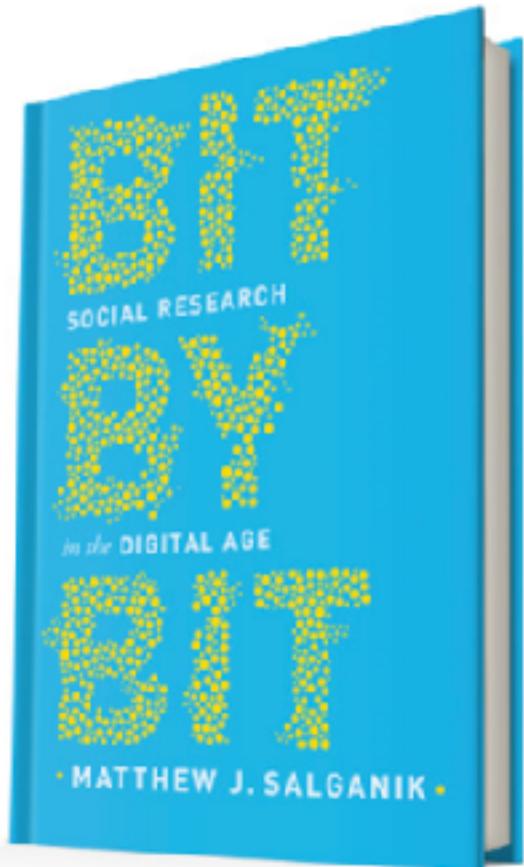


Understand your data!



“Given the heterogeneity of the flood of data, it is **not enough merely to record it and throw it into a repository**. Consider, for example, data from a range of scientific experiments. If we just have a bunch of data sets in a repository, it is **unlikely anyone will ever be able to find, let alone reuse**, any of this data. With adequate **metadata**, there is some hope, but even so, challenges will remain due to differences in experimental details and in data record structure.”

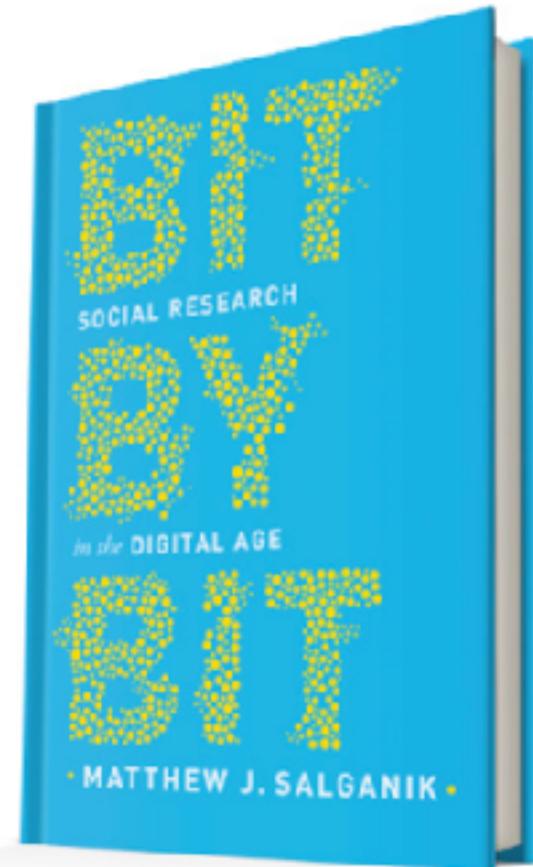
Understand your data!



2.2 Big data

In the analog age, most of the data that were used for social research was created for the purpose of doing research. In the digital age, however, a huge amount of **data is being created by companies and governments for purposes other than research**, such as providing services, generating profit, and administering laws. Creative people, however, have realized that you can **repurpose** this corporate and government data for research.

Understand your data!



2.2 Big data

... from the perspective of researchers, big data sources are “found,” they don’t just fall from the sky. Instead, data sources that are “found” by researchers are **designed by someone for some purpose**. Because “found” data are designed by someone, I always recommend that you **try to understand as much as possible about the people and processes that created your data**.

Understand your data!

Need **metadata** to:

- enable data **re-use** (have to be able to find it!)
- determine **fitness for use** of a dataset in a task
- help establish **trust** in the data analysis process and its outcomes

Data is considered to be of high quality if it's "**fit for intended uses** in operations, decision making and planning"

[Thomas C. Redman, "Data Driven: Profiting from Your Most Important Business Asset." 2013]

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NYC Open Data

SAT (College Board) 2010 School Level Results

Education

New York City school level College Board SAT results for the graduating seniors of 2010.

Records contain 2010 College-bound seniors mean SAT scores.

summary

Records with 5 or fewer students are suppressed (marked 's').

privacy

College-bound seniors are those students that complete the SAT Questionnaire when they register for the SAT and identify that they will graduate from high school in a specific year. For example, the 2010 college-bound seniors are those students that self-reported they would graduate in 2010. Students are not required to complete the SAT Questionnaire in order to register for the SAT. Students who do not indicate which year they will graduate from high school will not be included in any college-bound senior report.

Students are linked to schools by identifying which school they attend when registering for a College Board exam. A student is only included in a school's report if he/she self-reports being enrolled at that school.

Data collected and processed by the College Board.

source

Less

Tags No tags assigned

API Docs

Dataset

freshness

Updated

April 25, 2019

Views

28,463

popularity

NYC Open Data

About this Dataset

Updated

April 25, 2019

Data Last Updated Metadata Last Updated
February 29, 2012 April 25, 2019

Date Created

October 6, 2011

Views

28.5K

Downloads

48.4K

Data Provided by
Department of Education
(DOE)

Dataset
Owner
NYC OpenData

Update

Update Frequency

Historical Data

Automation

No

Date Made Public

10/11/2011

Dataset Information

Agency

Department of Education (DOE)

Attachments

 [SAT Data Dictionary.xlsx](#)

Topics

Category

Education

Tags

This dataset does not have any tags

<https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/>

NYC Open Data

What's in this Dataset?

Rows Columns
460 **6**

Columns in this Dataset

Column Name	Description	Type	
DBN		Plain Text	T
School Name		Plain Text	T
Number of Test Takers		Number	#
Critical Reading Mean		Number	#
Mathematics Mean		Number	#
Writing Mean		Number	#

<https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/>

NYC Open Data

What's in this Dataset?

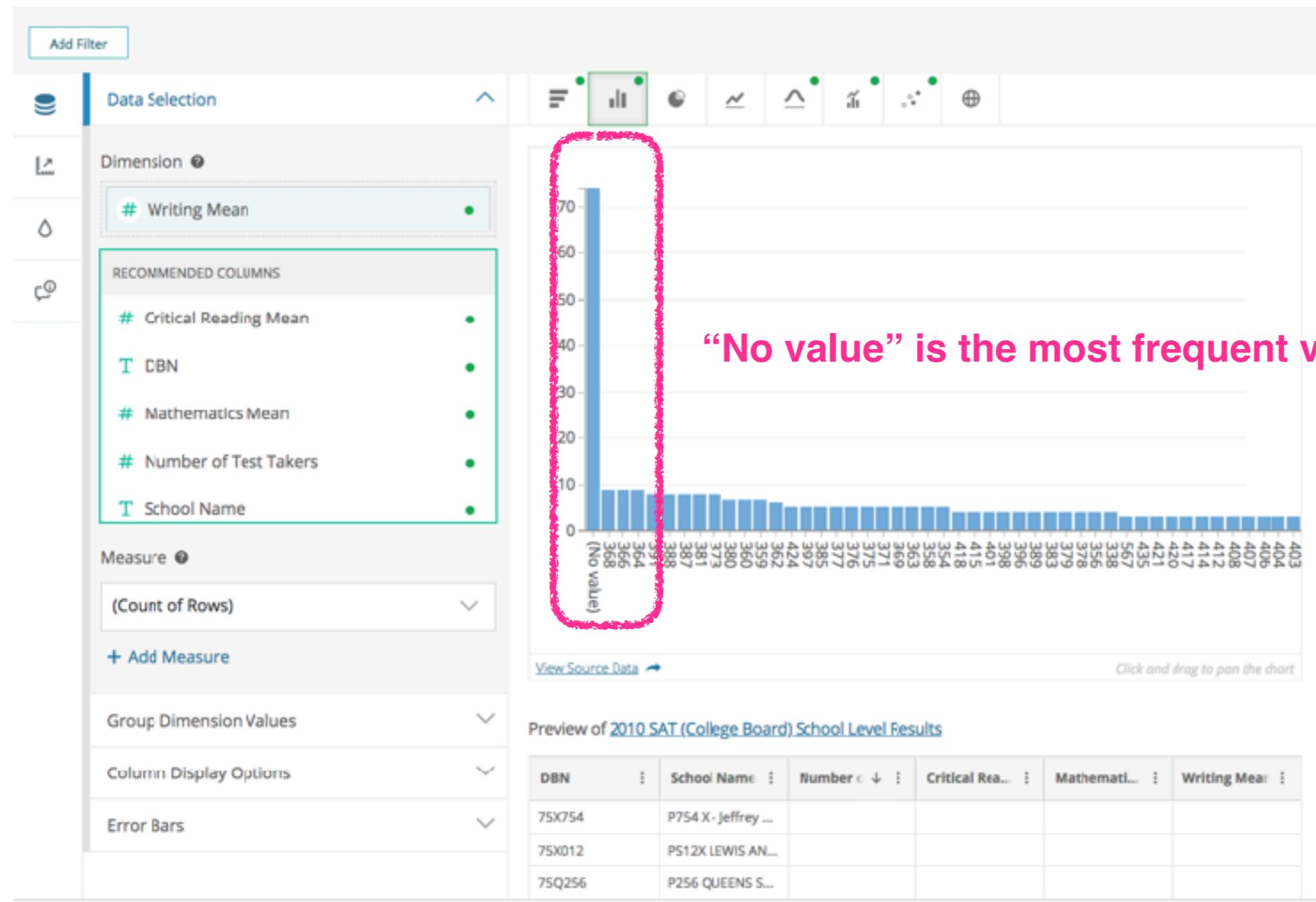
Rows Columns
460 **6**

Columns in this Dataset

Column Name	Description	Type	
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School Name		Plain Text	T
Number of Test Takers		Number	#
Critical Reading Mean		Number	#
Mathematics Mean		Number	#
Writing Mean		Number	#

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NYC Open Data



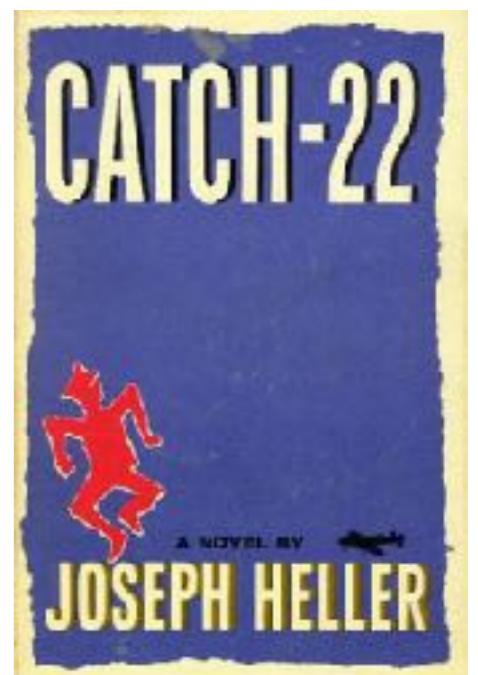
<https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/>

Data profiling

- **Data profiling** refers to the activity of creating **small** but **informative** summaries of a database
- What is informative depends on the task, or set of tasks, we have in mind

should profiling be task-agnostic or task-specific?

A related activity is **data cleaning**



Data cleaning



Data cleansing or **data cleaning** is the process of detecting and repairing corrupt or inaccurate records from a data set in order to improve the **quality of data**.

Erhard Rahm, Hong Hai Do: Data Cleaning: Problems and Current Approaches, IEEE Data Engineering Bulletin, 2000.



... **data** is generally considered high **quality** if it is "**fit for [its] intended uses** in operations, decision making and planning"

Thomas C. Redman, Data Driven: Profiting from Your Most Important Business Asset. 2013



Even though quality cannot be defined, you know what it is.

Robert M. Prisig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, 1975

Data cleaning

50,423 views | Mar 23, 2016, 09:33am

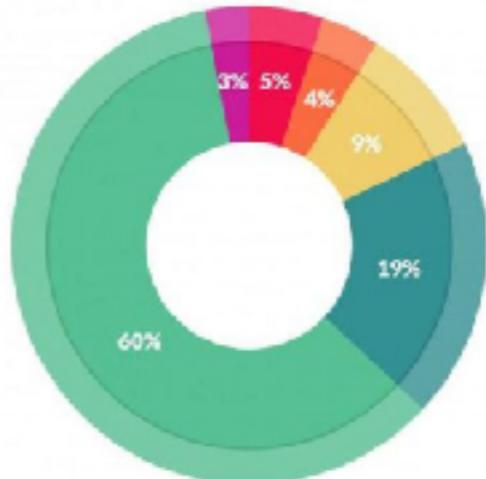
Forbes

Cleaning Big Data: Most Time-Consuming, Least Enjoyable Data Science Task, Survey Says



Gil Press Contributor

I write about technology, entrepreneurs and innovation.



