

Replication / astronomy

Reproducibility of 'Poincaré dodecahedral space parameter estimates'

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Edited by
(Editor)

Received
—

Published
—

DOI
—

Abstract

Is a scientific research paper based on (i) public, online observational data files and (ii) providing free-licensed software for reproducing its results easy to reproduce by the same author a decade later? This paper attempts to reproduce a cosmic topology observational paper published in 2008 and satisfying both criteria (i) and (ii). The reproduction steps are defined formally in a free-licensed git repository package “0807.4260” and qualitatively in the current paper. It was found that the effort in updating the Fortran 77 code at the heart of the software, interfaced with a C front end, and originally compiled with g77, in the content of the contemporary gfortran compiler, risked being too great to be justified on any short time scale. In this sense, the results of RBG08 are not as reproducible as they appeared to be, despite data availability and free-licensing and public availability of the software. The software and a script to reproduce the steps of this incomplete reproduction are combined in a new git repository named 0807.4260, following the ArXiv identity code of RGB08.¹

1 Introduction

This paper studies the reproducibility of the main observational results of a cosmic topology research paper published by myself and co-authors in 2008¹. The paper used the surface-of-last-scattering optimal cross-correlation method of finding a preferred orientation of the fundamental domain of the spatial section of the Universe, under the working hypothesis that the spatial section is a Poincaré dodecahedral space². The code was developed by me, with comments provided by my coauthors. The results that should be reproduced are those that use the method described in Section 3.2 of RBG08, and the observational analysis results described in Section 4.2, displayed in Figs. 3, 4, 5 and given numerically in Tables 2 and 3 of RBG08. Related cosmic topology papers by other authors are published with no references to software package details or software licences.

The reason for attempting and documenting the reproducibility of this paper is that not only are many papers in astronomy³ and other fields still published without providing the full empirical data sets and source code under free-software licences, but even those that provide free-licensed software and input data may be difficult to reproduce^{4,5,6}. While observational data in cosmology are usually made available online with high-quality documentation, often after an embargo period, free-licensed software in the field of cosmic topology, in particular, library functions for defining matched circles in the cosmic microwave background or matched *discs* in extragalactic 3-dimensional comoving space⁷, is only recorded in the scientific literature in papers published by my research group.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Code is available at <https://codeberg.org/boud/0807.4260>.

ded213c1c4cfdfe2ef92f7155b27d58c	wmap_ilc_5yr_v3.fits
fbcb8b2518fdddf0a1e7b5acde99a748e	wiener5yr_map.fits
5aa3267dc6d69bf8c5f0a3a893e23960	wmap_kp2_r9_mask_3yr_v2.fits
afbd67d8120c11e949eb0c414c2775f5	circles-0.3.2.1.tar.gz

Table 1. Checksums (md5sums) of the data and the main software source code files of RBG08, use for the present reproducibility test.

To document and help analyse the success and difficulties in reproducing scientific results in this context, the editors of *ReScience C* posed the “Ten Years Reproducibility Challenge”, a request that scientists attempt to reproduce the main results of *their own* peer-reviewed scientific research papers that had been published before 1 January 2010, and document the method and results in *ReScience C*⁸.

2 Method

2.1

The first steps for trying to reproduce the original results of RBG08 were to (re-)read the appropriate sections of the paper, initially taking the view of a non-author.

1. Section 2.1¹ states that the analysis method of Section 3.2 requires the three files at URLs listed in footnotes 1, 2, 3 on the same page. These files represent two versions of an all-sky map of the Universe mostly representing cosmic microwave background emission at $10h^{-1}$ Gpc (comoving) from the Earth as observed by the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP)⁹, and the “kp2” mask to enable analysis that avoids the most contaminated regions of the sky. These files need to be downloaded.
2. Footnote 7¹ indicates that CIRCLES-0.3.2.1, to be found at the URL <http://cosmo.torun.pl/GPLdownload/dodec/>, provides the software for generating the figures and tables. This software needs to be downloaded from <http://cosmo.torun.pl/GPLdownload/dodec/circles-0.3.2.1.tar.gz>.

The next step was to develop a script on a GIT repository server that satisfies the requirements of the international scientific community, specifically the International Science Council¹⁰, by not blocking access to scientists of any countries or territories. As of 2020, several popular GIT repository servers block access to scientists and other residents of several territories¹¹. A shift to servers acceptable under international scientific ethical standards is underway, but incomplete as of early 2020.

The remaining planned steps were to implement the minimal number of updates to make the code work and replicate the original results, using modern hardware and a modern software environment. Footnote 7 of RBG08 warns that “These [CIRCLES-0.3.2.1 and CIRCLES-0.3.8] and earlier versions of the software require medium to advanced GNU/LINUX, FORTRAN77 and C experience for a scientific user.” There is no statement regarding the particular compiler(s) used. As far as I recall, it’s very likely that the widely used GNU fortran compiler of the time, G77, was used together with GCC, as selected automatically by AUTOTOOL packages.

