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Key Takeaways from Stanford's Symposium on AI for Data Science

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Abstract:

Numerous symposia and conferences have been held to discuss the promise of AI. Many centers on its potential to transform fields like health and medicine, law, education, business and more. Further, while many AI-focused events include those data scientists involved in developing foundational models, to our knowledge, there has been little attention on AI's role for data science and the data scientist. In a new symposium series with its inaugural debut in December 2024 titled *AI for Data Science*, thought leaders convened to discuss both the promises and challenges of integrating AI into the workflows of data scientists. A keynote address by Michael Pencina from Duke University together along with contributions from three panels covered a wide range of topics including rigor, reproducibility, the training current and future data scientists, and the potential of AI's integration in public health.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Data Science, Rigor and Reproducibility, Education and Training, Public Health

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is undoubtably the most discussed topic. Broadly, AI can be defined as the ability of a computer system to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, and making decisions (1). Similarly, the Encyclopedia Britannica defines AI as "the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings" (2). Over the past decade, particularly in the last 2-3 years, the world has witnessed a transformative surge across nearly every field, driven by the advancements in generative AI - aspecific type of AI that focuses on generating new content (e.g., text, images, code) based on patterns learned from existing data. The impact spans education, finance, business, healthcare, life sciences, and beyond. Data scientists are among those scientists intimately developing and evaluating AI systems with rigor. By way of background, data science is the science of learning from data and involves the methods used for analysis and processing of data along with new tools to advance those methods (3). Despite the data scientist's involvement, there has been surprisingly little focus on how AI can advance the field of data science and assist data scientists in both research and real-world settings. While numerous symposia have explored the diverse intersections of AI with fields like healthcare, business, and education (4-10), few have focused on AI's role in the data scientist's workflow. There are enormous opportunities in data management, analysis, and even study design, where AI may be leveraged. Caution is needed as changes in the workflow can threaten rigor and cause further mistrust of the public in science. On December 3, 2024, the Stanford Quantitative Sciences Unit co-hosted its inaugural symposium with Stanford Data Science to explore how AI can be integrated thoughtfully into data science workflows in a symposium series entitled AI for Data Science. With over 150 inperson attendees, the symposium brought together thought leaders including data science educators, experts in biostatistics, epidemiology, health policy, informatics, and public health to

This paper aims to summarize major takeaways from those discussions and propose an agenda for future action and research.

discuss evolving tools, methods, and ethical implications. It aimed to foster collaboration, drive

innovation, and identify the specific needs, gaps, opportunities, and challenges for data scientists

and their workflows in the AI era.

Methods

Format

The one-day symposium included remarks from leadership, a keynote address, and three panel discussions on the following topics:

- 1) Challenges and solutions for integrating AI into the data scientist's workflow
- 2) Training and education of current and next generation of data scientists in the era of AI
- 3) AI for public health to illustrate challenges for data scientists in a real-world setting

Speakers

Experts from academia, industry, and the public health sector were invited based on their expertise and real-world experience (Table 1).

Audience

Participants included students, trainees, educators, faculty, and the general public.

Summarization of Talks and Panel Discussions:

1. Introduction: The Promise and the Threat of Generative AI to the Data Scientist's Workflow (Manisha Desai)

Dr. Manisha Desai introduced the promises and challenges of AI through illustration of tools including HyperWrite for refining a research question and ChatGPT4.0 for deriving a statistical analysis plan. A recent poll of Dr. Desai's team, the Quantitative Sciences Unit, demonstrated that only a small percentage (<15%) were currently engaging with AI when conducting their work, and that for those who did, they used it for: communication (e.g., explaining models to collaborators), coding, administrative tasks, and for developing statistical analysis plans.

- While there has been increased usage of AI tools in the workflow, this has been done largely without evaluation of how it helps.
- The illustration of HyperWrite for refining a research question demonstrated that the tool was too general to perform such a specialized task and that a better tool one that was trained on the right data would be critical to aid researchers in this task.
- The illustration of ChatGPT for creating a statistical analysis plan similarly demonstrated critical errors that did not follow statistical best practices including issues with multiplicity (or inflating the type I error when drawing inference) and the suggested use of an inappropriate outcome measure.