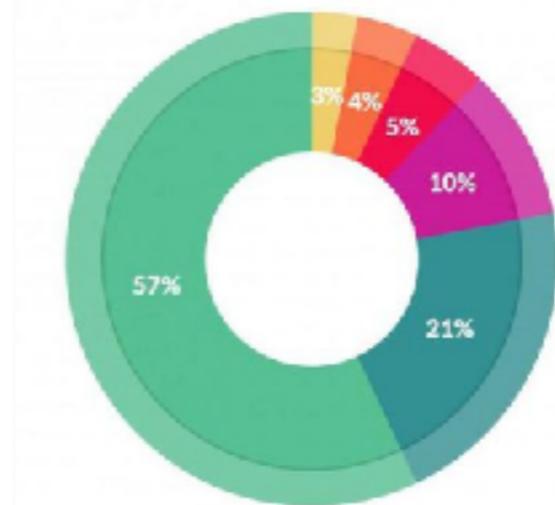
What data scientists spend the most time doing

- Building training sets: 3%
- Cleaning and organizing data: 60%
- Collecting data sets: 19%
- Mining data for patterns: 9%
- Refining algorithms: 4%
- Other: 5%

Spend most time doing

Collecting data (19%)

Cleaning and organizing data (60%)



What's the least enjoyable part of data science?

- Building training sets: 10%
- Cleaning and organizing data: 57%
- Collecting data sets: 21%
- Mining data for patterns: 3%
- Refining algorithms: 4%
- Other: 5%

Find least enjoyable

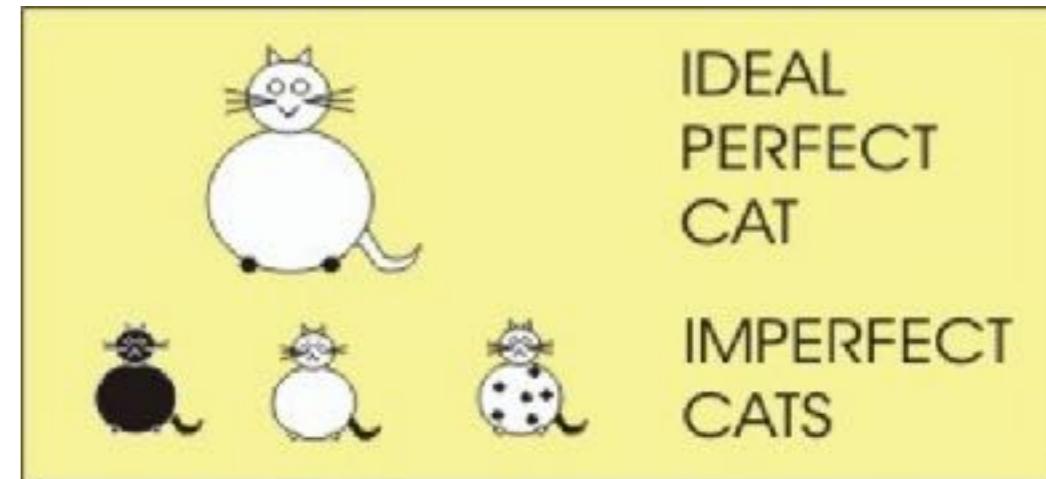
Collecting data (21%)

Cleaning and organizing data (57%)



data profiling

DB (databases) vs DS (data science)



<https://midnightmediamusings.wordpress.com/2014/07/01/plato-and-the-theory-of-forms/>

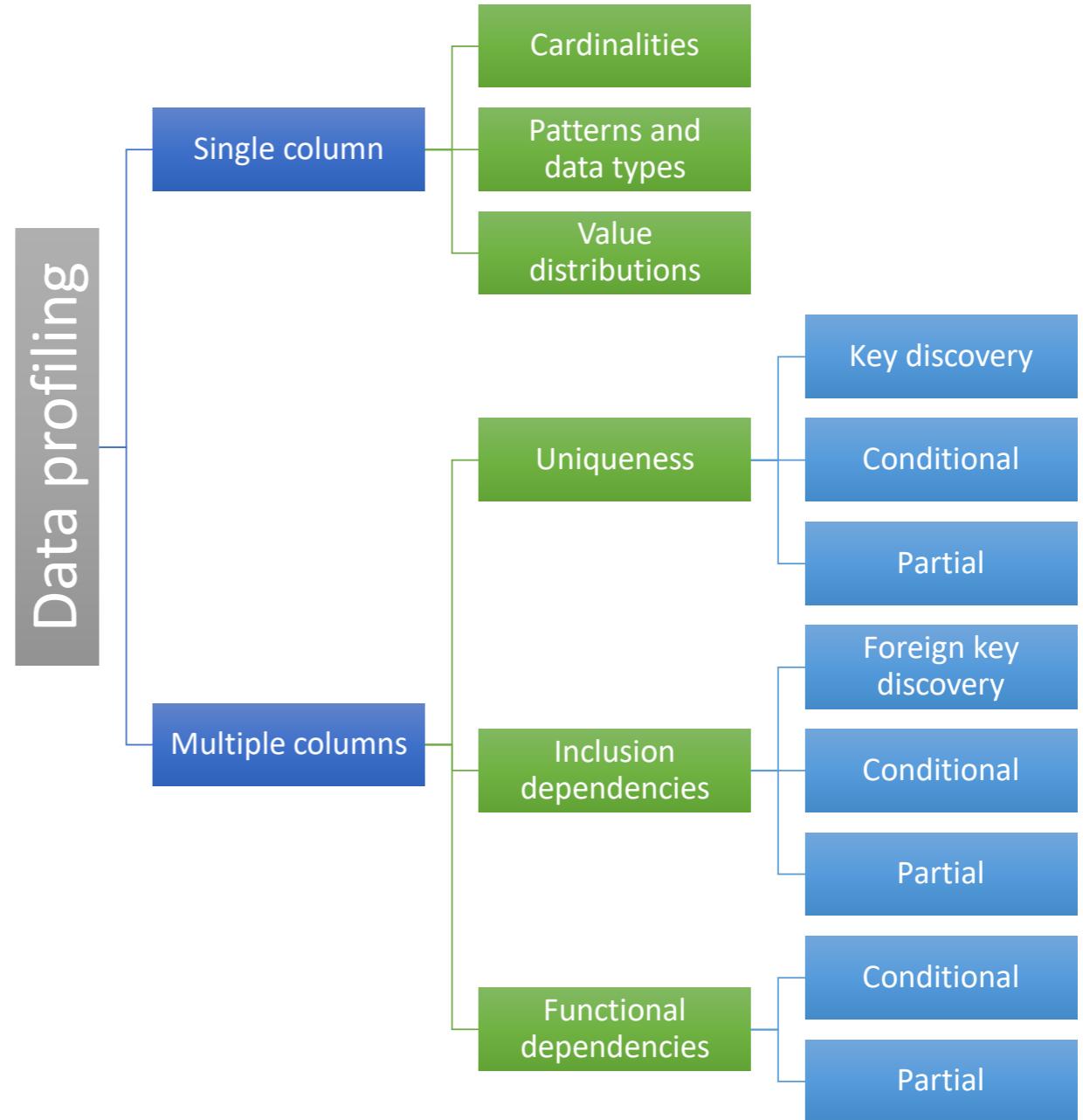
- **DB**: start with the schema, admit only data that fits; iterative refinement is possible, and common, but we are still schema-first
- **DS**: start with the data, figure out what schema it fits, or almost fits - reasons of usability, repurposing, low start-up cost

the “right” approach is somewhere between these two, **data profiling aims to bridge** between the two world views / methodologies

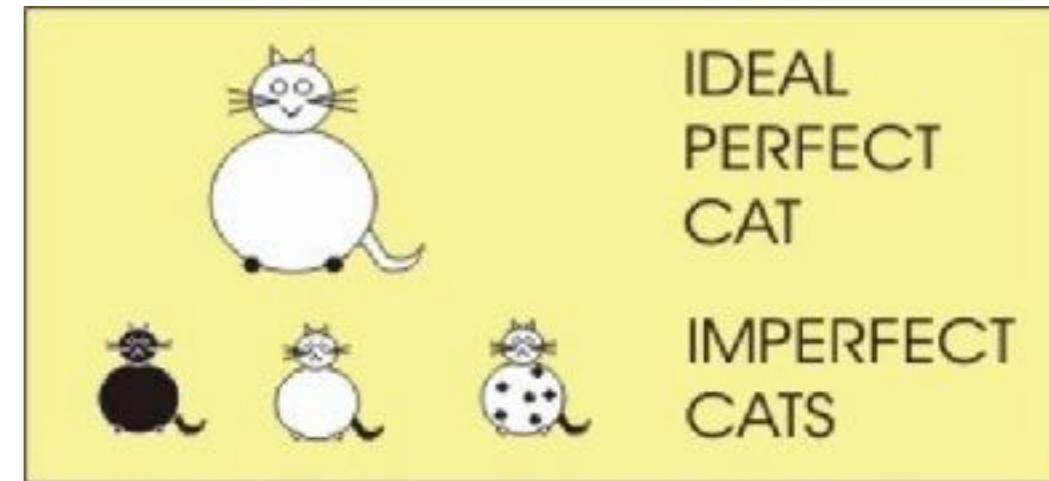
Data profiling

#	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
1	UID	sex	race	MaritalStatus	DateOfBirth	age	Inv	Full score	decile score
2	1	0	1	1	4/18/47	68	0	1	
3	2	0	2	1	1/22/82	34	0	3	
4	3	0	2	1	5/15/91	24	0	0	0
5	4	0	2	1	1/21/95	19	0	0	8
6	5	0	1	2	1/22/73	43	0	0	1
7	6	0	1	3	8/22/71	44	0	0	1
8	7	0	4	1	7/30/70	41	0	0	6
9	8	0	1	2	2/15/73	48	0	0	4
10	9	0	3	1	5/10/94	21	0	0	3
11	10	0	3	1	6/1/88	27	0	0	4
12	11	1	4	2	4/27/78	37	0	0	1
13	12	0	2	1	12/27/74	41	0	0	4
14	13	1	3	1	6/14/08	47	0	0	1
15	14	0	2	1	3/25/85	31	0	0	3
16	15	0	4	1	1/31/74	37	0	0	1
17	16	0	2	1	5/12/20	15	0	0	10
18	17	0	3	1	12/24/84	31	0	0	5
19	18	0	3	1	1/8/85	31	0	0	3
20	19	0	2	4	6/28/91	31	0	0	6
21	20	0	2	1	11/19/24	21	0	0	9
22	21	0	3	1	8/9/88	27	0	0	2
23	22	1	3	1	3/22/95	21	0	0	4
24	23	0	4	1	1/24/92	24	0	0	4
25	24	0	3	3	1/10/75	48	0	0	1
26	25	0	1	1	8/34/83	32	0	0	3
27	26	0	2	1	2/8/89	27	0	0	3
28	27	1	4	1	8/31/74	38	0	0	8
29	28	1	4	1	4/17/80	42	0	0	7

relational data (here: just one table)



An alternative classification

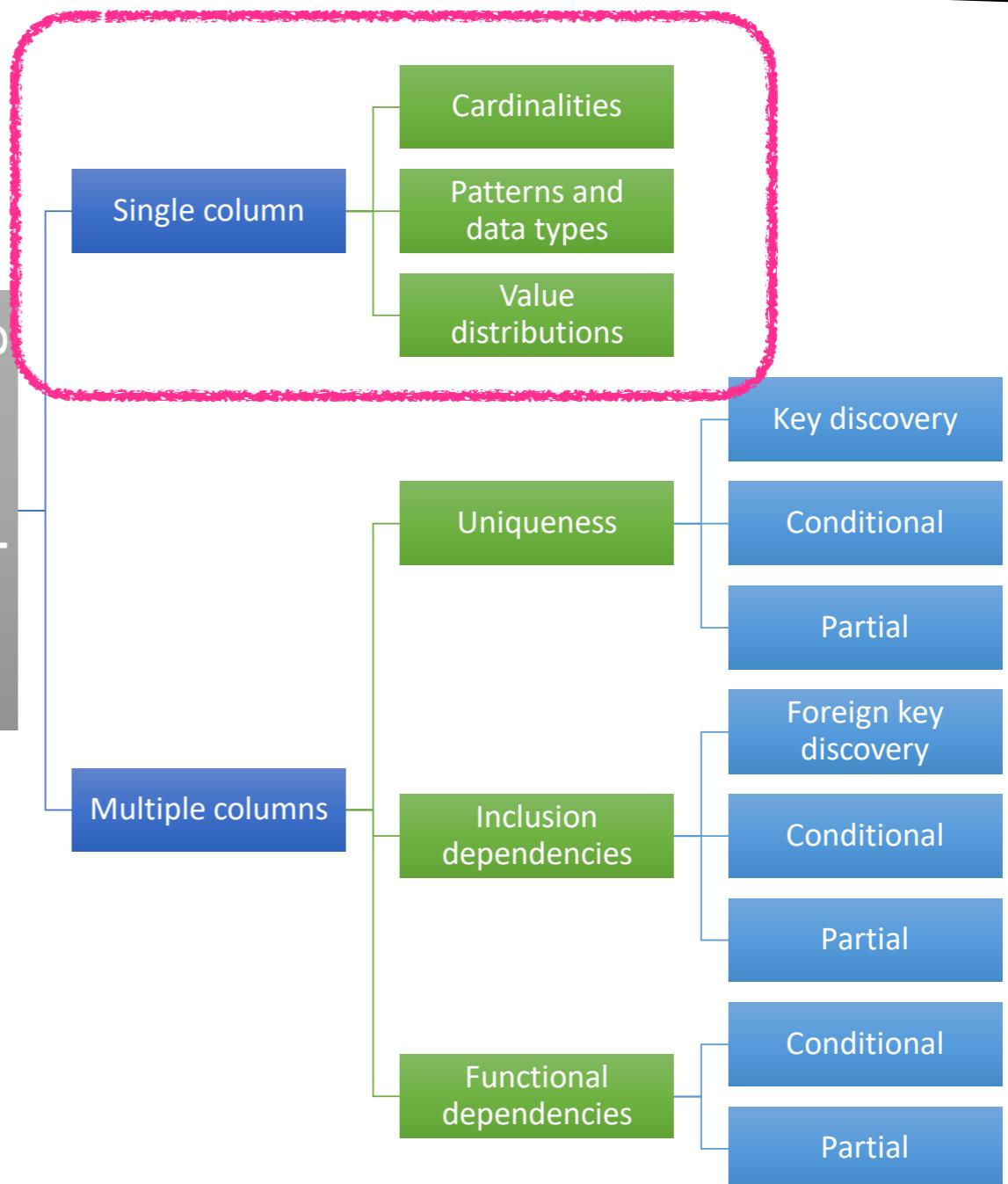


- To help understand the **statistics**, we look at value ranges, data types, value distributions per column or across columns, etc
- To help understand the **structure** - the (business) rules that generated the data - we look at unique columns / column combinations, dependencies between columns, etc - **reverse-engineer the relational schema** of the data we have
- We need both statistics and structure, they are mutually-reinforcing, and help us understand the **semantics** of the data - it's meaning

