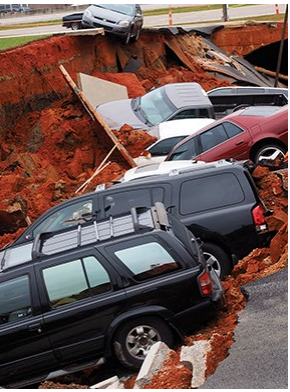
GSP 282 | Selected Papers from the Proceedings of Geo-Risk 2017

Geo-Risk 2017

Keynote Lectures





Edited by

D. V. Griffiths, Ph.D., P.E., D.GE
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Preface

Interest and use of probabilistic methods and risk assessment tools in geotechnical engineering has grown rapidly in recent years. The natural variability of soil and rock properties, combined with a frequent lack of high quality site data, makes a probabilistic approach to geotechnical design a logical and scientific way of managing both technical and economic risk. The burgeoning field of geotechnical risk assessment is evidenced by numerous publications, textbooks, dedicated journals and sessions at general geotechnical conferences. Risk assessments are increasingly becoming a requirement in many large engineering construction projects. Probabilistic methods are also recognized in design codes as a way of delivering reasonable load and resistance factors (LRFD) to target allowable risk levels in geotechnical design.

This Geotechnical Special Publication (GSP), coming out of the *Geo-Risk 2017* specialty conference held in Denver, Colorado from June 4-7, 2017, presents eight outstanding contributions from the keynote speakers. Four of the contributions are from practitioners and the other four are from academics, but they are all motivated by a desire to promote the use of risk assessment and probabilistic methodologies in geotechnical engineering practice. Honor Lectures are presented by Greg Baecher (Suzanne Lacasse Lecturer) on Bayesian thinking in geotechnical engineering and Gordon Fenton (Wilson Tang Lecturer) on future directions in reliability based design. The reliability-based design theme is continued by Dennis Becker who includes discussion of risk management, and Brian Simpson, who focuses on aspects of Eurocode 7 and the rapidly growing importance of robustness in engineering design. The evolution and importance of risk assessment tools in dam safety is covered in lectures by John France and Jennifer Williams, and Steven Vick. The challenges of liquefaction modeling and the associated risks of problems due to instability and deformations are covered in lectures by Hsein Juang and Armin Stuedlein.

These contributions to the use of risk assessment methodologies in geotechnical practice are very timely, and will provide a valuable and lasting reference for practitioners and academics alike.

All the papers in this GSP went through a rigorous review process. The contributions of the reviewers are much appreciated.

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Bayesian Thinking in Geotechnics

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Abstract

The statistics course most of us took in college introduced a peculiar and narrow species of the subject. Indeed, that species of statistics—usually called, Relative Frequentist theory—is not of much use in grappling with the problems geotechnical engineers routinely face. The sampling theory approach to statistics that arose in the early 20th C. has to do with natural variations within well-defined populations. It has to do with frequencies like the flipping of a coin. Geotechnical engineers, in contrast, deal with uncertainties associated with limited knowledge. They have to do with the probabilities of unique situations. These uncertainties are not amenable to Frequentist thinking; they require Bayesian thinking. Bayesian thinking is that of judgment and belief. It leads to remarkably strong inferences from even sparse data. Most geotechnical engineers are intuitive Bayesians whether they know it or not, and have much to gain from a more formal understanding of the logic behind these straightforward and relatively simple methods.

BAYESIAN THINKING

Most geotechnical engineers are intuitive Bayesians. Practical examples of Bayesian thinking in site characterization, dam safety, data analysis, and reliability are common in practice; and the emblematic *observational approach* of Terzaghi is a pure Bayesian concept although in a qualitative form (Lacasse 2016).

The statistics course one took in college most likely introduced a peculiar and narrow form of statistics, generally known as *Relative Frequentist* theory or *Sampling Theory* statistics. In the way normal statistics courses are taught, one is led to believe that this is all there is to statistics. That is not the case. As one of the reviewers of this paper said, it's not your fault if you haven't thought about Bayesian methods until now; and it's not too late.

