

STATISTICS COLLOQUIUM

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TALK: 2:30 PM — SEVER HALL, Rm. 201

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“Potential Outcomes And Causal Effects of Immutable Characteristics”

ABSTRACT

In the United States legal system, various directives attempt to reduce or eliminate the relevance of “immutable characteristics” (e.g., race, sex) in specified societal settings (e.g., employment, voting, capital punishment). Typically, the directive is phrased in terms of a prohibition on action taken “because of” or “on account of” a prohibited trait, suggesting the need for some kind of causal inquiry. Some researchers, however, have argued that causal reasoning is inappropriate in such settings because immutable characteristics (i) cannot be manipulated (thus the word “immutable”), and (ii) are fixed at birth, rendering virtually all measurable variables post-treatment. In this research, we demonstrate that a shift in focus from “actual” characteristics to perceptions of traits allows application of the potential outcomes framework of causation to some (but not all) civil rights concerns. In particular, the shift to perceptions addresses the two issues identified above because perceptions (i) can be manipulated, and (ii) do not necessarily occur at the birth of the person perceived. We articulate assumptions necessary for our framework to produce well-posed questions and, within the limits of observational studies, believable answers. To demonstrate the principles we discuss, we reanalyze data from one of the most famous empirical studies in the law, the so-called “Baldus Study” of the role of race in the administration of capital punishment in Georgia.