Data profiling

#	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
1	UID	sex	race	MaritalStatus	DateOfBirth	age	Inv	Full score	decile score
2	1	0	1	1	4/18/47	68	0	1	
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4	3	0	2	1	5/15/91	24	0	0	0
5	4	0	2	1	1/21/95	19	0	0	8
6	5	0	1	2	1/22/73	43	0	0	1
7	6	0	1	3	8/22/71	44	0	0	1
8	7	0	4	1	7/3/94	41	0	0	6
9	8	0	1	2	2/15/73	48	0	0	4
10	9	0	3	1	5/10/94	21	0	0	3
11	10	0	3	1	6/1/88	27	0	0	4
12	11	1	4	2	4/27/98	37	0	0	1
13	12	0	2	1	12/2/74	41	0	0	4
14	13	1	3	1	6/14/08	47	0	0	1
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16	15	0	4	1	1/3/74	37	0	0	1
17	16	0	2	1	5/12/20	15	0	0	10
18	17	0	3	1	12/24/84	31	0	0	5
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20	19	0	2	4	6/23/91	31	0	0	6
21	20	0	2	1	11/19/24	21	0	0	9
22	21	0	3	1	8/9/88	27	0	0	2
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24	23	0	4	1	1/24/92	24	0	0	0
25	24	0	3	3	1/10/73	48	0	0	1
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bg
Data profiling

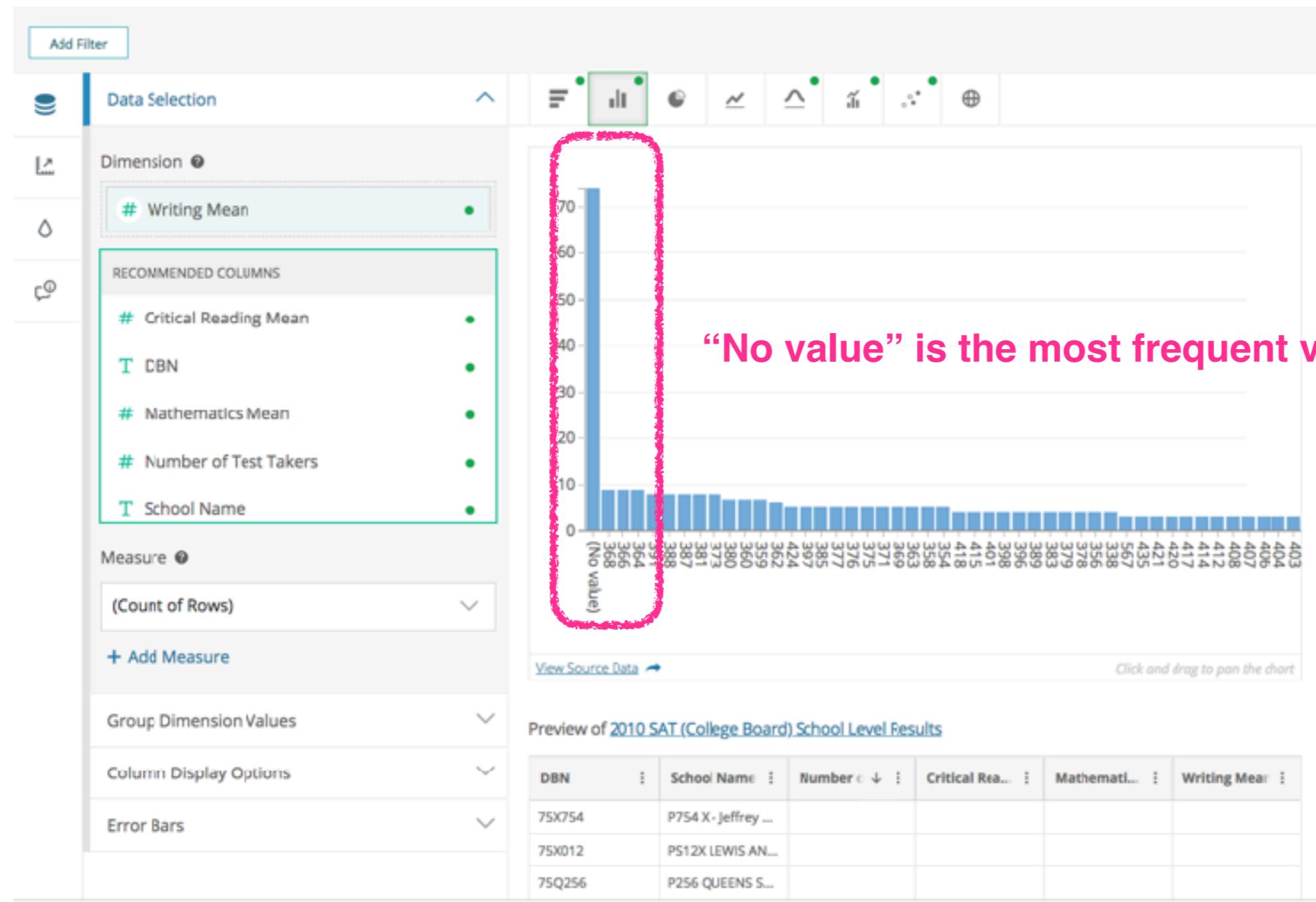


relational data (here: just one table)

Single column: cardinalities, data types

- cardinality of relation **R** - number of rows
- domain cardinality of a column **R.a** - number of **distinct** values
- attribute value **length**: min, max, average, median
- **basic data type**: string, numeric, date, time,
- number of percentage of **null** values of a given attribute
- regular expressions
- semantic domain: SSN, phone number
-

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<https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/>

The trouble with *null* values

A CRITIQUE OF
THE SQL DATABASE LANGUAGE

D.J.Date

PO Box 2647, Saratoga
California 95070, USA

* Null values

December 1983

I have argued against null values at length elsewhere [6], and I will not repeat those arguments here. In my opinion the null value concept is far more trouble than it is worth. Certainly it has never been properly thought through in the existing SQL implementations (see the discussion under "Lack of Orthogonality: Miscellaneous Items", earlier). For example, the fact that functions such as AVG simply ignore null values in their argument violates what should surely be a fundamental principle, viz: The system should never produce a (spuriously) precise answer to a query when the data involved in that query is itself imprecise. At least the system should offer the user the explicit option either to ignore nulls or to treat their presence as an exception.

50 shades of *null*

- **Unknown** - some value definitely belongs here, but I don't know what it is (e.g., unknown birthdate)
- **Inapplicable** - no value makes sense here (e.g., if marital status = single then spouse name should not have a value)
- **Unintentionally omitted** - values is left unspecified unintentionally, by mistake
- **Optional** - a value may legitimately be left unspecified (e.g., middle name)
- **Intentionally withheld** (e.g., an unlisted phone number)
-

(this selection is mine, see reference below for a slightly different list)

<https://www.vertabelo.com/blog/technical-articles/50-shades-of-null-or-how-a-billion-dollar-mistake-has-been-stalking-a-whole-industry-for-decades>

50 shades of *null*... and it gets worse

- **Hidden missing values** -
 - 99999 for zip code, Alabama for state
 - need data cleaning....
- lots of houses in Philadelphia, PA were built in 1934 (or 1936?) - not really!

how do we detect hidden missing values?

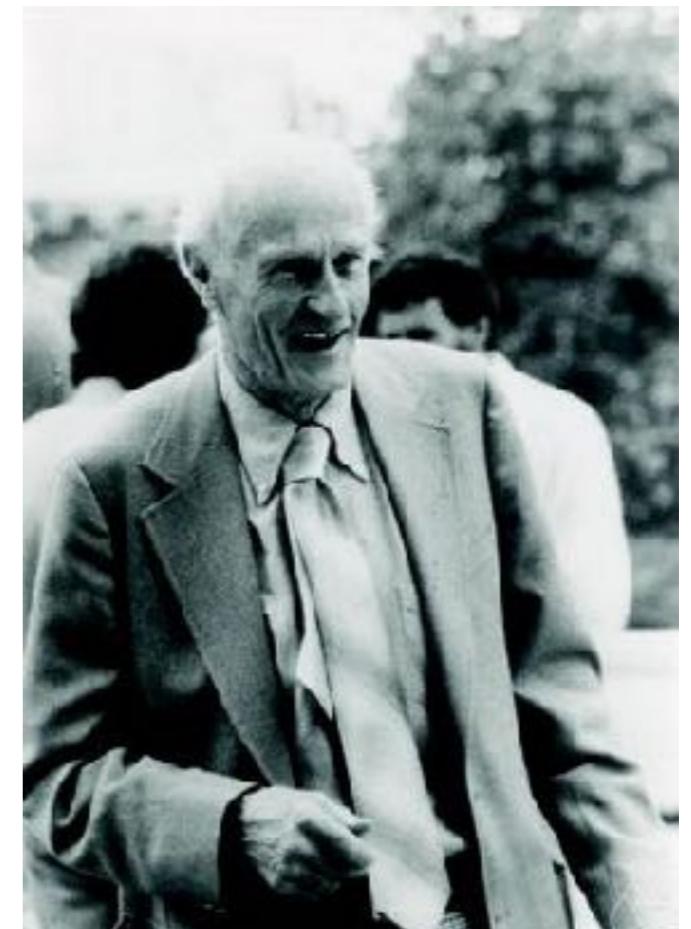
Single column: cardinalities, data types

- cardinality of relation **R** - number of rows
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- attribute value **length**: min, max, average, median
- **basic data type**: string, numeric, date, time,
- number of percentage of **null** values of a given attribute
- **regular expressions**
- semantic domain: SSN, phone number
-

Regular expressions

- some attributes will have values that follow a regular format, e.g., telephone numbers: 212-864-0355 or (212) 864-0355 or 1.212.864-0355
- we may want to identify a small set of **regular expressions** that match all (or most) values in a column
- challenging - **very many possibilities!**

A **regular expression**, **regex** or **regexp** ... is a sequence of characters that define a search pattern. Usually this pattern is used by string searching algorithms for “find” or “find and replace” operations on strings, or for input validation. It is a technique that developed in theoretical computer science and formal language theory.



Stephen Kleene

Inferring regular expressions

- we may want to identify a small set of **regular expressions** that match all (or most) values in a column
- challenging - **very many possibilities!**

Example Regular Expression Language

.	Matches any character
abc	Sequence of characters
[abc]	Matches any of the characters inside []
*	Previous character matched zero or more times
?	Previous character matched zero or one time
{m}	Exactly m repetitions of previous character
^	Matches beginning of a line
\$	Matches end of a line
\d	Matches any decimal digit
\s	Matches any whitespace character
\w	Matches any alphanumeric character

telephone
(201) 368-1000
(201) 373-9599
(718) 206-1088
(718) 206-1121
(718) 206-1420
(718) 206-4420
(718) 206-4481
(718) 262-9072
(718) 868-2300
(718) 206-0545
(814) 681-6200
(888) 8NYC-TRS
800-624-4143

Oakham's razor

Lex parsimoniae

If multiple hypotheses explain an observation, the simplest one should be preferred.

Ockham's motivation: can one prove the existence of God?

Used as a heuristic to help identify a promising hypothesis to test

Many applications today: biology, probability theory, ethics - also good for inferring regular expressions :)



William of Ockham
(1285-1347)

Inferring regular expressions

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(718) 206-4481
(718) 262-9072
(718) 868-2300
(718) 206-0545
(814) 681-6200
(888) 8NYC-TRS

Simple Algorithm

- (1) Group values by length
- (2) Find pattern for each group
 - Ignore small groups
 - Find **most specific character** at each position

(2	0	1)	3	6	8	-	1	0	0	0
(2	0	1)	2	0	6	-	1	0	8	8
(7	1	8)	2	0	6	-	1	1	2	1
(7	1	8)	2	0	6	-	1	4	2	0
(7	1	8)	2	0	6	-	4	4	2	0
(7	1	8)	2	0	6	-	4	4	8	1
(7	1	8)	2	6	2	-	9	0	7	2
(7	1	8)	8	6	8	-	2	3	0	0
(7	1	8)	2	0	6	-	0	5	4	5
(8	1	4)	6	8	1	-	6	2	0	0
(8	8	8)	8	N	Y	C	-	T	R	S
(\d	\d	\d)	\d	\w	\w	.	.	\w	\w	\w

Inferring regular expressions

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(718) 206-1121
(718) 206-1420
(718) 206-4420
(718) 206-4481
(718) 262-9072
(718) 868-2300
(718) 206-0545
(814) 681-6200
(888) 8NYC-TRS

Simple Algorithm

- (1) Group values by length
- (2) Find pattern for each group
 - Ignore small groups
 - Find **most specific character** at each position

ignoring small groups: alternatives?

