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The Probability of Data's Inherent Sexiness: A Review of Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data

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Abstract

Charles Wheelan's *Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data* (2013) reintroduces the field of statistics to the apathetic reader in an approachable and sympathetic way. By focusing on the acquisition of appreciation for the field over straightforward comprehension, Wheelan is able to achieve what many qualitative researchers have striven for in reintroducing the field to those thought previously lost.

Keywords

Data, Qualitative, Quantitative, Statistics

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The Probability of Data's Inherent Sexiness: A Review of *Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data*

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Charles Wheelan's Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data (2013) reintroduces the field of statistics to the apathetic reader in an approachable and sympathetic way. By focusing on the acquisition of appreciation for the field over straightforward comprehension, Wheelan is able to achieve what many qualitative researchers have striven for in reintroducing the field to those thought previously lost. Keywords: Data, Qualitative, Quantitative, Statistics

For many a researcher the rift between qualitative and quantitative inquiry is a division forged in the classroom. However, the animosity that many carry with them through their careers does not necessarily have to be an eternal one. Charles Wheelan, in his sharp and cleverly argued book *Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data* (2013), works from the standpoint that, like him, many researchers were scarred from the start by improper instruction to the field of statistical analysis. Though a passing grade allowed many to continue with one's studies it did little to signal that an understanding or, perhaps more important, an endorsement for the field was picked up along the way. To be sure, statistics has suffered from an image problem and for the qualitative researcher who did not "get it" the first time around this might well be the book to reignite interest in the besieged field. With a title like *Naked Statistics* we could hope for no less.

Wheelan manages to take the readers hand and walk through the main points of the discipline in a way that never feels condescending or overly reverent. He acknowledges that much of the more complicated work of statistics can now be done through computer programs and as such he holds little value in occupying the readers time in the how-to of doing the work by hand. Instead he works with the goal that by the end of the book the reader will find the concepts of statistics more intuitive and manageable. Wheelan is able to tap into the insecurity of former statistics students through his own experience and manages to create opportunities where the reader can follow along and feel bright for doing so. Perhaps what allows the book to be its most useful is that it presents the information in a buffet style, allowing for the reader to take from it what they require at that moment and return as needed.

Careful not to give the impression of a textbook, *Naked Statistics* leaves much of the technical formulas and jargon to the book's sidelines; available if one so searches it out, but comfortably at arm's length for the skittish reader. The book works less with numbers and more with the concepts for understanding why we should care about how statistics work in processing the data we work so hard to cultivate. While the frazzled student of statistics might see red in trying to understand how complex systems of information can be collapsed into a seemingly meaningless measure of data, Wheelan works instead to get the reader to appreciate why that measure is useful in the hands of an ethical researcher and how it can be manipulated to different ends by others.

The pacing of the book is rapid with enjoyable anecdotes and examples abounding in such varied fields as sports, gambling, medical research, and game show strategy. The reader is not given much chance to question the fact that they are picking up on the concepts and applying them as the chapters seamlessly lead the reader to the next example and the next

concept before they realize they have learned something. Such trickery is both enjoyable and necessary for the prejudiced reader and works to perfection here.

Should the book suffer from a disadvantage, it is that it works so well to get the reader reengaged that by the end of the book the reader is essentially left to their own devices on where to take their newfound respect for statistics. This flaw is one of the existing contributions of published scholarship for the wary scholar, so the absence of a suitable sequel is perhaps the best flaw to carry in such a circumstance. Enjoyable and educational, this book could find itself a welcome and unexpected addition to a qualitative methods syllabus as well as act as light reading for the researcher in training. While this book might not find itself well-worn on the shelf of a knowledgeable statistician it could easily be made the go to tome for the defender of the discipline who wants to bring others back to the fold. While Wheelan sets himself a tall order for making data sexy in an age of statistical skepticism he achieves his goal in reintroducing the reader to what is more important than content and often lost over time: appreciation.

References

Wheelan, C. (2013). *Naked statistics: Stripping the dread from the data*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Author Note

Sean Swenson is a doctoral student in Communication at University of South Florida. Sean's research interests include critical cultural media studies, end-of-life decision-making, autoethnography, and identity development. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed directly to: Sean Swenson at sswenson@mail.usf.edu.

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