This traditional frequentist form of statistical thinking is not particularly useful except in narrowly defined problems of the sort one finds in big science, like medical trials, or in sociological surveys like the US Census. It is tailored to problems for which data have been acquired through a carefully planned and randomized set of trials. It is tailored to aleatory uncertainties, that is, uncertainty dealing with variations in nature. This almost never describes the problems a normal person faces, and especially not geotechnical engineers. Most geotechnical uncertainties are epistemic: they deal with limited knowledge, with uncertainties in the mind not variations in nature.

Two concepts of probability. The reason that college statistics courses deal with this peculiar form of statistics and not something more useful in daily life has to do with intellectual battles in the history of probability, and in how the pedagogy of statistical teaching evolved in the early 20thC. Even though concepts of uncertainty, inference, and induction arose in antiquity, what we

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think of as modern *probability theory*, at least its mathematical foundations, arose only around 1654. Hacking (1975) and Bernstein (1996) trace this history.

From that time, two concepts of probability evolved in parallel. These deal with different problems, and while they have evolved to use the same mathematical theory, and while they are commonly confused with one another, in fact they are philosophically distinct. One concept, the one taught in undergraduate courses, deals with the relative frequency with which particular events occur in a long series of similar trials. For example, if you roll a pair of dice a thousand times, "snake eyes" (double-1) will occur in about 8.3% of the tosses. This is the sort of probability that is involved with large clinical trials. One exposes 1000 subjects to a test drug, and 1000 subjects to a placebo, and then compares the frequency with which particular outcomes occur in each group.

The other concept of probability deals with degrees of belief that one should rationally hold in the likely outcome of some experiment or in the truth of a proposition. This species of statistics has nothing to do with frequencies in long series of similar trials, but rather with how willing one is to make decisions or to take action when faced with uncertainties. For example, frequency statistics might be used to describe the rates of false positive or false negative results when a medical test is applied to a large number of subjects; but the probability that you as a unique individual are sick if a diagnostic test comes back positive is not a matter of frequencies, it is a matter of one unique individual, namely, you. You are either sick or well. Probability in this case is a matter of the degree of belief about which of those two conditions you think obtains. Vick (2002) interprets this theory of degrees-of-belief as a formalization of "engineering judgment."

Scope of this paper. This paper focusses on inferences which at first glance seem difficult or impossible to make—and indeed they are, using frequentist thinking. But they are easy when viewed through the lens of Bayesian thinking. Bayesian methods have been used across the spectrum of geotechnical applications since the 1970's, as reflected in the early work of Tang (Lacasse *et al.* 2013), Wu (2011), Einstein (Einstein *et al.* 1978), Marr (2011), and many others. These methods have revolutionized many fields of engineering and continue to do so (McGrayne 2012). "Clippy" the annoying Microsoft self-help wizard was a Bayesian app. Spam filtering of your email inbox is, too. The Enigma Code of the German Kriegsmarine was broken using Bayesian methods at Bletchley Park. And the wreckage of Air France flight 447 was found using a Bayesian search algorithm. Recent reviews of the use of Bayesian methods in geotechnical engineering have been provided by Yu Wang (2016), Zhang (2016), and Juang and Zhang (2017). For reasons of space and to avoid complicating the 'message,' advanced topics in Bayesian methods such as belief nets and Markov-chain Monte-Carlo are not discussed here.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

The application of statistics to practical problems is of two sorts. On the one hand, we use statistics to describe the variability of data using summaries such as measures of central tendency and spread, or frequency distributions such as histograms or probability density functions. On the other hand, we use statistics to infer probabilities over properties of a population that we have not observed and based on a limited sample that we have observed. It is this latter meaning of statistics that we deal with here. It is the inductive use of statistics, which in the 19th C. was called *inverse reasoning*.

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