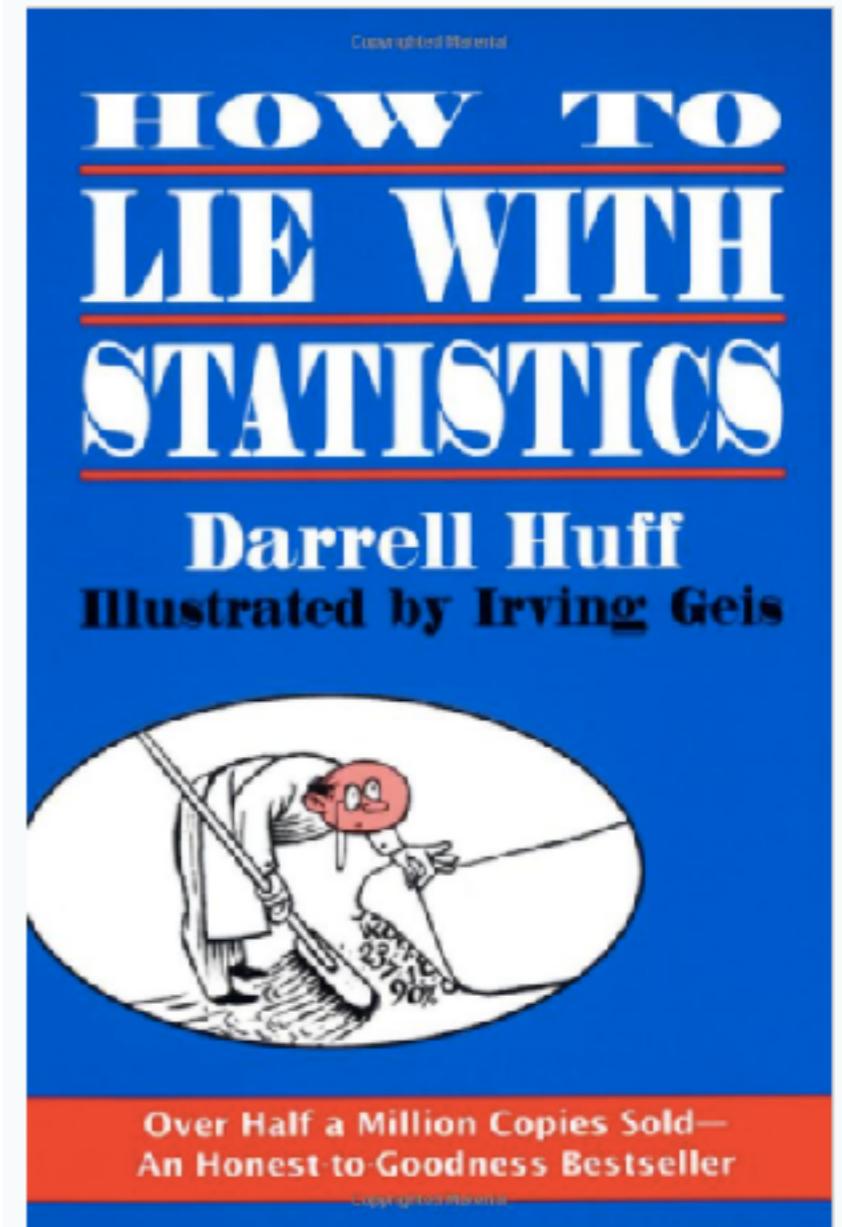
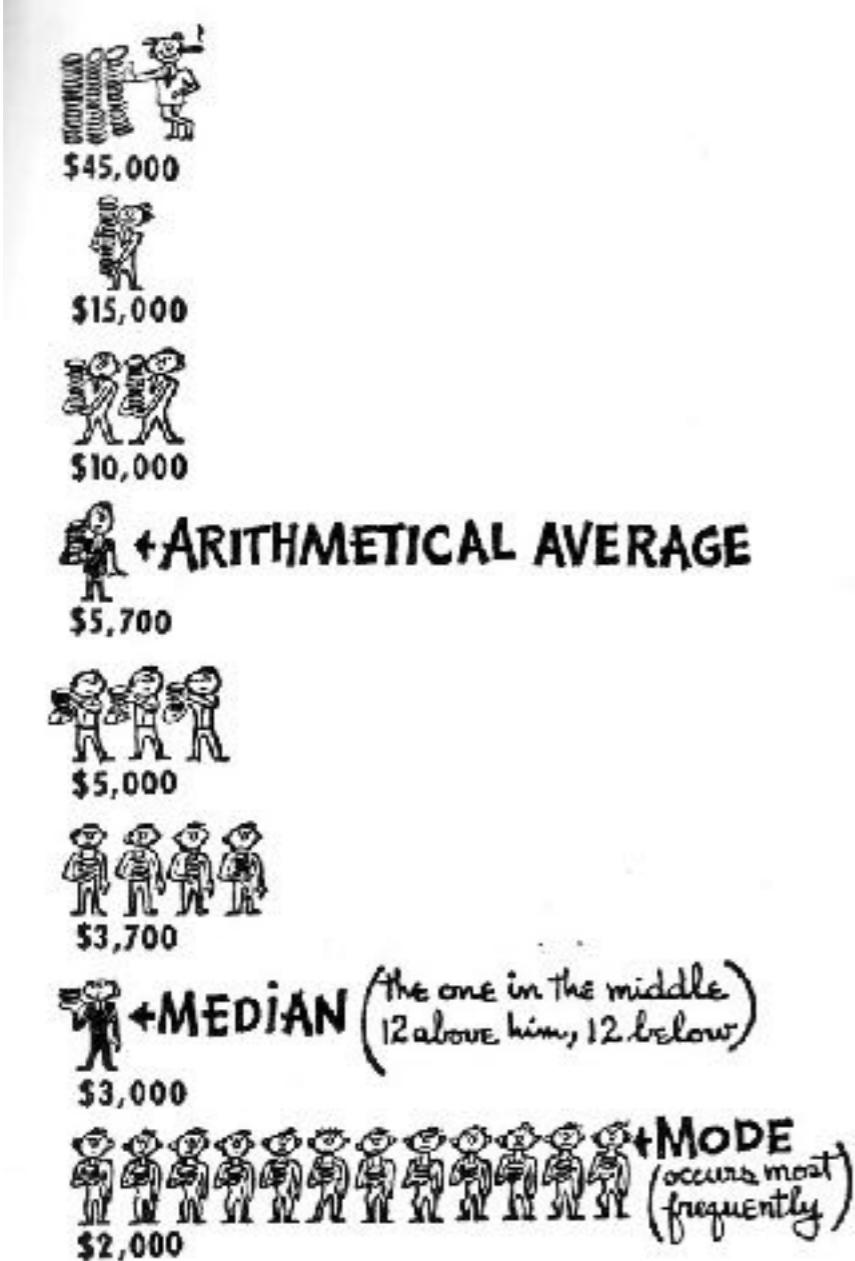
(| \d | \d | \d |) | | \d | \w | \w | . | . | \w | \w | \w |

(\d{3}) \d\w{2}.{2}\w{3}

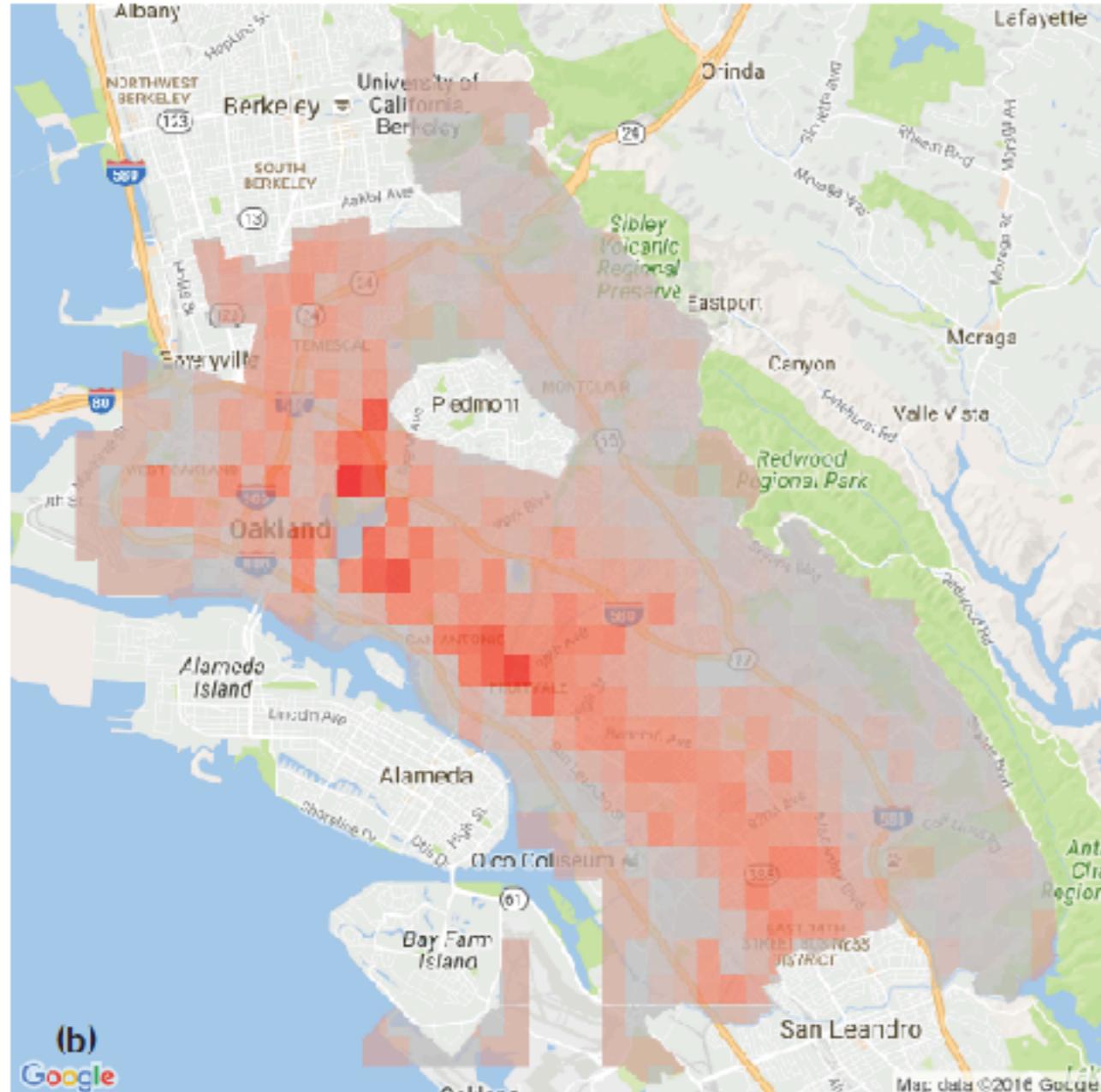
Single column: basic stats, distributions

- min, max, **average**, median value of **R.a**
- **histogram**
 - equi-width - (approximately) the same number of distinct values in each bucket (e.g., age broken down into 5-year windows)
 - equi-depth (approximately) the same number of tuples in each bucket
 - biased histograms use different granularities for different parts of the value range to provide better accuracy
- quartiles - three points that divide the numeric values into four equal groups - a kind of an equi-depth histogram
- **first digit** - distribution of first digit in numeric values, to check Benford law
- ...

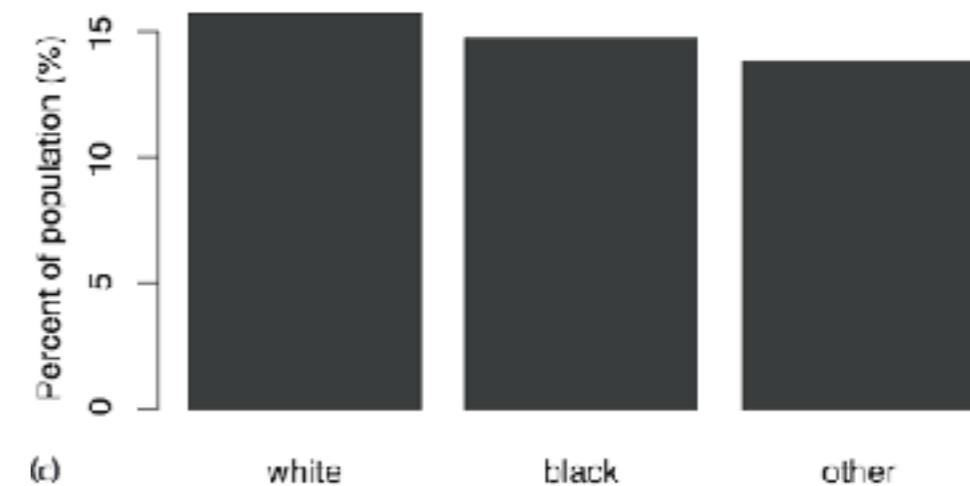
The well-chosen average



Is my data biased? (histograms + geo)

