

STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN BIOLOGY

Conventions, Abstractions, and the Future



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18/06/2019

1 The Reproducibility Crisis

- What crisis?
- Why are we in this crisis?

2 The p -Value Conundrum

- Background
- Alternatives

3 Finding A Solution

- Summary
- Discussion

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Irreproducible research

Reproducibility analyses have shown that only a surprisingly small portion of studies can be replicated.

~ Nuzzo (2015). FOOLING OURSELVES. Nature.

This manifests in:

- Large sample-to-sample variations of the p -value

~ Halsey et al. (2015). The fickle P value generates irreproducible results. Nature Methods.

- Ambiguity in data handling procedures

~ Peng & Leek (2015). P values are just the tip of the iceberg. Nature.

- Difficulty in establishing meta-analyses

~ Cumming (2014). The New Statistics: Why and How. Psychological Science.

Thus, our studies become **solitary glances behind the curtain**.

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Reasons for the reproducibility crisis

Some select phenomena that brought us here:

Dichotomy of p -values

- Arbitrary .05 significance cut-off generates a false dichotomy of 'false' or 'true' conclusions
- Significant effect are not necessarily biologically relevant

~ Burnham et al. (2011). AIC model selection and multimodel inference in behavioral ecology: Some background, observations, and comparisons. Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology.

Peer-review shortcomings

- Reluctancy to make corrections
- No clear guidelines on where to direct criticism towards
- No standard process for data and code access

~ Allison (2016). A tragedy of errors. Nature.

Research integrity

- Research questions often formulated post-hoc leading to *multiple testing* issue
- Sloppy reporting of data handling procedures
- Lack of data and code repository guidelines
- Lack in pre-specification of research

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What is the p -value and why is it insufficient?

"The p -value is the probability of randomly obtaining an effect at least as extreme as the one in your sample data, given the null hypothesis."

Misconceptions

- The p -value is not designed to tell us whether something is strictly true or false
- It is not the probability of the null hypothesis being true
- The size of p does not yield any information about the strength of an observed effect

Mathematical Quirks

- It varies strongly from sample-to-sample (depending on statistical power of the set-up)
- If the sample size is big enough, the p value will always be below the .05 cut-off, no matter the magnitude of the effect

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Effect sizes

"A measure of the magnitude of a statistical effect within the data (i.e. values calculated from test statistics)."

~ Nakagawa & Cuthill (2007). Effect size, confidence interval and statistical significance: A practical guide for biologists. Biological Reviews.

- **Intuitive** to interpret and often what we are interested in
- Three types for most situations:
 - r statistics (correlations)
 - d statistics (comparisons of values)
 - OR (odds ratio) statistics (risk measurements)
- These are **point estimates**
- Need to be reported alongside some information of credibility
- These are usually *standardised* thus enabling meta-studies

In R: <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/compute.es/compute.es.pdf> and
<https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/effsize/effsize.pdf>

Confidence Intervals

"Confidence intervals (CIs) answer the questions: 'How strong is the effect' and 'How accurate is that estimate of the population effect'."

~ Halsey (2019). The reign of the p -value is over: what alternative analyses could we employ to fill the power vacuum? *Biology Letters*.

- **Intuitive** to interpret
- Answers the questions we are most interested in
- Does not require additional information of statistical certainty
- Combines **point estimates** and **range estimates**
- Removes some of the pressure of the *"file drawer problem"*
- Shares the same mathematical framework as the p -value calculation
- Especially useful in **data visualisation**

In R, many functions come with in-built ways of establishing CIs.

Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)

The Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) is a indicator of model fit.

~ Burnham et al. (2011). AIC model selection and multimodel inference in behavioral ecology: Some background, observations, and comparisons.
Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology.

- Used for **model selection and comparison**
- Lower AICs indicate better model fit
- One can establish contrasting models adhering to different hypothesis and identify which model suits the data best
- A proper hypothesis selection tool
- Model selection often comes with some degree of uncertainty
- Can be misused in step-wise model building procedures

In R, most model outputs can be assessed using the `AIC()` function.

Bayes Factor

" The minimum Bayes factor is simply the exponential of the difference between the log-likelihoods of two competing models."

~ Goodman (2001). Of P-Values and Bayes: A Modest Proposal. Epidemiology.

- **Intuitive** to interpret (Bayes Factor of 1/10 means that our study decreased the relative odds of the null hypothesis being true tenfold)
- Uses prior information to establish expected likelihoods thus enabling a progression in science

In R: <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/BayesFactor/BayesFactor.pdf> or direct Bayesian Statistics using JAGS or STAN (for example)

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Research Integrity

- 1 Distinguish between **prespecified** (answering a question) and **exploratory** (formulating a question) studies.
- 2 Express **research question in terms of expectations** of effect sizes
- 3 Identify the **effect sizes best suited to answer** these questions
- 4 **Report full study plan before commencing data collection**
- 5 **Calculate measures** of statistical meaning that **enable meta-studies** (e.g. effect sizes and CIs)
- 6 Make sure to **correctly interpret the results** outside of the p -value dichotomy of true and false
- 7 **Report the findings in a meta-analytic context**

Where do we go from here?

*"Treat statistics as a science, and not a
recipe"*

~ Andrew Vickers

*"The numbers are where the scientific
discussion should start, not end!"*

~ Regina Nuzzo