

## 41 The Pattern in the Data

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Some years ago, I was involved in a project in which we secured self-report surveys from collaborators in several countries. One of my roles in this project was to serve as the central repository for the hard copies of the surveys (this was before online data collection took off) and to enter the data into a statistical package. We had secured data from many different countries and cultures across many continents. What we sorely lacked were data from a country in Africa. And then we got them! I was so excited to have these data that I began entering them just as soon as they arrived in the mail. I had made it through perhaps two dozen of the 200 surveys when I thought I might have noticed a pattern in the numbers. Surely it couldn't be? I frantically flipped through 15 or 20 surveys and there it was, plain as day: the same 10-digit sequence. Our African collaborator – or someone working with him – had filled in 200 20-page surveys with the same sequence of 10-digits, over and over.

I alerted one of my senior collaborators. Neither of us could believe it. We wrestled with what we should do, how we should proceed. Should we report him? To whom? It seemed like a lot of extra work to report him, to provide the relevant evidence, and neither of us was comfortable with directly confronting him. We had never collaborated with him before and hadn't known about him until he contacted us with the offer to collect African data on whatever topic we might like to investigate. We later learned that he had contacted several U.S. academics proposing to collect African data in exchange for authorship on journal articles. It seems he had scanned recent issues of journals that published cross-cultural research and contacted authors of cross-cultural articles – casting a net and seeing what he could drag in. In the end, we decided not to confront him, but instead to alert him vaguely to “irregularities” in the data that had caused us some concern. We never heard back from him. We simply threw out his data.

In hindsight, I regret not reporting him or at least directly confronting him. This episode occurred a few decades ago, and I haven't heard anything from him or about him, or seen his name in print. But maybe

I missed it? I worry that he duped others as he attempted to dupe us, and that there is a cross-cultural project out there that has included data submitted by this person that are fraudulent, muddying the scientific literature. I have forgotten his name and university home. In fact, I have forgotten in which country he resided, and the hard copies and electronic partial files have long since been discarded. With the amount of time I have spent over the past few decades thinking about this incident and worrying whether he struck again, I surely would have been better off – and science would have been better off – had I fought through the awkwardness and dealt with this situation head on when it occurred. More specifically, I would have alerted him directly to the data fabrication, giving him the benefit of the doubt that he might have been duped, perhaps by his research assistants or local collaborators. Depending on his reaction and explanation, I would have reported the data fabrication to the head of his department or division. I might also have written to the editors of journals that publish cross-cultural work, alerting them to this instance of data fabrication. My actions would certainly have depended on his reactions and explanation. Unfortunately, I never gave him the chance to react or explain.