An Account of a Professional Ethics Violation in Sociology

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This is a story about a sociologist's admission to a professional violation. It is not only a story about unethical behavior, but it is also about the profession as depicted by an interaction between two sociologists. I am the other sociologist in the story and am primarily the listener.

The context of the interaction was a university setting; the meeting was fairly brief, lasting approximately twenty minutes, and superficial. We had not met before and may or may not meet again. So essentially, all we had in common was our mutual membership in the discipline of Sociology, which is probably very significant.

The brevity and superficiality of the interaction is noteworthy. One might more likely expect a divulgence of deviant behavior after having established a lengthy and trusting relationship. This might be especially true for a form of deviant behavior meaningful and threatening to the profession as a whole and therefore to both parties of the interaction. He must have assumed that I would understand, that I would not judge his behavior as "bad" even though it was wrong, and that I had been confronted with the same choices and dilemmas as he. He clearly stated that he knew his behavior to be scientifically unsound. Yet he did not refrain from engaging in it and telling me about it.

In the course of our conversation, we had exchanged thoughts on a topic not uncommonly discussed among sociologists and other social scientists. Specifically, we were discussing reviews of grant proposals and manuscripts for publication that misadvise us, for instance, to apply incorrect statistical procedures. By way of putting this profession-level mistake in context, Sociology and other disciplines go through phases of interest in particular topics and in the use of certain methodologies. Topics-wise, AIDS, homelessness, and drugs have been and continue to be "sexy" topics; and LISREL modeling is the primo statistical

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The success of proposals and manuscripts is thought to be influenced to some degree, although certainly not entirely, by attention to hot topics and use of the preferred methodology.

Upon discussing this phenomenon and gaining no disagreement from me, the sociologist in this story related a tale of manuscript rejection with overtones of faulty advice from reviewers. In this particular instance, he and his co-author had submitted a manuscript to a journal for peer review, and the manuscript was subsequently rejected on the basis that LISREL modeling should have been performed and was not. The data however were inappropriate for LISREL modeling. Not unexpectedly, the narrator recounted the same puzzlement uttered by other sociologists: In this case, the reviewer was incorrect to suggest LISREL modeling and the narrator and his co-author knew that, mathematically speaking, LISREL was inappropriate. The narrator could have appealed to the editor, citing sources to support his statistical procedure and negating the use of LISREL for these data. He did not; he and his co-author applied LISREL modeling and the paper was accepted. One moral to the story is that deviance, at least sometimes, is rewarded. Another moral to the story is that there was deviance on one side of the coin and incompetence on the other. To add to the collective blame and collective injury to the profession, if the paper was published as the narrator stated and if there was no stated disagreement from readers, the error was compounded beyond the reviewer's error.

Upon discussion with other social scientists about this self-report and this form of ethical violation, a few have asked whether it matters if the wrong technique was applied so long as the results are the same. (The self-reporter concentrated on telling me that he knowingly did something wrong and why he did it; he did not tell me whether the results were changed as a consequence of LISREL application.) Some feel that if the results are not altered, then the violation is not serious. Others say that it is seriously wrong to misapply statistical techniques regardless of the outcome.

While it is unquestionably wrong to misapply statistical techniques, such violations are not so serious as when the results are altered as a consequence. But to say that, barring different results, inappropriate methodology is not a serious violation or not a violation at all may be too dismissive of the purpose of Sociology. To misuse statistical techniques even if the results are not altered is to encourage poor science. Faulty reviews and agreement to go along with faulty advice from reviewers deteriorate the science of Sociology by (1) blurring or losing sight of the purpose of Sociology, which is to obtain the truth of social phenomena using the most sound scientific techniques available; (2) encouraging the spread of ignorance; and (3) rejecting knowledge gained from properly conducted analyses if the author refuses to misapply statistical techniques.

To elaborate on point 2, if inappropriately applied statistical techniques appear often in published form, those who know better may question their own accurate understanding and proper use of statistics. They may begin to wonder if they have been wrong all this time; for example, they may begin to believe