SDA/PHIL 270 Data, Ethics, Society

Kino Zhao (she/her) kino_zhao@sfu.ca

General Information

Course Description

This class introduces students to ethical and epistemological issues surrounding the gathering and processing of social data.

Reading

All text are available online.

Assessment

Weekly Perusall (30%):

Weekly reading comprehension questions. Graded on accuracy. 3 lowest grades will be dropped.

In-class writing (10%):

Students are expected to have done the reading before class. At some point during the class, students will complete an in-class writing assignment. There's no make-up. 3 lowest grades will be dropped. Open notes.

Midterm exam (30%):

It's going to be a series of short answers similar to in-class discussion questions. You are allowed to reference your reading, notes, slides, or any material.

Take home final exam (30%):

It's going to be longer answers similar to in-class writing assignments.

Schedule

Unit 1: the case study

Week 1: Why do we gather data about people?

- Merry, S. E. (2011). Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance. *Current Anthropology*, 52(S3), S83–S95. https://doi.org/10.1086/657241

Week 2: The case of COMPAS

- Machine Bias, ProPublica, https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing

Week 3: A criticism

- Flores, A. W., Bechtel, K., & Lowenkamp, C. T. (2016). False Positives, False Negatives, and False Analyses: A Rejoinder to "Machine Bias: There's Software Used Across the Country to Predict Future Criminals. And It's Biased Against Blacks." *Federal Probation*, 80(2).

Week 4: Merely statistical evidence? No.

- Colyvan, M., Regan, H. M., & Ferson, S. (2001). Is it a Crime to Belong to a Reference Class. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 9(2), 168–181. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00123

Week 5: Merely statistical evidence? Sometimes.

- Silva, P. (2023). Merely statistical evidence: When and why it justifies belief. *Philosophical Studies*, 180(9), 2639–2664. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-01983-x

Week 6: What counts as evidence for discrimination? Causal analysis

- Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2004). Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination. *American Economic Review*, 94(4), 991–1013. https://doi.org/10.1257/0002828042002561

Week 7: What counts as evidence for discrimination? Against the causal analysis

- Pages 1163-1194 (sections 0,1,2) of Kohler-Hausmann, I. (2019). Eddie Murphy and the Dangers of Counterfactual Causal Thinking About Detecting Racial Discrimination. *Northwestern University Law Review*, 113(5), 1163–1227.

Week 8: midterm

Week 9: Measuring people

- Porter, T. M. (2012). Funny Numbers. *Culture Unbound*, 585–598.

Week 10: Value capture

- Nguyen, C. (2024). Value Capture. Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy, 27(3). https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v27i3.3048

Week 11: Should science pay attention to social values? Yes.

- Douglas, H. (2000). Inductive Risk and Values in Science. *Philosophy of Science*, 67(4), 559–579.

Week 12: Should science pay attention to social values? No.

- Koertge, N. (2000). Science, Values, and the Value of Science. Philosophy of Science, 67(S3), S45–S57. https://doi.org/10.1086/392808

Week 13: Standpoint epistemology

- Wylie, A. (2012). Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 86(2), 47–76.

Last updated April, 2025