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Grokking the Data, Hearing Each Other: Fostering Scholarly Dialogue Through Sound Statistics and Civil Discourse*

Seán Lacey†

Abstract

This report brings together existing evidence, policy guidance, and professional experience to show that many research integrity challenges arise early in the research process, through routine decisions about planning, analysis, and communication. While examples from statistical practice are used to illustrate these issues, the discussion applies across research traditions, including qualitative, theoretical, and mixed methods work. Research integrity is framed as a matter of judgment and professional conduct, shaped by how researchers plan their work, manage uncertainty, and engage with critique. The discussion highlights common pitfalls in research practice, the role of planning in supporting trustworthy work, and the importance of clear communication when evidence admits multiple interpretations. It concludes that research integrity is best understood as a design choice, embedded through transparent planning and thoughtful dialogue rather than imposed through compliance alone.

Keyphrases

Civil discourse, scholarly dialogue, statistical data analysis, research integrity.

Contents

Introduction

Discussions of research integrity often center on misconduct, error, or failure. High-profile cases of fabrication, irreproducibility, or misuse of results understandably attract attention. Yet many difficulties encountered in contemporary research do not arise from deliberate wrongdoing (Lacey and Wilkinson 2025). They develop instead through routine practices carried out under pressure, such as incomplete planning, imprecise communication, and limited engagement with uncertainty or disagreement. In policy, these practices are commonly described as questionable research practices in the United States and as unacceptable research practices in Europe (NAS 2017; ALLEA 2023).

Rather than presenting a new framework, this report draws together established research, policy guidance, and the author's own research and professional experience to examine how integrity is shaped through everyday research practice. Research integrity depends not only on technical competence, but also on how scholars work with data and with one another. To grok the data is to approach analysis with care, restraint, and attention to context. To hear each other is to engage in scholarly exchange with patience, respect, and openness to critique. These practices are closely linked. Together, they influence whether research contributes to understanding or confusion, trust or skepticism.

The points in this report are not confined to quantitative research. Many forms of inquiry rely on data that are textual, observational, design-based, or conceptual rather than numerical. The central concerns discussed here of planning, judgment, interpretation, and communication, arise wherever meaning is constructed through research practice. Statistical analysis provides a visible case where these matters are often contested, but the underlying principles apply across methods and disciplines.

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†Correspondence to sean.lacey@mtu.ie.

Understanding data beyond the numbers

Data analysis is sometimes treated as a procedural task, governed by rules, thresholds, and software outputs. While methodological standards are necessary, they do not replace judgment. Data do not carry meaning on their own. They reflect choices about measurement, inclusion, exclusion, and representation, each of which shapes what can reasonably be inferred (Gelman and Loken 2014).

Developing a sound understanding of data therefore requires more than correct computation. It involves examining patterns, questioning assumptions, and situating results within disciplinary and social contexts. Exploratory analysis, visualization, and sensitivity checks support this process when they are used to learn what the data can and cannot support.

Difficulties arise when analytical outputs are treated as definitive answers rather than as evidence requiring interpretation. p-values, effect sizes, thematic codes, and model outputs assist reasoning, but they do not substitute for it (Wasserstein et al. 2019). Grokking the data means recognizing both what analysis reveals and what remains uncertain.

Common pitfalls in data-driven research

Many threats to research integrity arise from familiar practices rather than intentional misconduct. Selective reporting, over-interpretation of marginal findings, and failure to distinguish statistical significance from substantive importance are widely documented concerns (Nosek et al. 2015). Comparable issues arise in qualitative work when interpretations are presented as settled despite limited grounding or unacknowledged analytic choices.

Another recurring difficulty lies in how results are communicated. Simplification is often necessary, but excessive simplification can distort the understanding of methods as well as the interpretation of findings. Uncertainty may be downplayed in an effort to appear decisive, while alternative interpretations receive little attention. In interdisciplinary or public-facing settings, this can increase misunderstanding rather than clarity (Spiegelhalter 2019).

Such problems rarely stem from a single poor decision. They develop through a sequence of unexamined choices, many of which occur early in the research process. Addressing them requires attention not only to outcomes, but to how research is planned, discussed, and reviewed.

Planning as a foundation for research integrity

Many discussions of research integrity focus on what happens once results are available. While these questions matter, they often arise too late. By the time concerns are raised, key decisions about data handling, analysis, and interpretation have already been made. Core aspects of research integrity cannot be added retrospectively.

Planning plays a central role in embedding integrity within research practice. A considered research plan makes explicit the assumptions, intentions, and constraints that shape a study before results are known. This applies across research traditions. In quantitative work, it may involve specifying outcomes, models, and criteria for interpretation. In qualitative research, it may involve clarifying analytic approaches, reflexive commitments, and how differing perspectives will be handled (Braun and Clarke 2021).

