

## COMMENT

### **A freshman's view on "Whose Statistics?", the Radical Statistics Annual Conference on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

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I found out about the existence of the Radical Statistics group for the first time when getting an invitation to the conference "Whose Statistics?" in February.

With my active interest in the philosophy of Statistics, the difficulties with connecting mathematical models with the real world, and social science applications of statistics, I was delighted that there is such a group, emphasising responsibility, and ethical and social considerations when dealing with statistics. So I decided to go to the conference and to become a member.

I wasn't exactly sure what to expect, but I was certainly not disappointed, because I perceived the group and the conference as lively, open minded and enriching.

The conference programme was many-sided, as well as the points of view expressed in the discussions. Actually, I could only really connect the conference title "Whose Statistics?" with the extremely interesting and engaging presentation of Heather Brooke, and it rather seemed to be a collection of various topics of interest to some or all members of the group than a conference with a particular focus. Probably this style is necessary for holding such a heterogeneous group together, but I wondered whether it would have been possible (and good) to have a stronger block of four or so presentations focusing on a main topic.

The versatility may be connected to my curiosity about the group's name - "Radical" - but in which direction?

Presentations treated particular statistical results (Dorling, Marchant), problems of communicating statistical results and data (Miller, Brooke), the history of statistics (Magnello) and statistical methodology (Goldstein) - I would see these as fundamentally different levels of looking at Statistics. There may be some tension between them; for example, I perceive a certain contrast between the fast firework of interesting statements about society illustrated by an amazing number of graphs in Danny Dorling's presentation and the detailed critical analysis of studies in the presentations of Paul Marchant and Harvey

Goldstein, where it seems to me that ethical application and presentation of statistical data analyses calls for slowness and transparency. Also, what if such a thoughtful and ethical application of statistical methodology eventually, at least in some cases, doesn't support the free, democratic, egalitarian and social cause? (Or is this to be taken for granted?)

The tension was clearest for me in the activity group in which we were supposed to rank some examples for bad use (or interpretation) of data analyses according to how "bad" they were in terms of supporting power structures (I don't remember anymore how this was precisely formulated).

It seemed that the worst cases in terms of misrepresenting, manipulating or just messing up statistics were often not the worst in terms of being used by "evil powers" (whoever that may be), and how good is creating such a one-dimensional badness ranking in terms of a sensible and critical treatment of data and measurement?

Of course raising such questions is a merit of having such a broad range of views represented in the conference.

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