Postdoc position – INSERM U1136 CIPHOD team, Paris

Collaborative and federated causal discovery in a high dimensional setting with applications to epidemiology

Project summary: Access to causal graphs is essential for estimating causal effects [Greenland et al., 1999, Savitz and Wellenius, 2016]. These graphs represent qualitative cause-and-effect relationships between exposures, health outcomes, and other variables. When there is no hidden confounding factor, causal graphs are directed acyclic graphs (DAGs), where each node is independent of its nondescendants conditionally on its parents (causal Markov condition). However, in many applications, it is challenging for a practitioner to provide such a graph.

Causal discovery [Spirtes et al., 2000] is an active research field focused on discovering a causal graph from observational data. New methods are regularly proposed, but no single method stands out in all situations. Indeed, they all rely on assumptions that may or may not be appropriate for a particular dataset [Assaad et al., 2022]. In many cases, the results of causal discovery methods are still unsatisfactory in real-world applications [Aït-Bachir et al., 2023]. Nevertheless, it has been shown that multiple datasets from different environments can improve causal discovery [Mooij et al., 2020, Huang et al., 2020]. However, the French regulatory context, characterized by the extremely strict application of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to preserve data confidentiality, makes creating a causal graph from multiple datasets challenging. Therefore, it is important to start developing a federated causal discovery method that preserves privacy. Federated in the sense that we need to learn a causal graph (or an abstraction) from many datasets representing all these datasets and preserving confidentiality in the sense that we cannot compromise patient privacy [Mian et al., 2023]. Federated causal discovery is crucial in the current context, especially in the healthcare field. This is particularly relevant when considering the existence of a causal graph representing complex relationships, not recoverable solely from data from a single environment but recoverable by combining data from multiple environments. Consider multiple hospitals where the probability of encountering patients with a rare disease is high in one hospital (let's call it hospital A) compared to other hospitals. If we collect all the data and group them into a central server and then apply a non-federated causal discovery approach, then a hacker could easily access this sensitive information by accessing the central server and subsequently categorize patients from hospital A as individuals suffering from this rare disease. This situation poses a major problem in terms of data confidentiality, potentially violating the GDPR. Moreover, a naive approach to federated causal discovery, where each hospital would use an algorithm to discover a local causal graph and then send these local graphs to a central server, could also pose risks to confidentiality. By comparing the differences between local graphs, a hacker could potentially deduce patient profiles, thus compromising their privacy. It is therefore imperative to develop federated causal discovery methods specifically designed to preserve individuals' privacy and comply with GDPR standards. These methods must ensure that patients' sensitive information cannot be compromised, even in a distributed and collaborative environment.

Another strategy to reduce the risk of failure in causal discovery involves implementing a collaborative framework that brings together a causal discovery algorithm, domain experts, and a large language model (LLM). This integrative approach leverages the theoretical accuracy of causal discovery algorithmds, the critical insights of human experts, and the capability of LLMs to extract information from texts—demonstrated by their effectiveness in extracting qualitative causal knowledge from textual sources like epidemiological studies [Jin et al., 2023, Zečević et al., 2023]. In healthcare and other fields, this combination of machine efficiency with human expertise (as background knowledge) can lead to more precise, reliable, and actionable insights . Furthermore, incorporating prior knowledge or human guidance can significantly improve the outcomes of causal discovery processes [Biswas et al., 2022, Meyer-Vitali and Mulder, 2023].

Therefore, the objectives of this project are the following:

- Propose a federated causal discovery method that preserves patient privacy and is applicable to high-dimensional data;
- Propose a collaborative causal discovery framework that enables the use of causal discovery methods

with LLMs (Large Language Models);

Lab location and description: The Pierre Louis Institute of Epidemiology and Public Health (co-accredited by Inserm and Sorbonne University) is located at the Sorbonne University Faculty of Medicine - Hôpital Saint Antoine in Paris. It is composed of six teams, in addition to the recently established CIPHOD "Causal Inference in Public Health using large Observational health Databases" team. The general research objectives of CIPHOD are to put forth novel theoretical findings and develop innovative methodologies in the realm of causal inference, with a focus on their applicability and utility for epidemiologists.

