Letter to the Editor

Data Cooking: A Recipe for Disaster

Madam, All research data, irrespective of the underlying reason for which it was generated, whether in the form of written records or in electronic format, is the property of the University. Research data is the centre piece of any work, expected to be of high quality, free of any errors. A good research proposal generally has an elaborate plan of analysis and dissemination. Researchers generally build in a budget of two data enterers, who would work separately. In the end both of them merge their files in order to tease out any discrepancies and omissions. If there are any then primary sources of data are collected in order to rectify the errors.[1] Generally an error rate of 0.001, which translates in to 1 error per thousand fields, is considered acceptable human-oversight. However, what we are concerned about is falsification and fabrication of data.

Concerns have been expressed against copying and plagiarism.[2] Another issue which plagues our universities is data cooking. This is commoner then what we like to believe. In fact, multinational funding agencies are weary of funding researchers, without an established track-record, in the developing countries due to such concerns. Lacking systems, people can get away with such criminal conducts.

If we look at it, such behaviours do not stem out of the blue; they are a result of years of cheating and fabrication. Lacking training in research methods, with additional burden of meeting deadlines for promotions, people resort to tinkering with numbers. Another compulsion behind this falsification is that negative results are not interesting to publishers. With the burden of meeting deadlines, and churning out papers, which are bread and butter of academics, such falsifications take roots in one's career. Of course lack of mentorship is the main reason behind this research misconduct. In the absence of role models, exemplifying integrity, people resort to data cooking and distortion of facts.

History of Epidemiological Research has few examples to offer. There was one professor of psychology who used to write very elaborate papers in peer-reviewed journals. One day a colleague got suspicious that he never goes out in the field collecting research data. He reported this to the journal editors, who asked for the corroborating data, which was never there. Subsequently Professor was asked to step down from his academic position. A teacher of mine told me this true story, with an advice to keep a record of all data, in case of any conflict. Now-a-days research ethics mandate that researcher keeps a record of all data-forms, at least up to five years of publication. This is generally made available on public domain too. This can also prove to be handy in case of a reanalysis of facts and concepts. However it is essential to keep the identity of the research subjects confidential.[3]

Most of us are acquainted with individuals who have fabricated their data - in part as well in totality. Question is: who would be the whistle blower? Truth has its price in terms academic rivalries, oppression and victimization.

We are in need of developing a system which deters such academic misconduct; training people in research integrity through mentorship from the grounding years, supervising and auditing the high-stake projects and penalizing those who are found guilty. Academic leadership has to work hand-in-hand with researchers and journal editors to root out the evil of this research misconduct.

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