

## Responses to discussion about “Issues with data and analyses: Errors, underlying themes, and potential solutions”

Andrew W. Brown, Kathryn A. Kaiser, David B. Allison

*N.B. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their universities or any other organization.*

There has been some spirited online dialogue regarding our recently published paper, “[Issues with data and analyses: Errors, underlying themes, and potential solutions](#),” particularly around two paragraphs with headings “Comment on studies, data, methods, and logic, not authors” and “Respectfully raise potential concerns about invalidating errors (or plausible misconduct) and allow for due process.” We very much appreciate the opportunity to provide additional insights and perspectives on these two sections about civility and due process.

In our article, we stated that our hopes for a more collegial scientific discourse in the future were idealistic. We recognize that the reality of how scientific discourse occurs often makes pursuit, let alone achievement, of such ideals challenging. Conversations online highlighted that in the brevity of our paper we were not always as clear as we wish we had been and left some statements open to multiple interpretations. Discussions of our paper ranged from agreement, to reasonable disagreement, to knocking down strawmen of our arguments – strawmen that we permitted through ambiguity in our writing. We support good-faith efforts to improve research rigor, reproducibility, and transparency. Additionally, our ultimate interest is to have such efforts be as streamlined, timely, civil, and collegial as possible.

Our responses to key points raised:

---

### [1] Regarding our choice of a particular blogpost as an example for the topic of ‘commenting only on the research and not on the researcher’:

In our paper, we communicated that we believe it best to comment on the stuff of science when commenting on studies or papers (namely the data, methods, and logic), and not the persons who conducted the study and wrote the papers. We noted that in some cases, individuals sometimes criticized or commented on persons in addition to the studies, and sometimes did so in ‘extreme’ terms. As an example of this, we cited a blog post that was critical of both Brian Wansink’s work and Brian Wansink himself. From our article: “The recent case of the criticisms inveighed against a prominent researcher’s work (82) offers some stark examples of individuals going beyond commenting on the work itself to criticizing the person in extreme terms (e.g., ref. 83)”, with reference 83 being a reference to a blog post by Mr. Jordan Anaya.

#### (a) Was our choice of example apropos?

We chose the example because we work in the fields of nutrition and obesity. At the time we wrote our paper, one of us (DBA) had just given a talk that referenced the scrutiny of Brian Wansink’s work, questions about errors in it, and the quality of the dialogue around it. Given its prominence at the time, not to address this example would have been conspicuous and invited accusations of bias by omission. We neither defended Dr. Wansink nor his work in our paper, but rather commented on the nature of the dialogue criticizing him and his work.

#### (b) Were we accurate in our statements?

We stated that the blog post in question referred to a person and not just to the work that person had done. Aside from the title of the post, “The Donald Trump of Food Research,” the text includes additional statements that refer to the person; for example, “If you were to go into the lab and create someone that

perfectly embodied all the problems science is currently facing you couldn't do better than Brian Wansink." In that respect, our statement was accurate.

In saying that Mr. Anaya's blog post went *beyond* the work itself, we did not say that he commented *only* on the researcher *in exclusion of* the work. Mr. Anaya's blogpost does contain an insightful analysis of the work and not just comments about the person. Similarly, the second part of our statement is that the blogpost used "extreme terms," and what constitutes "extreme terms" is subjective. Stating that there could be no person who better embodied the problems of science seems extreme to us.

We believe that Mr. Anaya has done important work in helping to uncover errors in published papers, including the papers of Dr. Wansink. Mr. Anaya made other evenhanded and scholarly comments in his blogpost as well, but our focus was on what we felt could be improved. We apologize if this did not come across clearer, and we hope we have made our intentions clear here.

**(c) Did we intend to single out one author?**

No, we did not, and we regret if it may have appeared that way to Mr. Anaya or anyone else. Indeed, we refer to neither Dr. Wansink nor Mr. Anaya by name in the sentence in hopes of focusing on the principles we were discussing, not the individuals being discussed. Our paper included additional examples of authors commenting on persons – albeit in different ways – cited in the same paragraph, and we avoided using names in-line for those examples, too. We recognize that there is no shortage of other persons who have used "extreme language," and even critics of online critics have used extreme language. We regret that we left open for interpretation that his blogpost was perhaps a unique or exceptionally egregious example – that was not our intention.

---

**[2] How did we intend to use the word "censure" and were we advocating the censure of any specific individual(s) for past behavior?**

The online Cambridge Dictionary offers multiple definitions of 'censure' including "strong criticism or disapproval," "strong criticism or disapproval, esp. when it is the official judgment of an organization," and "to criticize someone officially." These definitions and those in other dictionaries make clear that 'censure' can vary both in the extent of severity and formality. It does not universally imply any consequences beyond criticism and expression of disapproval. Our nonspecific use of censure is therefore appropriate because the severity and formality of response is dictated by the severity and conditions of the action to be censured. Our opinions in the publication are a form of censure. We prefer censure be more innocuous when possible, such as simple communications among colleagues to tone down the rhetoric and attacks when things start getting heated and off topic.

We emphasized in our paper and emphasize again here that as firm believers in the freedom of expression we in no way advocate the preemptive curtailment of speech through censorship. In doing the important work of critiquing scientific work, freedom of speech allows critics to comment in the style they wish. Equally, that same freedom allows others to say when they find the style of that speech ill-advised. We stand by our position that keeping dialog collegial helps keep the focus on what is most important – the science.

---

**(3) Did we dismiss blogs, social media, and other outlets as viable mechanisms for addressing scientific errors? Did we advocate that private formal channels were the only way to address such errors?**

We do believe that the court of public opinion without a formal due process is no way to adjudicate the reputations and careers of individual scientists. But we *do not* believe that blogs or other outlets are to be dismissed. Indeed, we cited multiple blog articles, and we ourselves engage with bloggers, which negates such a charge. We stated that “[w]e do not suggest that public discourse about science, and particularly potential errors or points of clarification, should be stifled.” We believe a good way forward is to “[r]espectfully raise potential concerns about invalidating errors (or plausible misconduct) and allow for due process,” yet we also recognize that the handling of such errors through formal channels needs improvement.

The use of blogs is relatively new to scientific discourse. Indeed, we recognize that until procedures to better correct science “are in place and working expeditiously, we think some scientists may still feel compelled to address their concerns publicly.” Further, we acknowledge that “[o]ur call for professional decorum and due process is, admittedly, somewhat idealistic,” and, “as we reported elsewhere, the process of getting errors corrected, even when going through proper channels with journals, is often some combination of absurdly slow, inept, confusing, costly, time-intensive, and unsatisfying.”

However, we highlighted examples of where blogs may have seemed counter-productive, and in at least one passage, we neglected to cite cases where other systems failed and blogs were productive. There is great scholarly content included within various blogs that discuss problems in science.

We have stated that the data, methods, and logic are all that matters, prompting some to question why we are concerned with tone and attacks in blogs and elsewhere when tone and attacks are neither data, methods, nor logic. They do matter to the extent that they add unhelpful and distracting noise to the discussions and may limit participation. Enmeshing personal attacks with logic and sound scientific reasoning does a disservice to otherwise meritorious content.