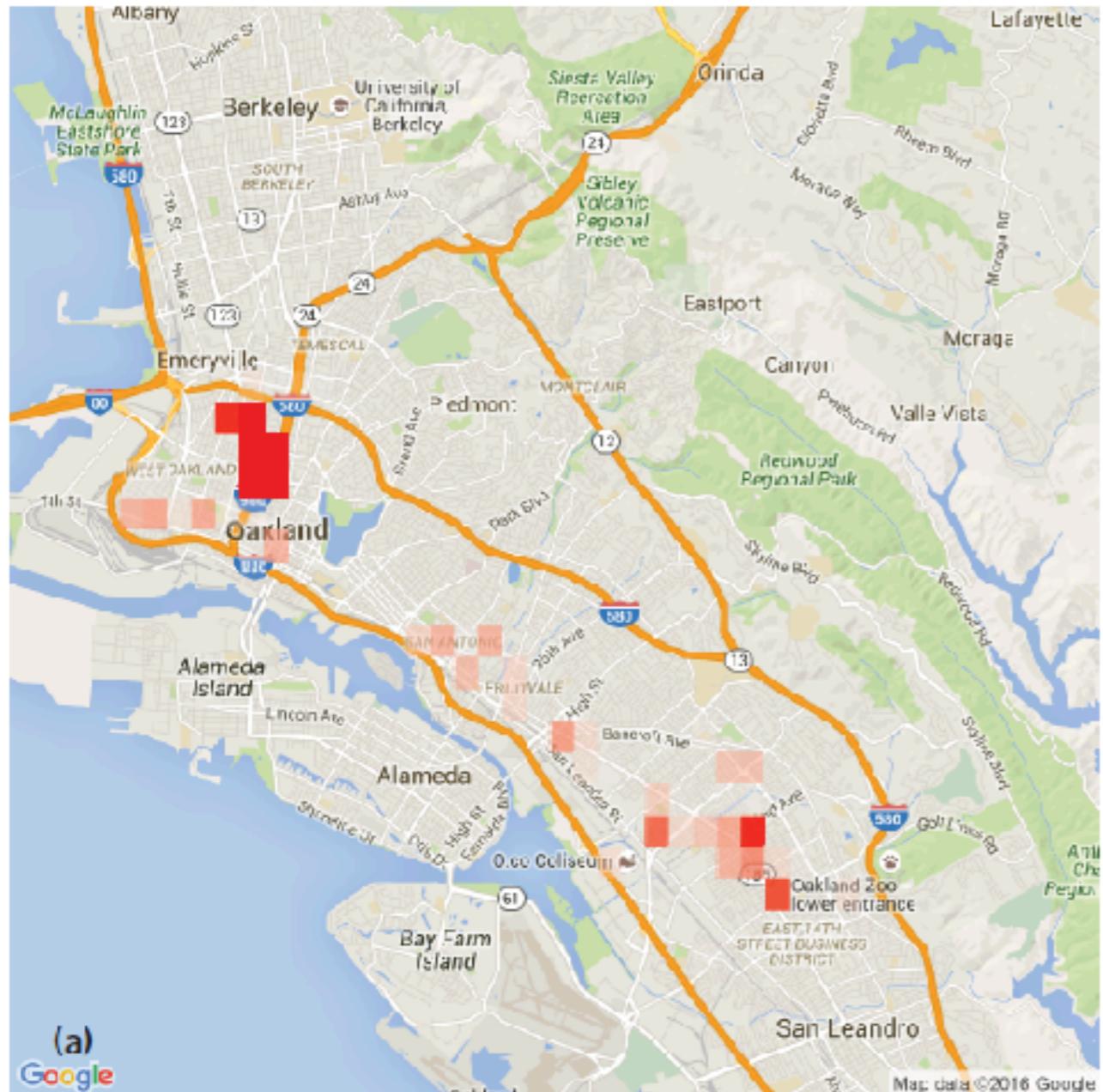


Estimated number of drug users, based on 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, in Oakland, CA

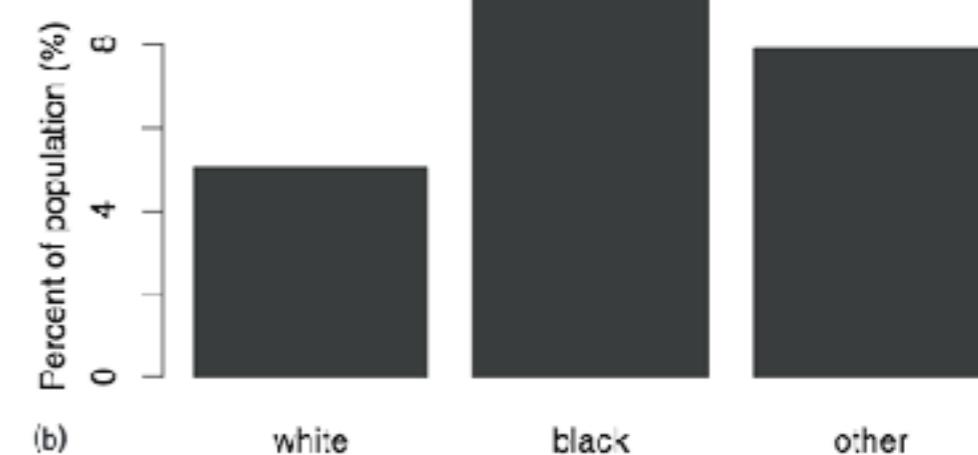


Estimated drug use by race

Is my data biased? (histograms + geo)

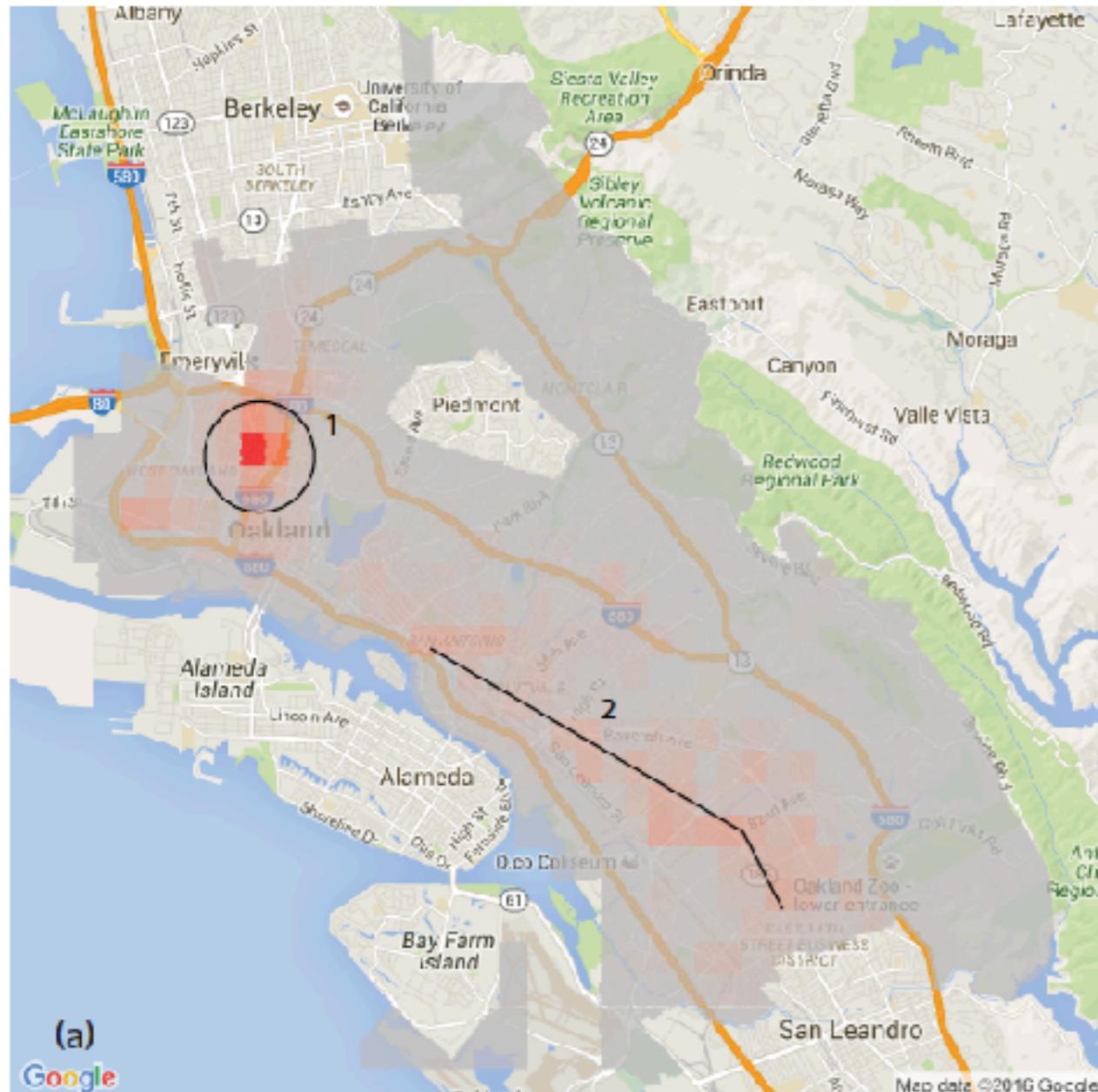


Number of days with targeted policing for drug crimes in areas flagged by PredPol analysis of Oakland, CA, police data for 2011

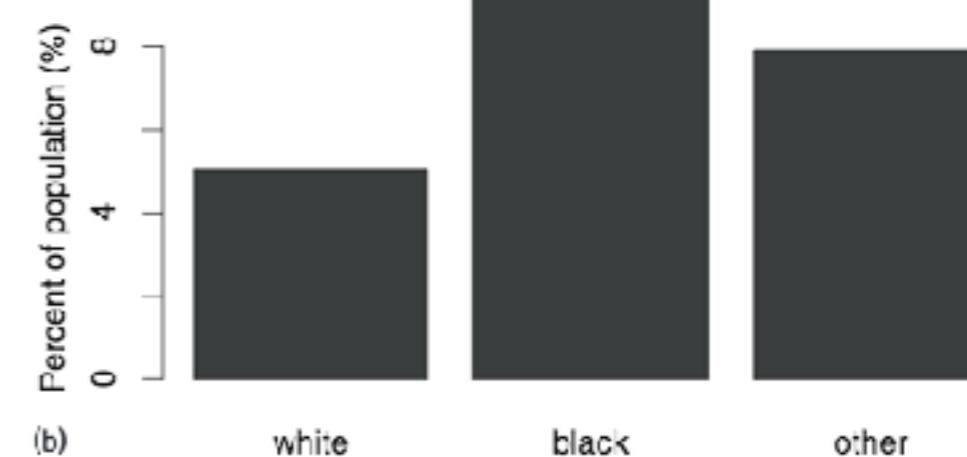


Targeted policing for drug crimes by race

Is my data biased? (histograms + geo)



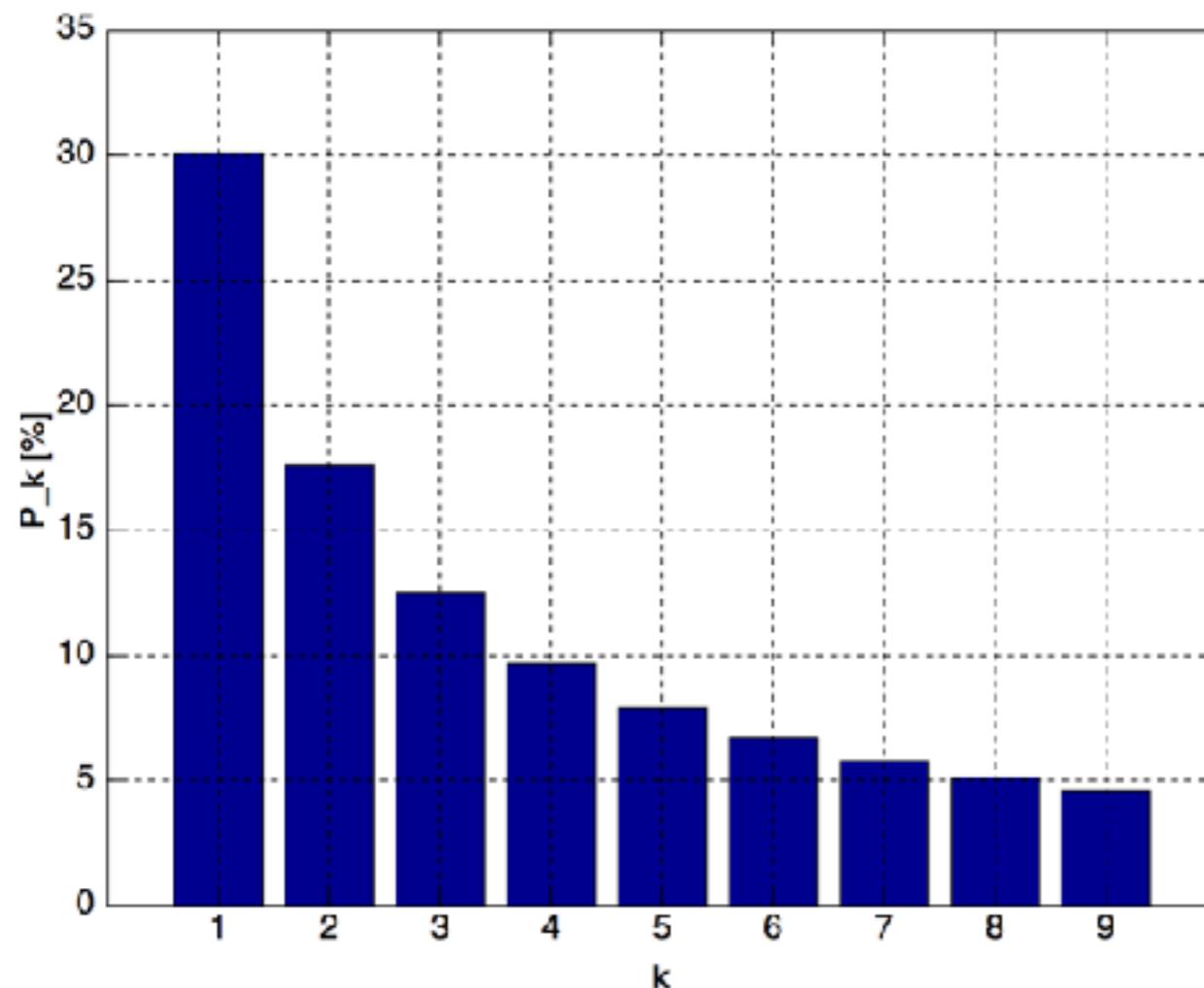
Number of drug arrests made by the Oakland, CA, police department in 2010



Targeted policing for drug crimes by race

Benford Law

The distribution of **the first digit d** of a number, in many naturally occurring domains, approximately follows



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benford%27s_law

$$P(d) = \log_{10} \left(1 + \frac{1}{d} \right)$$

1 is the most frequent leading digit, followed by 2, etc.