- While caution must be exercised in the use of such tools, some like ChatGPT may offer a *start* to a plan that could be further refined.
- Generally, tools that can be effective for data scientists need to be trained on the right data. The user also needs training in how to engage the tool optimally.
- It is essential to keep humans in the loop when developing both research questions and analytic plans. The best AI-based approaches will find ways to do so that facilitate both human creativity and rigorous science.

2. Keynote: Robust Governance as a Cornerstone of Trustworthy AI (Michael Pencina)

Dr. Michael Pencina from Duke University School of Medicine delivered his insights on robust governance as the foundation of building and deploying trustworthy AI.

- Users and developers should be brought together to build trust in AI and its capability.
- New methods for evaluating generative AI are needed with two key points in mind: 1)
 The standard for evaluating generative AI has been human evaluation, but is not scalable, and 2)
 Traditional performance metrics for predictive AI do not apply well for generative AI.
- The lack of best practice and guardrails in applications to healthcare delivery have led to inconsistent implementation and potential biases which are relevant for the data science context.
- In the context of health, joint efforts are emerging in regulators working with industry partners, non-profit organizations and general public to create flexible frameworks that emphasize local governance with national standards.
- Existing ethical frameworks, such as the Declaration of Helsinki, can be adapted to apply to AI, noting that basic transparency around AI usage is critical.
- Duke's approach for integrating AI into the healthcare system is the Algorithm-Based Clinical Decision Support (ABCDS) framework which emphasizes the importance of lifecycle management for AI tools, from use case identification through registration, evaluation and monitoring.
- Applications of AI in research need to afford sufficient flexibility to promote innovation.
- Extending ideas to the data science workflow:

- The workflow includes various stakeholders when addressing data-intensive research.
- o New evaluation methods for AI tools and their applications are needed.
- There has been growing focus on operational AI and data science to enhance health system efficiency.
- Existing ethical framework need adaption when applying AI to data science practice; basic transparency should be promoted at each step of the data scientist's workflow
- Consensus best practice or applications of AI in data science will promote data science rather than hinder it.
- Lifecycle management for AI tools are also applicable for data science models and workflows.
- As in health, we need to emphasize flexible AI governance as a facilitator to data science practice and innovation, avoiding turning it into "research police".

3. Panel 1: Challenges and Solutions for Integrating AI into the Data Scientist's Workflow

This panel discussed challenges and solutions for integrating AI into the data scientist's workflow through the following questions:

- 1: What tools might be considered for the data scientist's workflow?
- 2: How do we evaluate whether a tool is ready for adoption into the workflow?
- 3: How much error is acceptable in research workflows?
- 4: Does integrating AI affect reproducibility compared to traditional statistics or workflows, and how can we ensure reproducibility when using AI tools?

- AI tools are being adapted for various purposes: communication, coding, reproducibility assistance, statistical analysis plan generation, and the analysis of qualitative studies
- A range of tools are being used to help with activities such as communication (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini), data sorting, coding, summarization (GitHub Copilot, Cursor AI, CoLoop), reproducibility assistance such as writing README files and bash scripts to create reproducible workflows, enhancing code documentations (ChatGPT), generating statistical analysis plans (ChatGPT), and generating research ideas (e.g., Virtual Lab).

- New tools are being developed by James Zou in his Virtual Lab to create a novel workflow. (11) Sara Singer's team is developing tools that will integrate into the qualitative researcher's analytical workflow. (12)
- Another interesting use case includes leveraging AI to more efficiently confirm internal reproducibility prior to publication. For example, there may be one person who codes without AI while another codes with AI. This could help reduce the error rate. (13)
- The panel acknowledged that tools should be evaluated for their effectiveness for a particular step in the workflow (e.g., how well does Tool A assist in coding this specific problem), but more importantly, data scientists should evaluate how a given tool affects their entire workflow holistically (e.g., does it reduce the time needed to generate a final statistical analysis plan?).
- We need to rethink how much error is acceptable with a given tool. In making healthcare decisions, small errors can be critical, while in research, error tolerance may be higher. Specifically, we can imagine specifying a tradeoff between efficiency and the error with which we are comfortable. For example, in the discussion, one of the panelists referred to a traditional method to develop a detailed phenotyping algorithm for Type 2 diabetes that required 1,900 hours and achieved 93% precision and 89% recall. With an AI approach, it was discussed that a classifier may be trained on 50 examples in 2 hours and achieve slightly lower precision (around 2% less) but deliver results far more quickly. The key question is: what are the uses for which we need the 1,900 hours version and what can we do with the 2 hours version?
- The stochastic nature of generative AI poses a unique challenge to demonstrating reproducibility, as results can vary each time. Thus, reproducibility exercises need to be structured in a new way. For example, one idea may be to demonstrate reproducibility in steps -- breaking the flow apart into pieces where we expect the answer to be constant (where AI was not used) vs dynamic (where AI may have been leveraged to get to the next step). For the dynamic steps, including details of how AI was engaged will be critical.
- Version control (e.g., of the code we generate, or data set we leverage) while important in research becomes critical when AI is integrated into the process, especially as we