Statistical analysis plans provide one clear illustration of how planning supports research integrity by reducing selective interpretation and making reasoning visible to collaborators and reviewers (Cregan and Lacey 2024). More broadly, planning clarifies responsibilities related to data management, authorship, and ethical review. These discussions establish shared expectations that support careful analysis and constructive exchange.

Whether quantitative or qualitative, methodological decisions carry ethical responsibility; transparent planning and clear articulation of analytic approaches help ensure that findings are interpreted responsibly and that scholarly dialogue focuses on evidence rather than assumptions or intentions.

Planning should not be understood as a restriction on intellectual freedom. Rather, it enables considered flexibility by distinguishing between decisions that must be made early and those that can develop as understanding improves. When expectations are clear, disagreements are easier to address and less likely to become personal.

Communicating uncertainty with clarity and care

Uncertainty is a defining feature of research, yet it is often treated as something to be minimized. In quantitative work, uncertainty is expressed through ranges, intervals, and sensitivity analyses. In qualitative research, it appears through reflexive awareness, interpretive openness, and recognition of multiple viewpoints (Braun and Clarke 2024).

Communicating uncertainty clearly allows readers to judge how much weight to place on findings and where caution is appropriate. It also signals honesty about what the evidence can support. Transparent treatment of uncertainty strengthens credibility by aligning claims with evidence (Spiegelhalter 2019).

Careful communication of uncertainty also supports respectful scholarly exchange. When limitations are acknowledged openly, critique is less likely to be experienced as a challenge to credibility and more likely to be received as part of collective inquiry.

Hearing each other in scholarly disagreement

Disagreement is a normal feature of academic work. Difficulties arise not from disagreement itself, but from how it is handled. Dismissive reviews, defensive responses, and poorly framed critique can obscure substantive issues and weaken trust (COPE 2017).

Hearing each other requires recognizing that critique often has both technical and interpersonal dimensions. A comment may be poorly phrased yet analytically important or politely expressed yet conceptually weak. Responding respectfully involves addressing content while managing tone with care.

Civil discourse does not require consensus, nor does it prevent firm defense of one's work. It does require attention to how arguments are presented and how others are acknowledged (Evans et al. 2023; Stolper and Inguaggiato 2023).

Bridging analysis and conversation

Research findings acquire meaning through discussion and good signposting. Communicating complex analyses to different audiences requires judgment about what to emphasize, what to qualify, and what to leave open, as well as leadership in communication that sets expectations for careful interpretation and respectful exchange (Lacey, Haven, et al. 2025).

Responsible narrative framing connects results to context without overstating certainty. It encourages questions rather than closing them

down. Structured discussion formats, collaborative interpretation sessions, and guided workshops can help link analysis with shared understanding.

Interpretation is often collective work. Meaning develops through exchange rather than declaration. Treating communication as part of the research process supports both integrity and credibility.

Dilemmas as a test of research integrity

Ethical dilemmas in research frequently present several defensible options rather than clear right and wrong answers. Decisions about responding to critique, reporting ambiguous findings, or negotiating authorship reflect competing values and constraints (Cross Institutional Research Integrity Training 2022).

Discussing such dilemmas openly helps make implicit norms visible. It reinforces the idea that research integrity depends on judgment rather than compliance alone (Erasmus University Rotterdam 2024). Planning provides a reference point in these situations, but it cannot remove the need for reflection and discussion.

Emerging challenges for responsible research

Recent developments in research practice further emphasise the need for integrity built into design. Research security considerations require balancing integrity and openness with protection (Lacey et al., 2025a). Generative tools raise questions about authorship, originality, and responsibility (Foltýnek et al. 2024). International collaboration introduces differences in norms and expectations that require careful navigation (Lacey, Farrelly, et al. 2025).

These challenges cannot be addressed through reactive measures alone. They require proportionate planning and open dialogue within and across research communities.

Conclusion

Research integrity is not secured at the point of publication, nor is it guaranteed by formal requirements alone. It is shaped through a sequence of choices made long before outputs are achieved and through the ways scholars engage with evidence and with one another.

To grok the data is to approach analysis with care, transparency, and restraint. To hear each other is to treat disagreement as part of inquiry rather than as a threat. These practices are not tied to any single method. Whether working with numbers, texts, designs, or concepts, researchers face similar choices about how evidence is interpreted and how claims are communicated.

Many of the difficulties discussed in this report fall within what policy frameworks describe as questionable/unacceptable research practices. Yet they are often better understood as the cumulative outcome of decisions made without sufficient planning, reflection, or attention to communication. Addressing them requires more than enforcement or correction after the fact.

Planning brings these practices together, embedding integrity into research design rather than leaving it to remediation later. Research integrity, in this sense, is not an aspiration added at the end of a study. It is a commitment enacted from the beginning.

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Contact: sean.lacey@mtu.ie
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Affiliations

Research Integrity & Compliance Office, Munster Technological University, Ireland.

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