[Benford: “The law of anomalous numbers” *Proc. Am. Philos. Soc.*, 1938]

Benford Law

The distribution of **the first digit d** of a number, in many naturally occurring domains, approximately follows

$$P(d) = \log_{10} \left(1 + \frac{1}{d} \right)$$

Holds if **log(x) is uniformly distributed**. **Most accurate** when values are distributed across multiple orders of magnitude, especially **if the process generating the numbers is described by a power law** (common in nature)



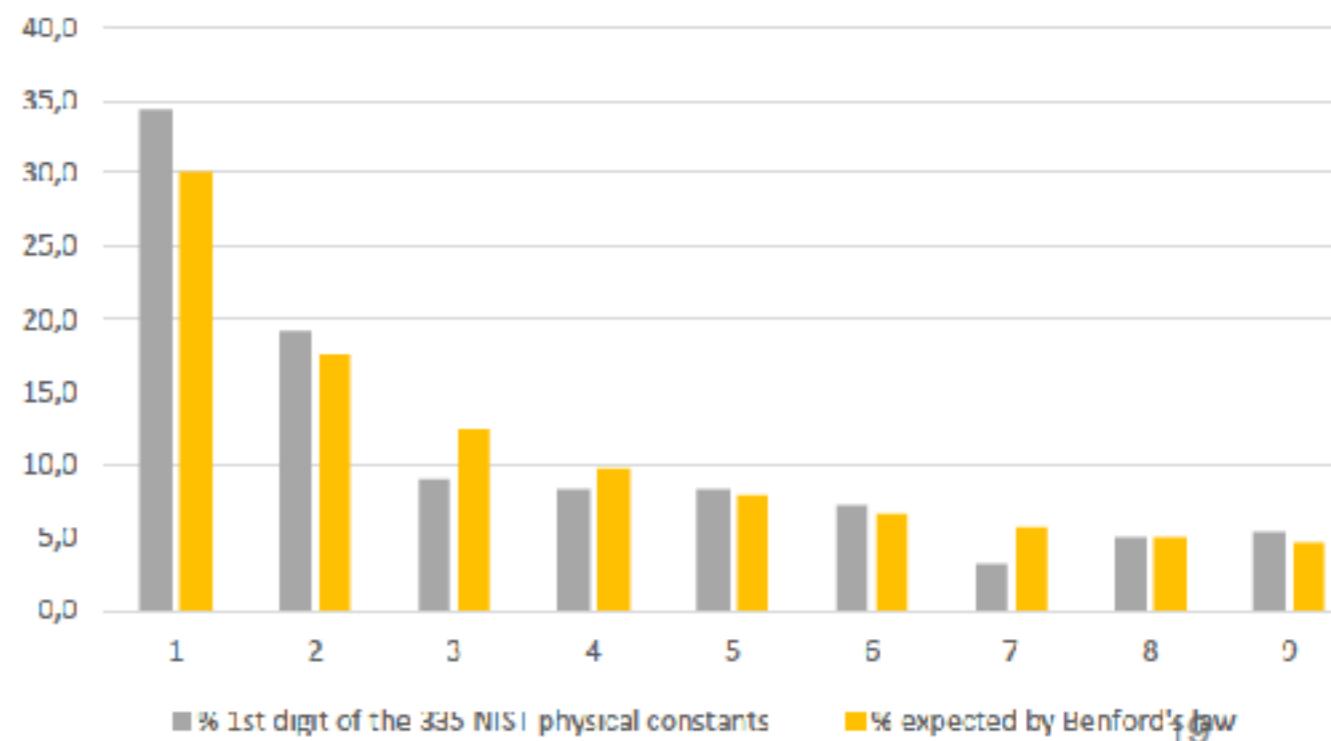
A logarithmic scale bar. Picking a random x position uniformly on this number line, roughly 30% of the time the first digit of the number will be 1.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benford%27s_law

[Benford: “The law of anomalous numbers” *Proc. Am. Philos. Soc.*, 1938]

Examples of Benford Law

- surface area of 355 rivers
- sizes of 3,259 US populations
- 104 physical constants
- 1,800 molecular weights
- 308 numbers contained in an issue of Reader's Digest
- Street addresses of the first 342 persons listed in American Men of Science
-



height of tallest structures

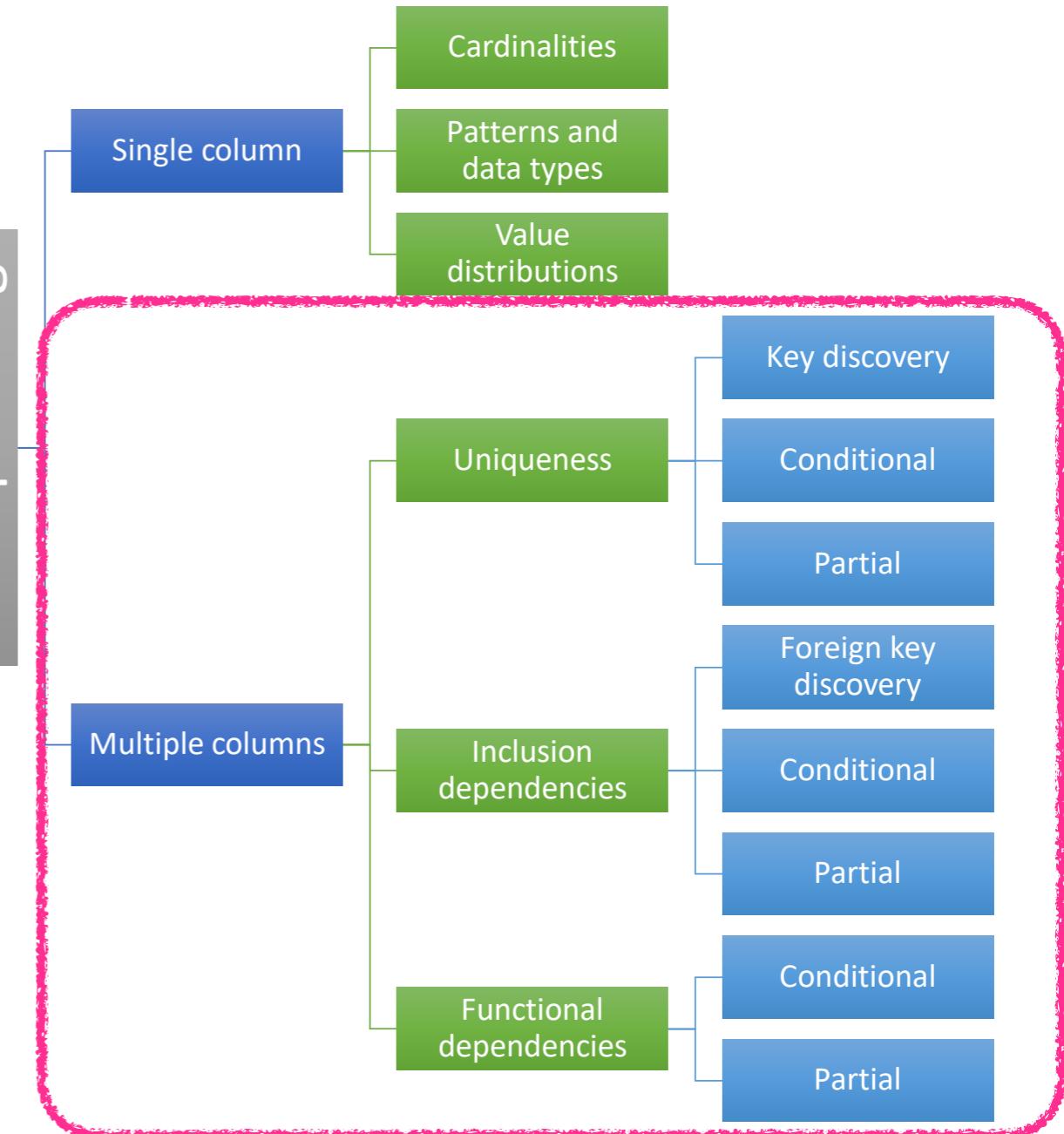
used in fraud detection!

Data profiling

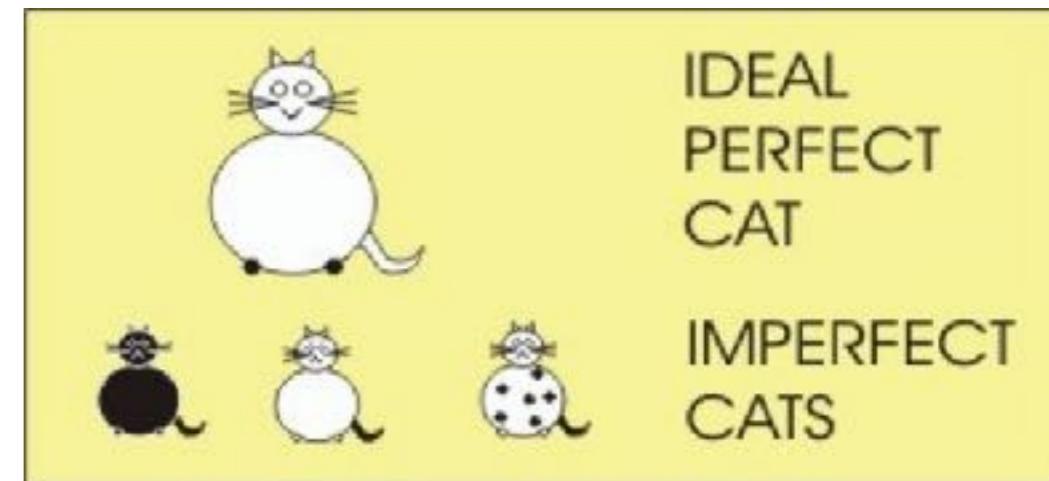
#	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
1	UID	sex	race	MarriedStatus	DateOfBirth	age	Inv.	Full score	decile score
2	1	0	1	1	4/18/47	68	0	1	
3	2	0	2	1	1/22/82	34	0	3	
4	3	0	2	1	5/10/91	24	0	0	0
5	4	0	2	1	1/21/95	19	0	0	8
6	5	0	1	2	1/22/73	43	0	0	1
7	6	0	1	3	8/22/71	44	0	0	1
8	7	0	4	1	7/3/74	41	0	0	0
9	8	0	1	2	2/15/73	48	0	0	4
10	9	0	3	1	5/10/94	21	0	0	3
11	10	0	3	1	6/1/88	27	0	0	1
12	11	1	4	2	4/27/78	37	0	0	1
13	12	0	2	1	12/2/74	41	0	0	4
14	13	1	3	1	6/14/08	47	0	0	1
15	14	0	2	1	3/25/85	31	0	0	3
16	15	0	4	1	1/3/74	37	0	0	1
17	16	0	2	1	5/12/20	15	0	0	10
18	17	0	3	1	12/24/84	31	0	0	5
19	18	0	3	1	1/8/85	31	0	0	3
20	19	0	2	4	6/28/91	24	0	0	6
21	20	0	2	1	11/19/24	21	0	0	0
22	21	0	3	1	8/9/88	27	0	0	2
23	22	1	3	1	3/22/95	23	0	0	1
24	23	0	4	1	1/24/92	24	0	0	0
25	24	0	3	3	1/10/73	48	0	0	1
26	25	0	1	1	8/34/83	32	0	0	3
27	26	0	2	1	2/8/89	27	0	0	3
28	27	1	4	1	8/31/94	28	0	0	0
29	28	0	1	1	4/17/80	42	0	0	7

relational data (here: just one table)

DATA PROFILING



An alternative classification



- To help understand the **statistics**, we look at value ranges, data types, value distributions per column or across columns, etc
- To help understand the **structure** - the (business) rules that generated the data - we look at unique columns / column combinations, dependencies between columns, etc - **reverse-engineer the relational schema** of the data we have
- We need both statistics and structure, they are mutually-reinforcing, and help us understand the **semantics** of the data - it's meaning

taming technical bias



This week's reading

Taming Technical Bias in Machine Learning Pipelines *

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Abstract

Machine Learning (ML) is commonly used to automate decisions in domains as varied as credit and lending, medical diagnosis, and hiring. These decisions are consequential, inspiring us to carefully balance the benefits of efficiency with the potential risks. Much of the conversation about the risks centers around bias — a term that is used by the technical community ever more frequently but that is still poorly understood. In this paper we focus on technical bias — a type of bias that has so far received limited attention and that the data engineering community is well-equipped to address. We discuss dimensions of technical bias that can arise through the ML lifecycle, particularly when it's due to preprocessing decisions or post-deployment issues. We present results of our recent work, and discuss future research directions. Our overall goal is to support the development of systems that expose the knobs of responsibility to data scientists, allowing them to detect instances of technical bias and to mitigate it when possible.

1 Introduction

Machine Learning (ML) is increasingly used to automate decisions that impact people's lives, in domains as varied as credit and lending, medical diagnosis, and hiring. The risks and opportunities arising from the wide-spread use of predictive analytics are generating much attention from policy makers, scientists, and the media. Much of this conversation centers around bias — a term that is used by the technical community ever more frequently but that is still poorly understood.

In their seminal 1996 paper, Friedman and Nissenbaum identified three types of bias that can arise in computer systems: pre-existing, technical, and emergent [9]. We briefly discuss these in turn, see Stoyanovich et al. [35] for a more comprehensive overview.

* Pre-existing bias has its origins in society. In ML applications, this type of bias often exhibits itself in the input data; detecting and mitigating it is the subject of much research under the heading of algorithmic fairness [5]. Importantly, the presence or absence of pre-existing bias cannot be scientifically verified, but rather is postulated based on a belief system [8, 12]. Consequently, the effectiveness — or even the validity — of a technical attempt to mitigate pre-existing bias is predicated on that belief system.