archive our data, code, and other research materials for reproducibility and replicability purposes.

4. <u>Panel 2: Training and Educating Current and Next Generation of Data Scientists in the Era of</u> AI

This panel focused on the training and education of data scientists through the following questions,

- 1: Considering the rapid advancements of AI, how should we adapt our training and education approach?
- 2: Should we modify our teaching content?
- 3: With the focus shifted toward high-level AI tools and advanced analytics, are we neglecting foundational skills, and what might this mean for future researcher?
- 4: How can we effectively teach fairness, ethics, and recognizing bias, particularly when addressing sensitive data and mitigating bias in practice?

- Educational approaches must evolve to address and acknowledge the integration of AI into research and practice.
- As students may be more proficient in AI than faculty, training educators to be more effective mentors is crucial
- AI may lower barriers for entry into the field, but fundamental skills quantitative and analytical skills, communication and teamwork skills, ethics and critical thinking remain vital for evaluating AI tool's effectiveness.
- Guidelines of AI application in education can reflect our definition of a good and responsible scientist
- Teaching should embrace AI tools while emphasizing the human element in decisionmaking and realizing AI's limitations – like its weakness in identifying research gaps or generating original ideas.
- AI tools can reduce technical burdens, allowing educators and students to focus on foundational concepts and deeper intellectual discussions.

- Rising AI usage among students presents challenges in evaluating academic performance, necessitating the incorporation of oral or in-person examinations to assess students' true understanding of fundamental concepts.
- Now more than ever, ethical practices and bias reduction must be embedded in every aspect of education, with team science approach playing a key role in improving decision-making and mitigating blind spots.

5. Panel 3: AI for Public Health

Our panel addressed the following questions:

- 1: How can public health agencies navigate regulations and data governance challenges to ensure ethical use of AI technologies and to build public trust?
- 2: How can AI unintentionally exacerbate existing health disparities if equity isn't prioritized in the development of these models?
- 3: How can public health, government, academia and private sectors collaborate to improve training, build trust and address policies to prepare for future challenges more effectively and responsibly?

- There are multiple barriers facing the public health sector.
 - a. The public health sector has long faced limited fundings and outdated infrastructure, causing significant barriers to implementing AI technologies despite their potential
 - b. The public health sector is not a unified system; local, state and federal agencies differ widely in technology resources and capacities which leads to uneven adoption and usage of AI across the nation.
- Public health agencies are more likely to adopt AI if the resource threshold for adoption is low and if AI helps solve existing concrete problems or challenges. Early possibilities include use in communication (e.g. translations), administrative task simplification and effective disease surveillance. (14-15) For example, AI can monitor school closures via social media for early warning sign of breakouts more efficiently than traditional manual means, which frees up skilled individuals for more critical work.

- It is important that AI technology be developed with population heterogeneity in mind (16), recognizing that the pathway to effectiveness of all may require different approaches for different populations.
- Developing AI tools for public health must go beyond surface-level fairness through meaningful collaborations among public health workers, communities, policymakers, and developers, ensuring that AI solutions address root causes of differences in health outcome rather than simply distributing resources equally.
- Building trust and addressing privacy concerns are essential in developing AI tools that
 improve public health. Trust needs to be built at multiple levels by demonstrating the
 value and security of AI tools in protecting privacy. Importantly, the tools must be
 developed with public health workers and the communities they serve in mind and to
 support not replace the public health workers.
- We need to train the public workforce on the use of AI technologies especially in underresourced communities.
- To fully unlock AI's potential in the public health sector, we must leverage public, private, and academic partnerships.

