EDITORIAL

Yes Sir, That's My Data!

I've always taken comfort in the fact that the cells I work with don't give a damn about me. I can say what I please about them, curse them if I want to, and it doesn't matter; they never carry a grudge. Nor does it do me any good to say nice things about them. My evaluation of the data they provide has no impact on them. The reverse is also supposed to be true. Data are utterly impersonal and disconnected from the person who obtains them. This is a basic premise for much of science (though not behavioral research or quantum physics). Statements about data per se are not statements about the person who obtained them. I used to think this was true for all data. Now I think it may still be true for my data, but when it comes to your data, fuggedaboutit! The difference is that I have a direct relationship, such as it is, with my data but you stand between your data and me. For that matter, I stand between you and my data, so you'd better watch what you say about them.

What, then, does it mean to say "my data" and "your data"? We are of two minds about this. We treat data as being ours, as something belonging to us, as something we made. We identify with our work, and identify others with their work. At the same time, we speak of data and results as just sitting out there (calling them "observations" or "findings"), independent of ourselves. This touches on an old debate, with ancient metaphysical roots—whether results are found or made, whether our world is discovered or constructed. When pressed, we usually dodge the duality by making distinctions: "It is not the data per se we identify with or feel possessive about or take pride in. It is having figured out how to elicit them, design the experiments, see the connections, etc." But we have a lot of trouble maintaining such distinctions and keeping such categories separate. Data, results, designs, conclusions, discoveries, schemes, insights, and ideas slide easily across the compartments of our minds and enter those where our feelings about ourselves and others reside. Often enough they slide all the way to "Mine!" or "Look at me!" or "I'm the greatest!" or "Nobody loves me." For other people, we confer character on their data and interpretations, and thereby on them. We see rigor or recklessness, bluster or modesty, trustworthiness or slyness, even loyalty or betrayal, in their tables and figures. Their results may make them presumptive cronies or competitors. This tendency to personalize is just something people do. Scientists are not exempt.

Look what happens between authors and reviewers. Authors often take negative reviews very personally. After all, telling people that their data are inadequate is like telling them that their dog, or their baby, is ugly. (When this happens, many authors think they can deduce reviewers' identities from gross or subtle cues. There's probably someone out there who carries a grudge against you for a review you never wrote.) Authors are acutely aware of how much time and labor went into the data they present. They often feel that their work should be judged taking into account the constraints under which it was done. Reviewers tend to use a more absolute scale for clarity and conclusiveness, and discount difficulty, time, and labor. As Editor, I explain to unhappy authors: "We don't have room for all worthy papers, we have page limits, we have to balance the number of papers devoted to different topics, we have to take our readers' interests into account." All true. "It doesn't mean the reviewers were biased. It doesn't mean that they think you do bad work. It doesn't mean they think you're inadequate." Also all true. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't.

We like to think we can readily separate our science from our selves. It's like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* telling his brother, "It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business." He was wrong. Even when we do science, it's always also personal.

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Editor