Volume 44, Number 6

Common Sense versus Good Sense

For many years I would begin a graduate course on research design with a discussion of fudging, finagling, and fraud, using as illustrations some famous cases such as that of the infamous educational psychologist Cyril Burt who cooked his data on social class and intelligence to make his results come out the way he wanted them to; or the anthropologist Margaret Mead's questionable use of leading questions to informants during her fieldwork in Samoa; or a host of hoaxes from the Piltdown Man to Captain Samuel Adams's faked run down the Colorado River (see the tremendous book by David Roberts, *Great Exploration Hoaxes*, Sierra Club Books, 1982).

The students invariably thought I had lost my mind. Why would you start a course by resurrecting such notorious and presumably atypical cases? Surely, "common sense" would tell you to start with what would constitute "good" research practice and go on from there? I had a simple reason. My point was very much the one that Roberts makes so brilliantly in his book: "Everyone can identify with the hoaxer, *because each of us has had the experience of seeing a trivial lie magnify into a nightmare of deception*" (my emphasis). In other words, the cases may be extreme but each in its own way is a warning about what happens in research (and in life) when rules of conduct are unknown or loosely engaged; data cannot be replicated and/or are not made available to others and thus rest entirely on the presumed personal integrity of their collector; and, most of all, when a minor bit of fudging turns into a massive fraud or exploitation of the people or place being investigated.

Much of what goes for common sense in contemporary research seems to have come home to roost in some recent well publicized cases. This includes believing researchers rather than questioning them, imposing ourselves on others to "help them" without first gaining their agreement and trust, preferring "human interest" stories to establishing more robust patterns across meaningful populations, engaging in research with marginalized and exploited groups who have little choice but to humor us, and ignoring plausible alternative hypotheses when they go against the grain of what we already believe. Now all of the "facts" are not known in these cases. Indeed, they may never be known in their entirety. Undoubtedly, something of a "Rashomon effect" is at work when all parties involved read about or recall what happened. But these cases are instructive nonetheless, insofar as openly debating them may help prevent similar problems in the future.

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One case in point is the controversy that has erupted over research with indigenous communities in Mexico and elsewhere designed to integrate local indigenous land claims with remotely sensed information. Some local groups have objected to the research on the ground that it is "sponsored" by the U.S. military, thereby plausibly suggesting that it has anything but the welfare of the local communities at heart. Another is the claim that a high profile story in *The New Yorker* about New Guinea inter-clan violence misrepresented the life stories of the individuals on which most of the conclusions about the irreconcilable violence of that society were based. Yet another is the dispute over the estimates of the number of Iraqis killed since the U.S. invasion of 2003. One study's claim of over 600,000 deaths during the first 3.3 years has not been adequately substantiated. Yet, the very conditions on the ground in Iraq may make determining the reliability of other estimates equally problematic. More generally, the ready availability on the Internet of information hitherto difficult to access, such as identifying by street address financial contributors to candidates and parties, raises a host of ethical questions when academics then publish maps of such data, and activists can then harass the contributors. Finally, mapping software is not some innocent technology without ethical implications. The recent case of Google Earth's "layered" maps of Japan identifying historic areas of residence of *burakumin* or low caste people stigmatizes these areas and the people who still live there and also potentially opens up these people who have previously hidden their stigma to future discrimination.

There is no way we can suddenly fix the dilemmas to which these controversies point. The AAG Council has recently set up a task force to see whether the association should develop more specific ethical guidelines relating to research funding and practice. Some very good ones are already available (for example, the International Society of Ethnobiology publishes some very clear and stringent ones). We can of course also better publicize the ones we already have in place. Though neither the AAG nor other professional associations hold inquisitorial or disciplinary powers, we do need to have more frequent and open debate about research ethics. The introductory graduate course is one place to start. We also have to stop pretending that research malpractice, like the few rotten apples in war crimes prosecutions, is simply a rare occurrence.

Of course, we all get things wrong from time to time. Often it is because many of us too desperately hope to find what we already assume is true. We are often closed off to surprise. At the same time, we need to see that disagreements and misunderstandings are inherent in the academic enterprise and not, as ad hominem visions would have it, always the fruit of evil, hubris, and dishonesty. But good sense certainly mandates that we endeavor to engage in "mindfulness," what the ethnobiologists define as "a continual willingness to evaluate one's own understandings, actions, and responsibilities to others." As in life, so in research, but as we all know, easier said than done. ■

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