Contract: The postdoc contract will start in September 2024, for a duration of 12 months (renewable).
The postdoc will be supervised by Dr. Charles Assaad (CIPHOD team). The postdoc will also collaborate with other teams in IPLESP and will have access to the resources and infrastructure available at INSERM/IPLESP and Sorbonne Université.

Candidat profile: Highly motivated candidate with a PhD degree and strong background in probability, machine learning, and causal inference, along with a keen interest in epidemiology. Proficiency in programming is also required.

Contact: Candidates are requested to send their CV (including a list of publications, research experiences, and references) to Charles Assaad (charles.assaad@inserm.fr) by June 13 2024. For additional details, please reach out to the same email address.

References

C. K. Assaad, E. Devijver, and E. Gaussier. Survey and evaluation of causal discovery methods for time series. *J. Artif. Int. Res.*, 73, apr 2022. doi: 10.1613/jair.1.13428.

A. Aït-Bachir, C. K. Assaad, C. de Bignicourt, E. Devijver, S. Ferreira, E. Gaussier, H. Mohanna, and L. Zan. Case Studies of Causal Discovery from IT Monitoring Time Series. In *The 39th European Conference on Uncertainty in Artificial Intelligence (UAI)*, Workshop on Causal Inference for Time Series Data, 2023.

S. Biswas, L. Corti, S. Buijsman, and J. Yang. Chime: Causal human-in-the-loop model explanations. *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Human Computation and Crowdsourcing*, 10(1):27–39, Oct. 2022. doi: 10.1609/hcomp.v10i1.21985.

S. Greenland, J. Pearl, and J. Robins. Causal diagrams for epidemiologic research. *Epidemiology (Cambridge, Mass.)*, 10(1):37—48, January 1999. ISSN 1044-3983. doi: 10.1097/00001648-199901000-00005.

B. Huang, K. Zhang, J. Zhang, J. Ramsey, R. Sanchez-Romero, C. Glymour, and B. SchÃ¶lkopf. Causal discovery from heterogeneous/nonstationary data. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 21(89):1–53, 2020.

Z. Jin, J. Liu, Z. Lyu, S. Poff, M. Sachan, R. Mihalcea, M. Diab, and B. Schölkopf. Can large language models infer causation from correlation? *arXiv preprint arXiv:2306.05836*, 2023.

A. Meyer-Vitali and W. Mulder. Causing Intended Effects in Collaborative Decision-Making. In *CEUR Workshop Proceedings*, HHAI-WS 2023: Workshops at the Second International Conference on Hybrid Human-Artificial Intelligence (HHAI, 2023.

O. Mian, D. Kaltenpoth, M. Kamp, and J. Vreeken. Nothing but regrets — privacy-preserving federated causal discovery. In F. Ruiz, J. Dy, and J.-W. van de Meent, editors, *Proceedings of The 26th International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Statistics*, volume 206 of *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research*, pages 8263–8278. PMLR, 25–27 Apr 2023.

J. M. Mooij, S. Magliacane, and T. Claassen. Joint causal inference from multiple contexts. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 21(99):1–108, 2020.

D. A. Savitz and G. A. Wellenius. Causal Diagrams for Epidemiologic Inference. In *Interpreting Epidemiologic Evidence: Connecting Research to Applications*. Oxford University Press, 08 2016. ISBN 9780190243777. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190243777.003.0003.

P. Spirtes, C. Glymour, and R. Scheines. *Causation, Prediction, and Search*. MIT press, 2nd edition, 2000.

M. Zečević, M. Willig, D. S. Dhami, and K. Kersting. Causal parrots: Large language models may talk causality but are not causal. *Transactions on Machine Learning Research*, 2023. ISSN 2835-8856.