Conclusion

The AI for Data Science Symposium served as a starting point for exploring the integration of AI into data science. We identified ten important action items (Table 2) for future research. Recommendations emphasize the need for governance, rigorous assessment frameworks, and the development of tools and guidelines that support reproducible AI-based workflows.

While all ten action items represent important steps toward advancing AI in data science with rigor and reproducibility, their complexity, resource needs, and dependence on collaboration vary. Some—such as retaining core data science principles in curricula (Item 7) and incorporating AI-related principles into training (Item 6)—can be achieved within existing academic structures, though they require gaining consensus among academic leaders on the core principles. There is no doubt that there will be heterogeneity among institutions in which principles to adopt. Other items, such as developing reproducible workflows for stochastic AI outputs (Item 2) and creating evaluation guidelines for qualitative analyses (Item 4), present greater methodological hurdles. Establishing frameworks for prioritizing and integrating AI tools

(Item 1) and developing standards for evaluating different AI tools (Item 3) will require significant cross-disciplinary coordination. Data scientists across subspecialities – for example biostatisticians trained in evaluation and informaticians trained in large language model development – need to come together to accomplish goals. Items related to literacy—whether among current data scientists (Item 8), trainees (Item 6), or the communities we serve (Items 9 and 10)—are essential for building trust and ensuring relevance, and will require sustained outreach and bidirectional engagement beyond traditional academic settings. The success of the most ambitious items will hinge on broad collaboration, transparency, and shared investment across the data science, AI, and public health communities.

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Table 1. Speakers, roles, and job titles

	Name	Job Title	Link to Professional Profile
Keynote	Michael	Chief Data Scientist for Duke Health, Vice Dean	https://medschool.duke.edu/personnel
Speaker	Pencina, PhD	for Data Science, Director of Duke AI Health,	/michael-pencina-phd
		Professor of Biostatistics and Bioinformatics,	
		Duke University School of Medicine	
Moderator	Manisha Desai,	Associate Dean for Quantitative and Data	https://profiles.stanford.edu/manisha-
(Panel 1)	PhD	Sciences, Director of the Quantitative Sciences	<u>desai</u>
		Unit, Kim and Ping Li Professor of Medicine and	
		Biomedical Data Science, and by courtesy, of	
		Epidemiology and Population Health, Stanford	
		School of Medicine	
Panelist	Nigam Shah,	Chief Data Scientist for Stanford Health Care,	https://profiles.stanford.edu/nigam-
(Panel 1)	MBBS, PhD	Associate Dean, Professor of Medicine and	shah
		Biomedical Data Science, Stanford School of	
		Medicine	
Panelist	Jade Benjamin-	Assistant Professor of Epidemiology and	https://profiles.stanford.edu/jadebc
(Panel 1)	Chung, MPH,	Population Health, Stanford School of	
	PhD	Medicine	
Panelist	Sara Singer,	Professor of Health Policy and Medicine,	https://profiles.stanford.edu/sara-
(Panel 1)	MBA, PhD	Stanford School of Medicine, by courtesy of	singer
		Organizational Behavior, Stanford Graduate	
		School of Business, and by courtesy, Senior	
		Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for	
		International Studies, Stanford University	
Panelist	James Zou,	Associate Professor of Biomedical Data Science,	https://profiles.stanford.edu/james-
(Panel 1)	PhD	Stanford School of Medicine, and by courtesy, of	zou
		Computer Science and Electrical Engineering,	
		Stanford University School of Engineering	
Moderator	Mark Musen,	Director of the Stanford Center for Biomedical	https://profiles.stanford.edu/mark-
(Panel 2)	MD, PhD	Informatics Research, Stanford Medicine	musen
		Professor of Biomedical Informatics Research,	
		Professor of Medicine and of Biomedical Data	