The system and hardware chosen for the reproduction project were an AMD computer running with a DEBIAN GNU/LINUX 9.12 system on an X86_64 LINUX-4.9.0 KERNEL. The Fortran compiler chosen was GNU FORTRAN (DEBIAN 6.3.0-18+DEB9U1) 6.3.0 20170516.

3 Results

The overall script intended to carry out the full sequence of downloads, configuring of packages, compiling of packages, subdirectory user-level installation of packages,

setting up of calculation parameters, and running the main code, was set up as a BASH script `reproduce_RBG08.sh`.

The full package aiming to reproduce the figures and tables listed above is provided at <https://codeberg.org/boud/0807.4260>, named after the ArXiv identity of RBG08.

3.1 Downloading data and software source code

1. The URL in footnotes 1, 2 and 3¹ gave clickable links that were split into two and not correctly clickable. The user needs to cut/paste the two halves of each URL in order to obtain the three data files. The data files were downloaded with no apparent problem, with md5sums as indicated in Table 1.
2. The file `CIRCLES-0.3.2.1.TAR.GZ` with the md5sum indicated in Table 1 was downloaded. It was included in the main git repository in its original form. Subsequent changes are recorded in the git history at <https://codeberg.org/boud/0807.4260>.

3.2 Compiling/debugging

Fixes needed in order to successfully compile CIRCLES include:

1. A Fortran 77 line that ended on one line with a + symbol and started on the next line with another + symbol (within the valid columns for standard Fortran 77) was apparently accepted by the GCC family fortran compiler in 2008, but not now (2020). One of the + symbols was removed.
2. A fitting algorithm `GSL_MULTIFIT_COVAR` available in GNU Scientific Library (GSL) versions 1.x was obsoleted; it is no longer present in modern 2.x versions of GSL. With the aim of minimising the interventions required in the system, GSL-1.10 was downloaded and compiled from source, re-creating part of the original software environment.
3. Using the modern GFORTRAN compiler options `-fcheck=bounds -Wall` to highlight likely sources of bugs due to insufficiently standard coding led to many warnings. Checking of these warnings motivated many fixes that could be expected to either solve errors in running the main CIRCLES package, or reduce the chance of calculational errors.
4. The autotools `autoreconf` command was run in the main `CIRCLES-0.3.2.1` directory and its subdirectories.
5. The `COSMDIST` package provided by default in a subdirectory of `CIRCLES-0.3.2.1` was replaced by a download/configure/compile/install section of the main reproduction script, since `COSMDIST` is now available in an online git repository. The aim was to reduce the chance of `COSMDIST` being a blocking factor in reproduction of the calculations.
6. Memory allocation errors that occur for running CIRCLES without previously defining environment variables for key values such as input filenames are present in `CIRCLES-0.3.2.1`. These were most likely not noticed in RBG08 because of the use of environment variables providing these values. Fixes to the front-end C file `CIRCLES.C` were made with the intention of avoiding memory allocation errors, which are typically reported to the user as segmentation faults.

3.3 Dependencies

The full list of dependencies listed – not necessarily really used – in the final GFORTRAN compile operation that creates the CIRCLES binary executable is:
`-lpgplot -lpng lcosmdist -lisolat -lastromisc llapack -lcbblas
-lf77blas -latlas lgfortran -lquadmath -lcfitsio -lcosmdist
-lgsl -lgslcblas -lm -lgcc -lX11 -lm.`

3.4 Running/debugging

At the time of writing the original paper, the aim was that the use of GNU tools to provide a free-licensed package configurable and compilable with `./configure && make` and a detailed `./circles --help` command would be sufficient to enable easy reproduction by a scientifically competent user. For example, invoking the CIRCLES help option shows both single-hyphen, one-character options and their equivalent double-hyphen, long options, such as `-i, --cmb_file_raw=FILE` `cmb` fits file of input data.

My private notes of what were intended to record the most significant steps taken in carrying out the project, along with more minor steps, were used in the attempted reproduction of RBG08. However, in trying to reproduce these steps now, it is clear that the original notes were not as complete and unambiguous as they should be. For the purpose of the current exercise in reproducibility, a completely fresh BASH script was prepared, which verifies the sha512 checksums of input data files and software packages that are downloaded from source rather than provided within the security context of the host system. The style of the new script is partly based on more recent attempts at reproducibility in my own recent papers in which GIT commit hashes of the software¹² and a BASH script for running the full software¹³ were provided. Some inspiration was taken from the MAKE-based reproducibility framework¹⁴ recently renamed MANEAGE¹⁵, but the structure of the script is much less modular; it is a simple linear script with a few minimal checks.

This situation illustrates the problem of “insider knowledge” being required for the reproducibility of a paper, where “insider” also includes knowledge that may still be coded in the scientist’s brain, but not in written form.

