

Are There Limits to Confidentiality?

There may be times in their careers when statisticians come face-to-face with moral dilemmas. What if, for example, while analysing survey data, a statistician spots offshore tax evasion, criminal asset-stripping, cartel price-fixing, insider corporate fraud or serious money-laundering?

Statisticians are often ordered by employers to sign solemn pledges of non-divulgence. Are such contracts null and void when white-collar criminality becomes blatantly obvious? In which direction do the scales of justice then balance the conflict of wrong-doing and complicit silence? Are employers in breach of jurisprudence in assuming power to place such an onus on honest employees?

Conscientious whistle-blowers may have some protection under the current legislation. Nevertheless, they need real moral courage to stand up to ostracism and victimisation by vengeful, unprincipled, petty-minded, self-seeking cliques. Government-employed statisticians may be particularly vulnerable to political intimidation.

That great political satire 'Yes, Minister' springs to mind, but it's not funny if you are ever asked to deny your principles or to sell your soul. There is a higher law and a duty to one's true self. Sometimes there cannot be any room for Machiavellian wriggling. A false pragmatism should not be invoked to justify collusion with doubtful practices.

In putting my thoughts on paper about what constitutes proper professional conduct, I have tried to do so from an ethical basis of common humanity. It would ill behove the profession to split into groups bickering from fundamentalist standpoints. It would be better that we should transcend diversity and yet welcome healthy debate.

The classic replies to my argument are that it is 'not helpful' to discuss ethical aspects of statistics; that it is paranoid to postulate such appalling ideas; and that the very discussion of such matters might, at worst, destroy the public's response levels to all surveys, or, at best, influence their answers.

The ultimate choice between right and wrong is stark. When we choose, we still have to keep our own self-respect. If ever we come face-to-face with one of those rare moments of truth, then how we handle it may be multivariably unpredictable. A fool would make a snap decision. Most people are fortunate never to reach the breaking-point at which their integrity can be bought.

In his *Stride Towards Freedom*, Martin Luther King wrote: "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it."

That generality may beg two reservations. Firstly, does the rigour of a proper solution vary in proportion to the perceived seriousness of misconduct? Secondly, we do not automatically have a right to appoint ourselves as judges of apparent misdemeanours.

Our best action might be to report malpractice to the proper authorities and leave due process and justice to the legal experts. Then we could retain our self-respect (and maybe retain the services of an ethical lawyer too). None of us is perfect, but we can all behave by the moral compass of an ideal.

Ours is an honourable profession. A good person once told me that statistical science is the guarantor of modern democracy. We need a charter of work ethics in order to do our job well. Professionals cannot be expedient in interpreting the dictates of conscience. Integrity implies that we do not compartmentalise morality in our lives. Dishonesty in one field damages honesty on the entire farm. Questionable behaviour eventually damages society much more so than boldly upholding what is eminently the right thing to do.

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