		Science, Stanford School of Medicine	
Panelist	Bryan	PhD Student in Biomedical Informatics, Stanford https://profiles.stanford.edu/bryan-	
(Panel 2)	Bunning	School of Medicine	bunning
Panelist	Laurence	Bing Professor of Human Biology, Professor of https://profiles.stanford.edu/la	
(Panel 2)	Baker, PhD	Health Policy, Stanford School of Medicine,	baker
		Senior Fellow at the Stanford Institute for	
		Economic Policy Research	
Panelist	Eleni Linos,	Associate Dean for Research, Director of the	https://profiles.stanford.edu/eleni-
(Panel 2)	MD, MPH,	Stanford Center for Digital Health, Ben	linos
	DrPH	Davenport and Lucy Zhang Endowed Professor	
		of Medicine, Professor of Dermatology, Stanford	
		School of Medicine	
Panelist	Steven	Associate Dean for Clinical and Translational	https://profiles.stanford.edu/steven-
(Panel 2)	Goodman, MD,	Research, Professor of Epidemiology and	goodman
	MHS, PhD	Population Health, of Medicine and, by courtesy,	
		of Health Policy, Stanford School of Medicine	
Moderator	Melissa Bondy,	Chair of the Department of Epidemiology and	https://profiles.stanford.edu/melissa-
(Panel 3)	PhD	Population Health, Stanford Medicine Discovery	bondy
		Professor of Epidemiology and Population	
		Health and, by courtesy, of Pediatrics, Stanford	
		School of Medicine	
Panelist	John Auerbach,	Former Director of Intergovernmental and	https://www.linkedin.com/in/john-
(Panel 3)	MBA	Strategic Affairs at CDC, Senior Vice President,	auerbach
		Public Health, ICF	
Panelist	Ivor Horn, MD,	Former Chief Health Equity Officer at Google,	https://www.drivorhorn.com
(Panel 3)	MPH	Pediatrician, and Health Services Researcher	
Panelist	Michelle	Professor of Epidemiology and Population	https://profiles.stanford.edu/327959
(Panel 3)	Williams, ScD	Health, Stanford School of Medicine	
Special	Lee Sanders,	Division Chief of General Pediatrics, Professor	https://profiles.stanford.edu/lee-
Advisor	MD, MPH	of Pediatrics and Health Policy, and by courtesy	sanders
		of Epidemiology and Population Health, Stanford	
		School of Medicine	

Table 2: 10 Action Items

Action Item	Description
framework for prioritizing and integrating AI tools into the data science workflow	The framework for data science should be analogous to frameworks used for health that prioritize tools, with the goal of enhancing and emphasizing innovation, acknowledging the risks are different from those that present in advancing health.
reproducible workflows for data analysis when AI is integrated	Traditional guidelines for reproducibility may not be applicable to generative AI which is stochastic in nature, necessitating an expansion of traditional guidelines.
3.Develop appropriate guidelines for evaluating different types of AI tools	The unique tradeoff between error and efficiency should be considered in the evaluation process.
4.Develop guidelines for evaluating AI- assisted qualitative analyses for achieving rigor, transparency, and cohesion	While AI increases efficiency, derived themes may contain more noise. Moreover, considering different metrics of evaluation from those in a quantitative setting is important. For example, it may be limiting or misleading to gauge AI output by its ability to exactly reproduce the same output as human investigators. The focus of guidelines should instead be on rigor, transparency, and cohesion.
academic progress and achievement in the	The growing use of AI may require different methods to evaluate performance and understanding of students and trainees.
retain the fundamental principles of the specific data science field	Programs should retain the fundamentals teachings of data science including of study design, statistical inference, probabilistic theory, predictive modeling, resampling methods, coding principles, and other such essentials that enable AI tools to be incorporated responsibly and effectively.
8.Increase AI literacy and competencies	Ongoing training will be essential for current data scientists. Further, new training will need to be developed for emerging data scientists.
communities that we serve, especially so that trust can be gained by public health officials and by the public themselves	Educating communities on AI is critical, especially for establishing trust within those being served, even if the connection between the scientist's work and the public is not immediately apparent. Moreover, community feedback can be incorporated to strengthen the effectiveness of the AI tool.
10.Enhance public health literacy in the AI data science community	As data scientists develop and incorporate AI tools into their workflows, understanding the communities they serve will be vital especially for ensuring the relevance and impact of the AI tools developed and adopted.