A more fundamental problem in terms of coding and software environment evolution is that this code uses a C front end and a Fortran 77 backend, configured and compiled together using AUTOCONF tools, in a way that, to the best of my knowledge and that of my co-authors, worked correctly in 2008.

The main files are `circles_f77.f`, 2023 lines long, named to emphasise the expected obsolescence of the Fortran 77 language standard; 21 Fortran 77 source files with a total of 11,616 lines of code in `lib/`; and 3415 lines of Fortran 77 code in the auxiliary package `astromisc/lib/`. For modernisation of this code, a minimum approach would be to convert from Fortran 77 to Fortran 2008, in which case Fortran-C compatibility conventions that are reasonably well developed and implemented by the GCC/GFORTRAN family could be used.

For the purposes of this reproducibility test, the required re-coding effort would be more than is presently justified. While this is, as far as I know, the only free-licensed code for identified-circles matching for the purposes of cosmic topology analysis for which peer-reviewed research has been published, the techniques developed in codes that are not publicly available under either free or non-free licences have developed considerably since 2008. Moreover, the research field is extremely high risk: an observational confirmation of the spatial topology of the Universe would be a historically important discovery, but whether or not this measurement is feasible remains highly speculative. To serve as a basis for long-term projects in this particular field, the software would best be rewritten according to modern standards of C and/or Fortran; and the best tested, accurate, fast, well-coded free-licensed auxiliary libraries, such as CGAL for geometrical purposes, could be used to avoid “reinventing the wheel”.

Given that a hurried attempt at a major refactoring of the code would not only tend to extend beyond the scope of the aims of the “Ten Years Reproducibility Challenge”, it would also be pointless (a systematic upgrade would better be done properly and thoroughly), this reproducibility attempt was terminated, leaving it with an untraced bug that is very likely to be memory related. The behaviour of the bug (or bugs) is inconsistent, yielding errors such as Fortran runtime error: Substring out of bounds: upper bound (7) of 'bin_format' exceeds string length (4) or Fortran runtime error: Substring out of bounds: upper bound (2) of 'indir' exceeds string length (-1158212918).

4 Discussion

Compiler evolution and Fortran/C compatibility are key elements of difficulties in reproducing RBG08, mostly combined with some coding that is not sufficiently robust. In 2008, G77 was an obvious choice of Fortran compiler in the stable distribution of Debian GNU/Linux. Since the Debian community already had at the time a solid reputation in terms of software security, verification of licensing and fully transparent and participatory decision-making, this seemed like a wise choice for reproducibility. The main developer of G77 had already announced his intention to stop maintaining the project in 2001¹⁶, but even by 2010, two years after RBG08 was published, the community remained unclear regarding the relationship between G95, based on GCC, versus GFORTRAN, part of GCC¹⁷.

If a reproducibility framework such as MANEAGE had been used¹⁵, it would have been much more likely that full reproducibility would have been attained, since MANEAGE would, in principle, have configured, compiled, and installed all the original software environment, including GSL and G77 and optionally a contemporaneous version of GCC, and would have encouraged the original project to be modular enough with sufficiently many verification tests to survive a decade of evolution of the software environment.

5 Conclusion

It is ironical that in the field of cosmic topology, not only are most software packages only available privately with unknown licences (as tends to be the case in astronomy as recently as 2015³), but the code that is explicitly public with peer-reviewed published results has turned out to be less easy to reproduce than expected. This is, unfortunately, consistent with typical reports on science research paper reproducibility^{4,5,6}. The specific bottleneck suspected of leading to memory errors in this case was that the effort required to update the Fortran 77 files at the heart of the code, interfaced with a C front end, and compiled with the current GFORTRAN compiler from within GCC rather than with the older, discontinued¹⁶ G77 compiler, risked being too great to be justified on any short time scale. While Fortran has remained actively used by scientists since more than half a century ago and in its modern standards continues to be used actively, and the original CIRCLES package was prepared using the powerful GNU AUTOTOOLS, a robust interface and standards for compiling C and Fortran code together have only evolved quite recently.

While the results of the paper are not as reproducible as they appeared to be, the requirement of the Ten Years Challenge for the code to be placed in an online git repository, which in this case is <https://codeberg.org/boud/0807.4260>, resulted in confirmation that the source code is fully free-licensed, including all libraries and other auxiliary software packages, and the input data files remain publicly available online. Refactoring the code into a format such as MANEAGE¹⁵ would be a potential way forward of shifting the research field towards a more completely *open-science* phase.

Acknowledgments

Part of this research has been supported by the "A next-generation worldwide quantum sensor network with optical atomic clocks" project of the TEAM IV programme of the Foundation for Polish Science co-financed by the European Union under the European Regional Development Fund. Part of this research has been supported by the Polish MNiSW grant DIR/WK/2018/12. Part of this research has been supported by the Poznań Supercomputing and Networking Center (PSNC) computational grant 314.

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