



Ethics and Statistics

Regina Ammicht Quinn

Feb. 22, 2021



Just the
facts,
ma'am.

Joe Friday (Jack Webb) in Dragnet

“The sexy job in the next 10 years will be statisticians.”
Hal Varian, New York Times, Aug 5, 2009

1. Ethics in a Data-Driven Society

Ethics identifies, outlines and translates

**principles, values, processes and the
critique of power relations**

- that are essential for a good life and
democratic society -

into a **digital democratic society.**

2. Ethics in a Data-Driven Society: Questions of Responsibility (1)

**„internal“ responsibility:
professional ethical standards**

avoid

- biased data
- misleading analysis
- cherry picking results /
- exclusion of data outliers
- „western“ perspectives as self-evident
- epistemic injustice

2. Ethics in a Data-Driven Society: Questions of Responsibility (2)

**„external“ responsibility:
social responsibility of the profession**

- communication
- limits and uncertainties / epistemic humility
- publishing environment
- effects on society and politics
- dataveillance

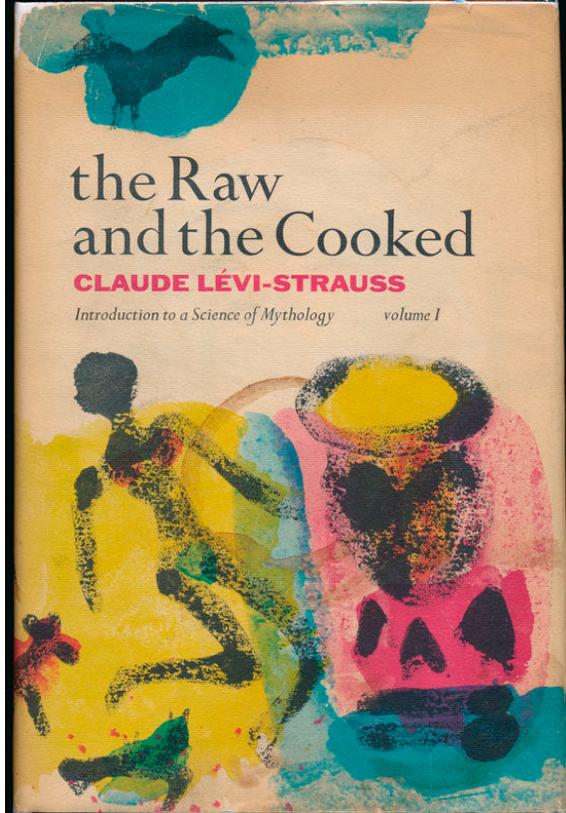


„internal“ responsibility:

professional ethical standards

„external“ responsibility:

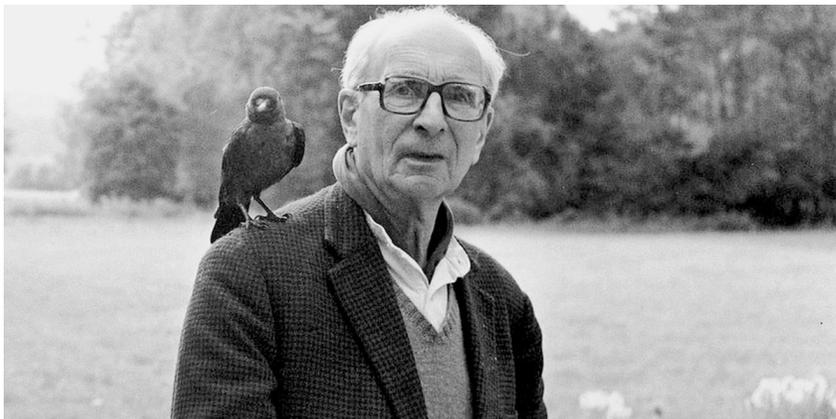
social responsibility of the profession



3. „Raw“ Data: a Food Metaphor

„[T]he seemingly indispensable misperception that data are ever raw seems to be one way in which data are forever contextualized [...] according to a mythology of their own supposed decontextualization.“

(Gitelman 2017, 5f.)



Claude Lévy-Strauss, Photo Anita Albus

4. The Quantified World

The German word „**vermessen**“ has 3 meanings (Mau 2017,33)

1. to measure something,
2. to measure something wrong,
3. to be presumptuous, overconfident, arrogant

The dimensions of a human life that can be translated into the language of numbers plays a decisive role for well-being and prospering.

Human life as a whole cannot be translated into numbers without negating some of the dimensions that make us human.

5. Ethics & Statistics Need Each Other

- Statistical **and** ethical literacy are important.
- Statistics and ethics **both** deal with uncertainties.
- Ethical judgements are hybrid: they combine empirical **and** normative knowledge.
- **Both** strive for epistemic justice.



No. Not just the facts, Sir.

„I will remember that I didn't make the world, and it doesn't satisfy my equations.“

(Derman/Wilmott 2009, Hippocratic Oath)

International Center for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities
Tübingen University
Wilhelmstr. 19
72074 Tübingen

regina.ammicht-quinn@uni-tuebingen.de