

Sept 21, 2012

Dear Professor McGee:

As the May issue of The American Statistician was released recently I had only now the opportunity to read your review of my book “Interpreting Economic and Social Data – A Foundation of Descriptive Statistics.” Given the continuous stream of research you have been engaged in as well as the demands of your teaching, I am amazed how you could find the time to review a book that was really lying outside your expertise in mathematics and statistics in medical and biological research. The content of the book must have been a new experience as well as a frustrating one given your background. I myself have reviewed many manuscripts for journals and books during my long statistical career and know what is involved.

Your review has been objective and fair. Only in the middle of your review did you vent your frustration “I found reading the book exceptionally difficult...” It would have made little difference, I suppose, if instead of stating “**statisticians** have turned to probability to look for answers and by doing so have further put off the real task of interpreting the situation in society...” I had more pointedly stated that I was addressing **economic** and **social statisticians**. These statements expressed my experience with the textbooks for Economic and business statistics that I had used, and discussions with colleagues. The reviewed book, as you rightly stated, is not a conventional textbook directed at students but is meant to be read by people who work with data like in government agencies such as the Federal Reserve or the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and by those teaching statistics in departments of economics and social sciences. It also appears that you were not in agreement with my interpretation of the slope and intersection in regression analysis. Nor could you, as a biometrician, fully appreciate the novel treatment of such economic topics as aggregation, ratios, index numbers and forecasting. The book essentially shifted the focus from ‘techniques of statistics’ with emphasis on probability and inference to ‘revealing and understanding actuality in society’. The title of the book really ought to have been “Interpreting economic and social situations with Statistical Data”.

I was not aware of ASA’s GAISE report recommending a reduction of probability topics and their elimination from the syllabi of introductory courses. My book appeared one year before that report. Either some statisticians who had read my book and agreed with my contention wrote the GAISE report, or GAISE was written by teachers who independently of my book felt that the teaching of probability received a disproportionate attention in their statistics courses. Either way the appearance of GAISE confirms my statements with regard to the excessive attention given to the teaching of probability at the expense of statistics as a tool, a ‘macroscope’ that allows us to view reality.

When I began teaching economic statistics at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, in Caracas, in 1948 I used a Spanish translation of Udny Yule’s book on statistical analysis which really was statistics in the sciences or an early version of mathematical statistics. My students, who were older employees at the Banco Central, complained that not much of what I had taught in that course was applicable to their work. The head of the department at that time suggested that the students just lacked the mathematical background. But during the following six decades of teaching undergraduate and graduate statistics in economic departments and business schools I gradually and reluctantly arrived at the positions expressed in “Interpreting Economic and Social Data...” with the statements that frustrated you. Considering all this, you did a remarkably fair and considerate review of a book that is intended for readers in the social sciences, not the bio-sciences, aimed at changing attitudes. Congratulations for a job well done. Best regards,

Othmar W. Winkler
Professor emeritus
Georgetown University

p.s. Attached find my paper about the history of economic and social statistics that I presented at the 2012 Joint Statistical Meeting of ASA in San Diego. It would be the sketch of a thirteen’s chapter.
[Copy at www.StatLit.org/pdf/2012-Winkler-ASA.pdf]