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Bulletin of the IEEE Computer Society Technical Committee on Data Engineering

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SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER



Data distribution debugging in machine learning pipelines

Stefan Gralberger¹ · Paul Groth¹ · Julia Stoyanovich² · Sebastian Schelter¹

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Abstract

Machine learning (ML) is increasingly used to automate impactful decisions, and the risks arising from this widespread use are gaining attention from policy makers, scientists, and the media. ML applications are often brimming with respect to their input data, which leads to concerns about their correctness, reliability, and fairness. In this paper, we describe *mlinspector*, a library that helps diagnose and mitigate technical bias that may arise during preprocessing steps in an ML pipeline. We refer to these problems collectively as *data distribution bugs*. The key idea is to construct a directed acyclic graph representation of the dataflow from a preprocessing pipeline and to use this representation to automatically instrument the code with predefined inspections. These inspections are based on a lightweight annotation propagation approach to propagate metadata such as lineage information from operator to operator. In contrast to existing work, *mlinspector* operates on declarative abstractions of popular data science libraries like estimator/transformation pipelines and does not require manual code instrumentation. We discuss the design and implementation of the *mlinspector* library and give a comprehensive end-to-end example that illustrates its functionality.

Keywords Data debugging · Machine learning pipelines · Data preparation for machine learning

1 Introduction

Machine learning (ML) is increasingly used to automate decisions that impact people's lives, in domains as varied as credit and lending, medical diagnosis, and hiring, with the potential to reduce costs, reduce errors, and make outcomes more equitable. Yet, despite their potential, the risks arising from the widespread use of ML-based tools are garnering attention from policy makers, scientists, and the media [32]. In large part this is because the correctness, reliability, and fairness of ML models critically depend on their training data. Preexisting bias, such as under- or over-representation of particular groups in the training data [12], and technical bias,

such as skew introduced during data preparation [69], can heavily impact performance. In this work, we focus on helping diagnose and mitigate technical bias that arises during preprocessing steps in an ML pipeline. We refer to these problems collectively as *data distribution bugs*.

Data distribution bugs are often introduced during preprocessing. Input data for ML applications come from a variety of data sources, and it has to be preprocessed and encoded as features before it can be used. This preprocessing can introduce skew in the data, and, in particular, it can exacerbate under-representation of historically disadvantaged groups. For example, preprocessing operations that involve filters or joins can heavily change the distribution of different groups represented in the training data [58], and missing value imputation can also introduce skew [47]. Recent ML fairness research, which mostly focuses on the use of learning algorithms on static datasets [14], is therefore insufficient because it cannot address such technical bias originating from the data preparation stage. Furthermore, it is important to detect and mitigate bias as close to its source as possible [52].

Data distribution bugs are difficult to catch. In part, this is because different pipeline steps are implemented using different libraries and abstractions, and data representation often

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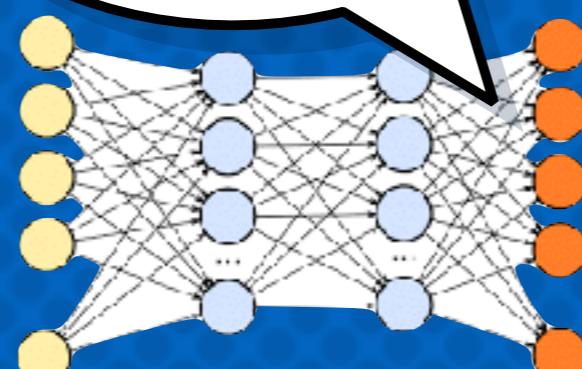
Springer

The “last-mile” view of responsible AI

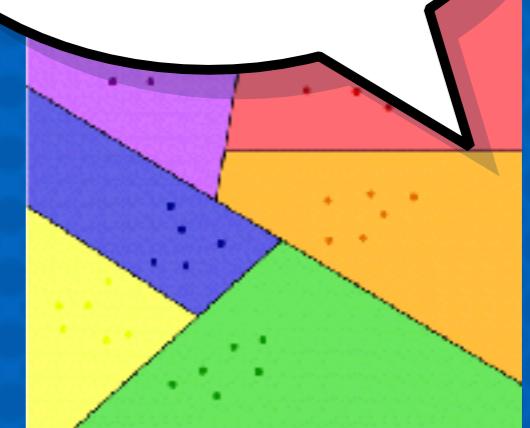
where did the data come from?



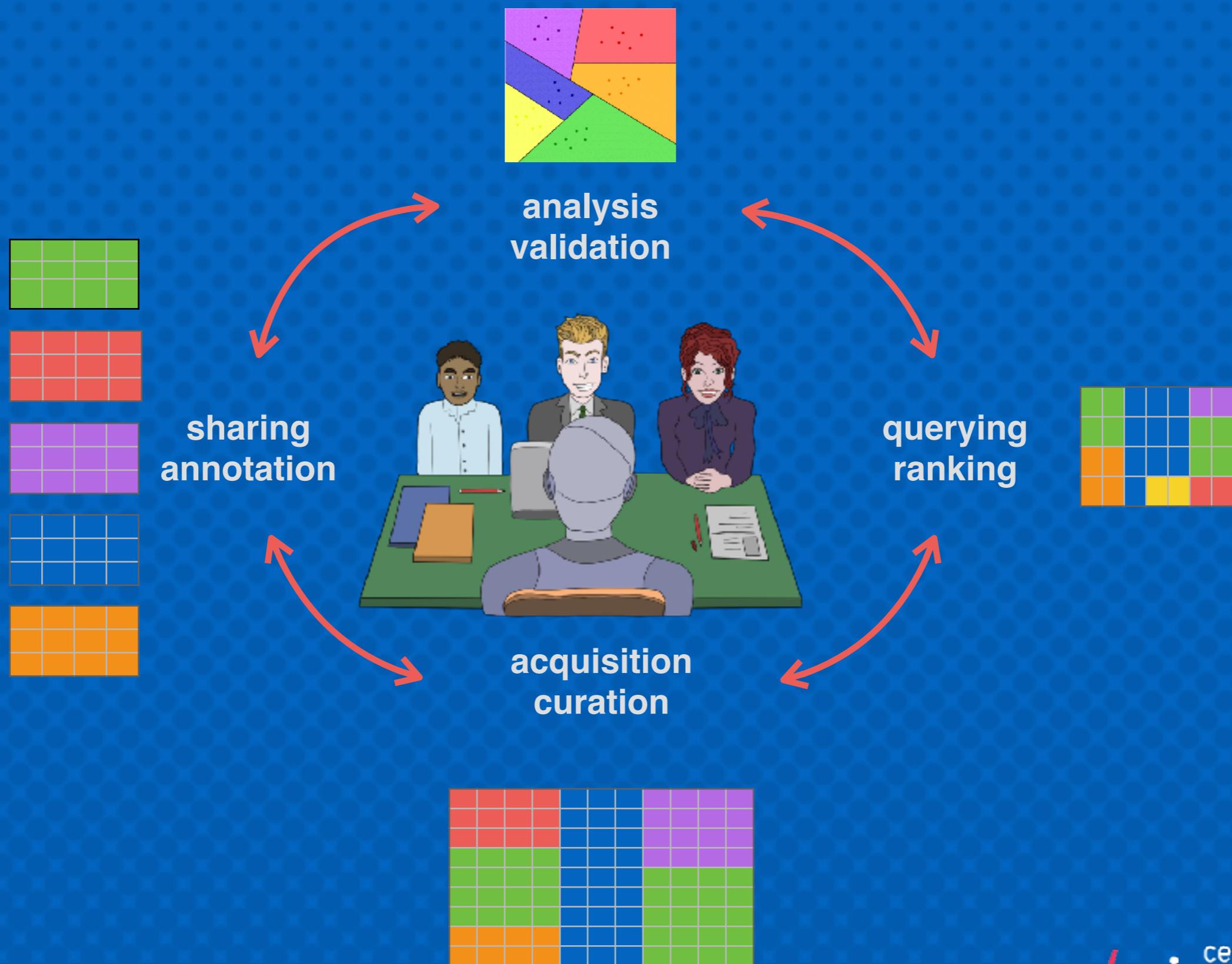
what happens inside the box?



how are results used?



Zooming out to the lifecycle view



Bias in computer systems

Pre-existing is independent of an algorithm and has origins in society

Technical is introduced or exacerbated by the technical properties of an ADS

Emergent arises due to context of use



[Friedman & Nissenbaum (1996)]



Model development lifecycle

Goal

design a model to predict an appropriate level of compensation for job applicants

Problem

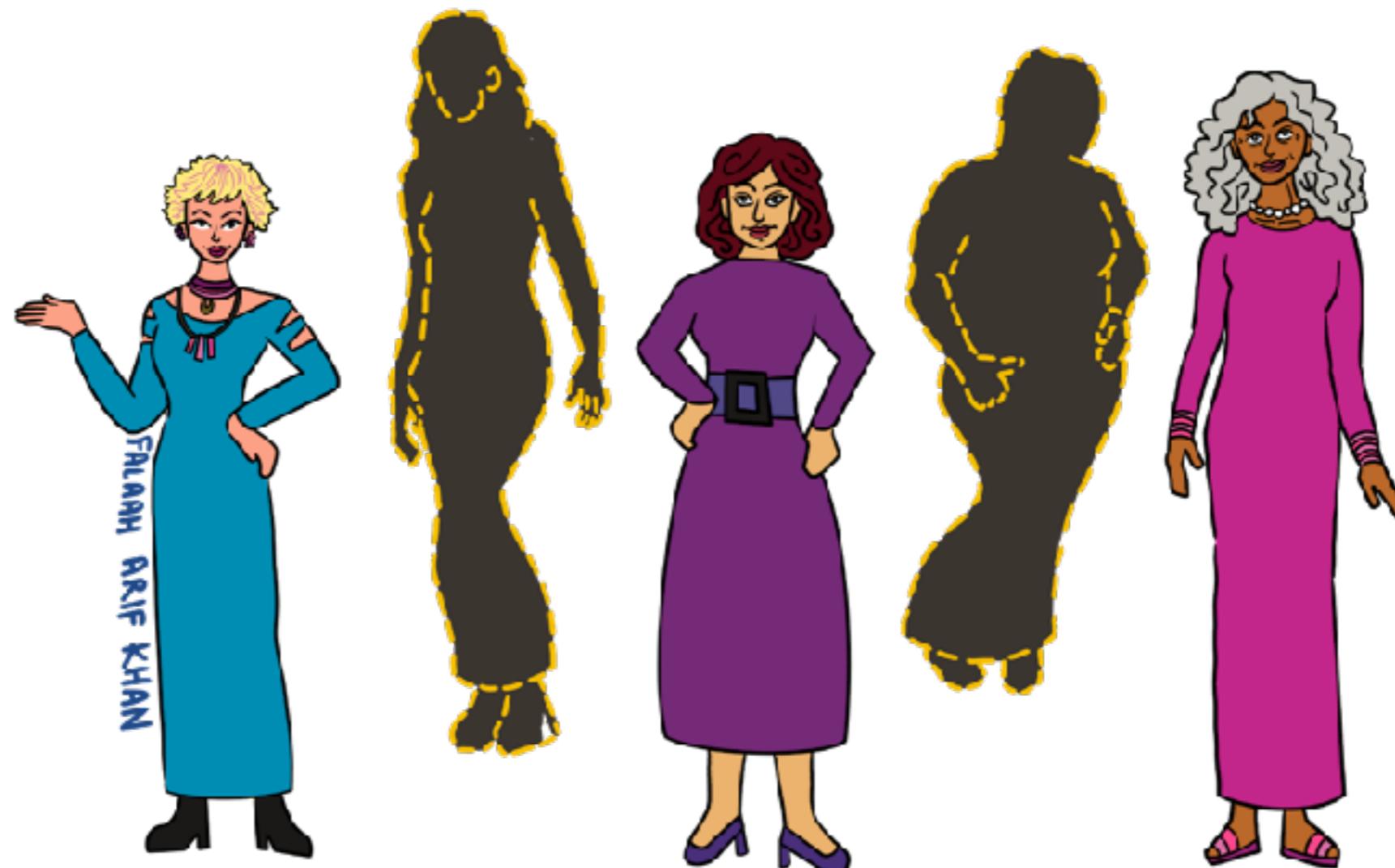
women are offered a lower salary than they would expect, potentially reinforcing the gender wage gap

demographics

employment



Missing values: Observed data

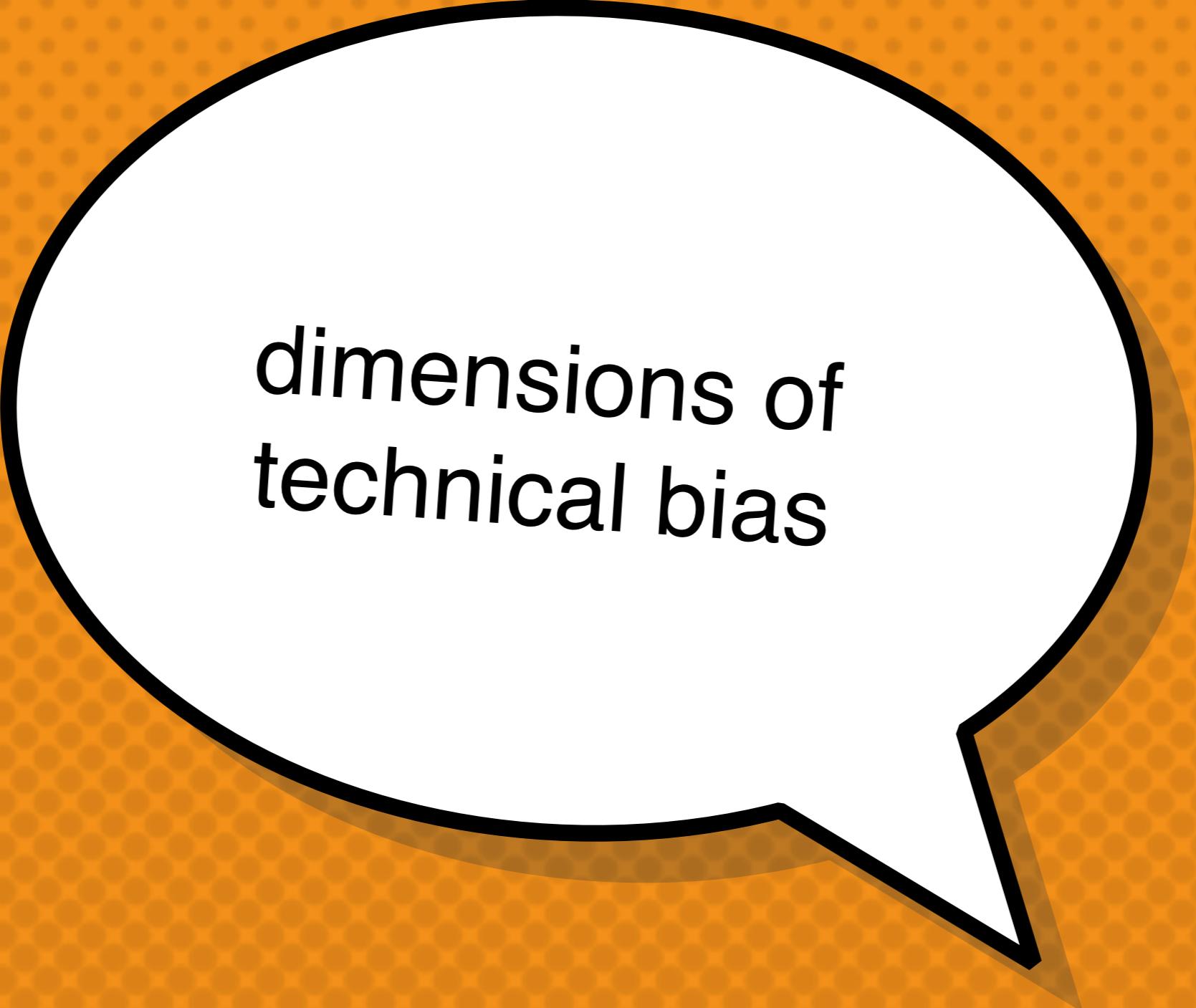


Missing values: Imputed distribution



Missing values: True distribution





dimensions of
technical bias

50 shades of *null*

- **Unknown** - some value definitely belongs here, but I don't know what it is (e.g., unknown birthdate)
- **Inapplicable** - no value makes sense here (e.g., if marital status = single then spouse name should not have a value)
- **Unintentionally omitted** - values is left unspecified unintentionally, by mistake
- **Optional** - a value may legitimately be left unspecified (e.g., middle name)
- **Intentionally withheld** (e.g., an unlisted phone number)
-



should we be
filling these in?
if so, how?

Missing value imputation

are values **missing at random** (e.g., gender, age, disability on job applications)?

are we ever interpolating **rare categories** (e.g., Native American)

are **all categories** represented (e.g., non-binary gender)?

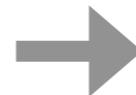


Data filtering

“filtering” operations (like selection and join), **can arbitrarily change demographic group proportions**

select by zip code, country, years of C++ experience, others?

age_group	county
60	CountyA
60	CountyA
20	CountyA
60	CountyB
20	CountyB
20	CountyB



age_group	county
60	CountyA
60	CountyA
20	CountyA

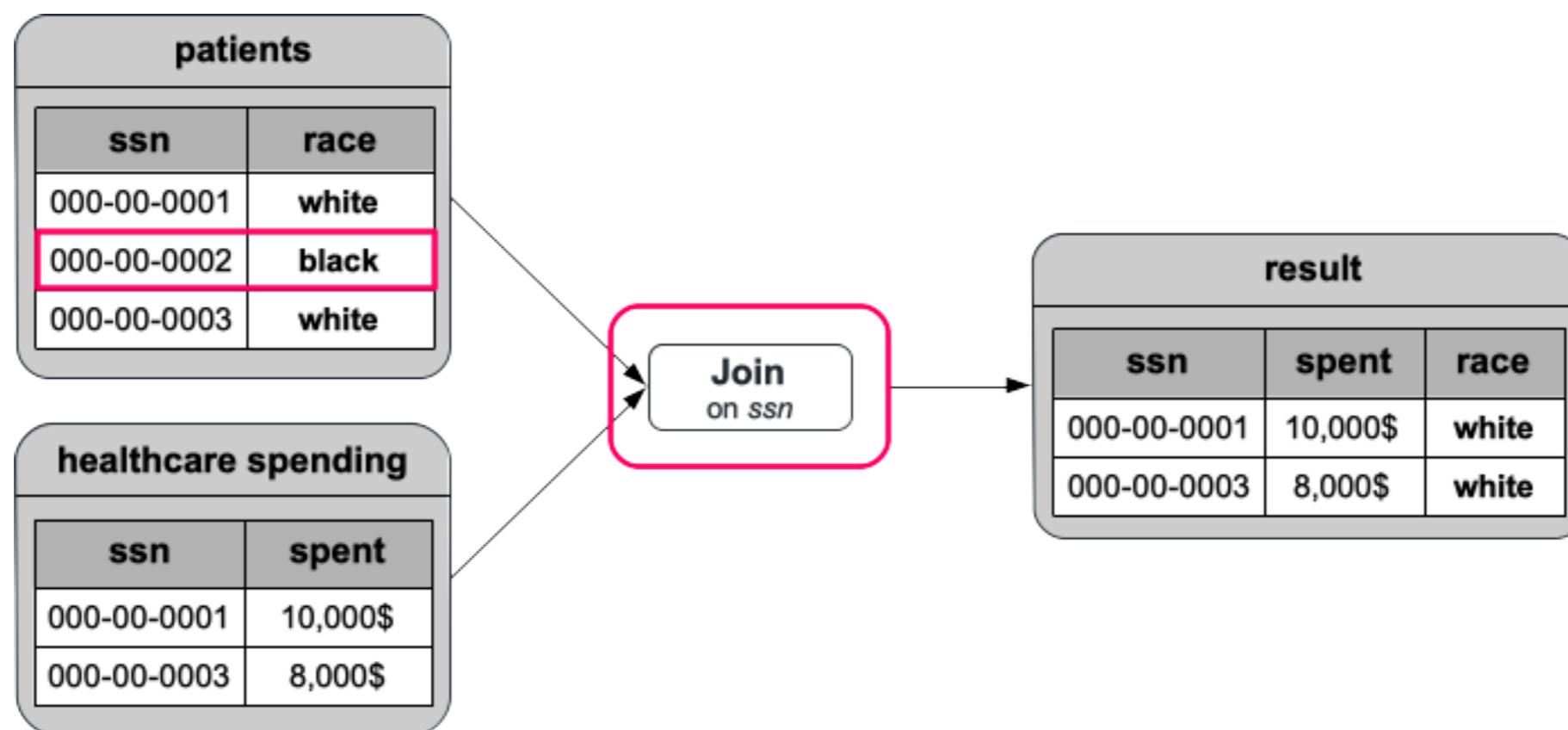
66% vs 33%

50% vs 50%

Data filtering

“filtering” operations (like selection and join), **can arbitrarily change demographic group proportions**

select by zip code, country, years of C++ experience, others?



Data distribution debugging: mlinspect

Potential issues in preprocessing pipeline:

- 1 Join might change proportions of groups in data
- 2 Column 'age_group' projected out, but required for fairness
- 3 Selection might change proportions of groups in data
- 4 Imputation might change proportions of groups in data
- 5 'race' as a feature might be illegal!
- 6 Embedding vectors may not be available for rare names!

Python script for preprocessing, written exclusively with native pandas and sklearn constructs

```
# load input data sources, join to single table
patients = pandas.read_csv(...)
histories = pandas.read_csv(...)
data = pandas.merge([patients, histories], on=['ssn'])

# compute mean complications per age group, append as column
complications = data.groupby('age_group')
    .agg(mean_complications=('complications', 'mean'))
data = data.merge(complications, on=['age_group'])

# Target variable: people with frequent complications
data['label'] = data['complications'] >
    1.2 * data['mean_complications']

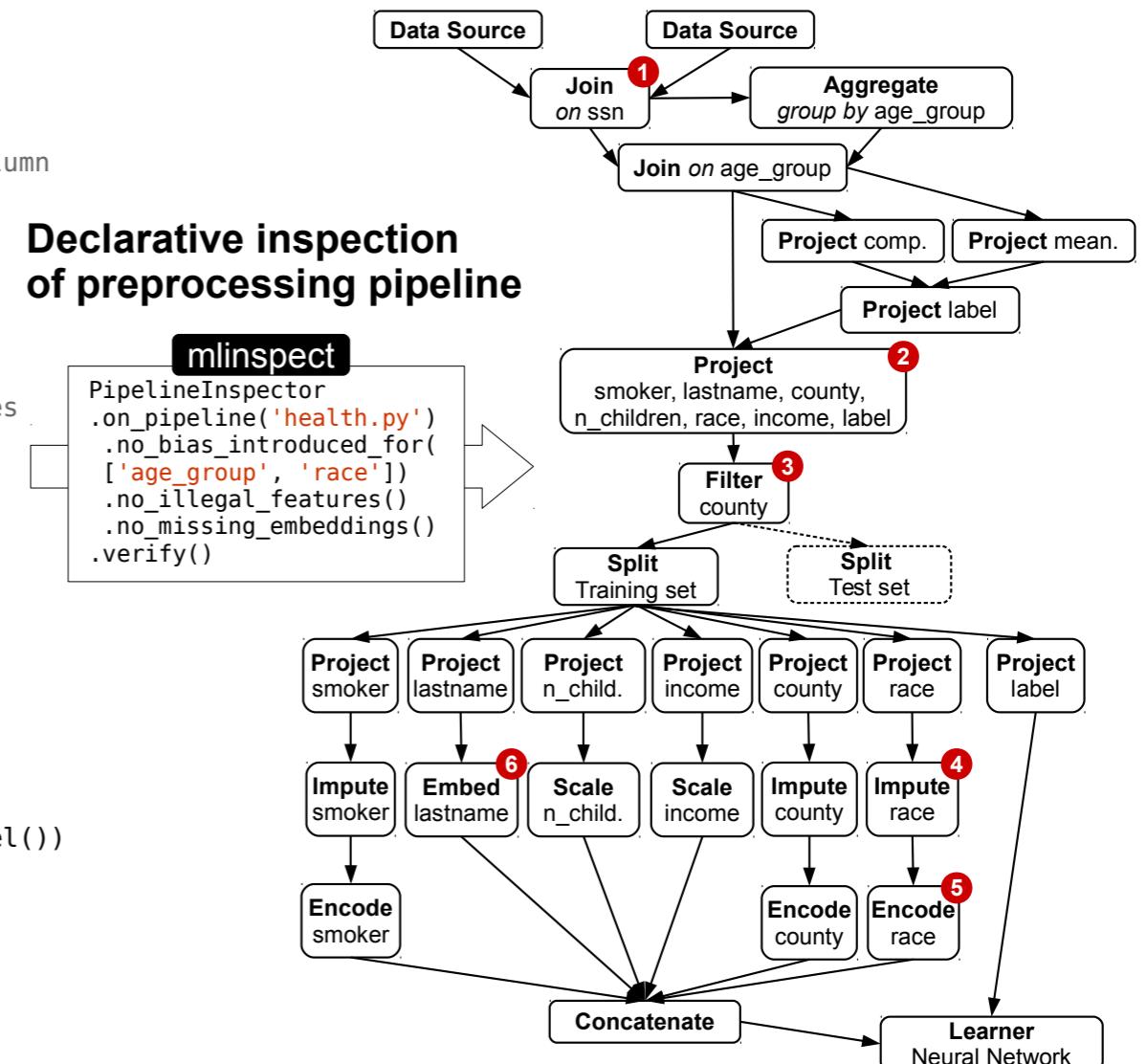
# Project data to subset of attributes, filter by counties
data = data[['smoker', 'last_name', 'county',
             'num_children', 'race', 'income', 'label']]
data = data[data['county'].isin(counties_of_interest)]

# Define a nested feature encoding pipeline for the data
impute_and_encode = sklearn.Pipeline([
    (sklearn.SimpleImputer(strategy='most_frequent')),
    (sklearn.OneHotEncoder())])
featurisation = sklearn.ColumnTransformer(transformers=[
    (impute_and_encode, ['smoker', 'county', 'race']),
    (Word2VecTransformer(), 'last_name'),
    (sklearn.StandardScaler(), ['num_children', 'income'])])

# Define the training pipeline for the model
neural_net = sklearn.KerasClassifier(build_fn=create_model())
pipeline = sklearn.Pipeline([
    ('features', featurisation),
    ('learning_algorithm', neural_net)])

# Train-test split, model training and evaluation
train_data, test_data = train_test_split(data)
model = pipeline.fit(train_data, train_data.label)
print(model.score(test_data, test_data.label))
```

Corresponding dataflow DAG for instrumentation, extracted by *mlinspect*



Data debugging: mlinspect

- similar to code inspection in modern IDEs, but specifically for data
- works on existing pipeline code using libraries like pandas and scikit-learn
- negligible performance overhead

ACM SIGMOD 2021 demo (4 min)

<https://surfdrive.surf.nl/files/index.php/s/ybriyzsdc6vcld2w>

CIDR 2021 talk (10 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic0aD6lv5h0>

<https://github.com/stefan-grafberger/mlinspect>

Sound experimentation



“A theory or idea shouldn’t be scientific unless it could, in principle, be proven false.”

Karl Popper

- software-engineering and data science best-practices
- data isolation: training / validation / test
- accounting for **variability** when observing trends
- tuning hyper-parameters: **for what objective?**

Responsible Data Science

The data science lifecycle

Thank you!



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for
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ai