

Full email exchange wherein I asked Poldrack to confirm his position regarding establishing a minimum transparency standard that ALL researchers should be expected to meet:



Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

---

## question re: your Poldrack (2019) The Costs of Reproducibility paper

7 messages

---

Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

Mon, Sep 28, 2020 at 1:47 PM

To: poldrack@stanford.edu

Hi Russ,

I hope this email finds you well. I was made aware of [your paper "The Costs of Reproducibility"](#). Though I agree with the general spirit of your paper, I disagree with a few specific points you make:

1. You mention that ECRs should conduct their research transparently, even if it hurts their career chances **because once the "field catches up"**, they will be seen as pioneers (*"Given this, why should a junior researcher even bother? I have two answers. The first is that once the field catches up (and I am certain it will), then you will be viewed as one of the pioneers."*). Specifically, the part "once the field catches up" seems problematic as I outline below (I assume by "field" you mean the established researchers in the field).

2. You then mention that it's your responsibility to do "everything you can" to advance the careers of ECRs who are focused on scientific integrity (*"Many of us are fortunate enough to be in that position of freedom, and it's our responsibility to do EVERYTHING WE CAN to advance the careers of junior researchers who are focused on scientific integrity."*).

However, i'm not sure that this is defensible given that one thing you **\*\*COULD\*\*** do, which you do NOT yet appear to be doing, is to require that **all researchers, including senior researchers**, meet a minimum transparency standard in conducting and reporting their research (eg [Poldrack et al., 2008](#) standard).

Hence, I was wondering if you could clarify your position. For instance, do you think that in 2020, 10 years after Bem's embarrassing ESP scandal, that **meeting a [minimum](#) transparency level in one's research should still be completely optional?**

Please let me know, thank you.

Warm regards,

Etienne.

<https://etiennelebel.com>

<https://CurateScience.org>

---

Russ Poldrack <poldrack@gmail.com>

Mon, Sep 28, 2020 at 2:03 PM

To: Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

hi Etienne - thanks for your message. I certainly agree with you that a minimum level of transparency should not be optional, and I try to enforce this in our own work as well as when I review papers. the question is whether and how this should be enforced more broadly. I have a strong distaste for bureaucratic requirements and legalistic rules, if only because I don't think they are good means of behavior change. That said, I have had many conversations with journal editors and grants officials about the need for this kind of transparency, and have certainly tried to encourage them to think about stronger requirements. However, I philosophically don't feel comfortable leading a public charge on this front - I would rather focus on carrots than sticks, in part because I think they are more effective in the long run, and also because I worry that being strongly associated with sticks would ultimately undercut my credibility as an advocate

for these practices (cf. the fMRI Data Center debacle)

hope that helps clarify things  
cheers  
russ

[Quoted text hidden]

--

Russell A. Poldrack  
Albert Ray Lang Professor of Psychology and Professor (by courtesy) of Computer Science  
Director, DSI Center for Open and Reproducible Science  
Building 420  
Stanford University  
Stanford, CA 94305

[poldrack@stanford.edu](mailto:poldrack@stanford.edu)  
<http://www.poldracklab.org/>

---

**Etienne LeBel** <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>  
To: Russ Poldrack <poldrack@gmail.com>

Mon, Sep 28, 2020 at 3:15 PM

Hi Russ,

Thanks for your response. It does help a bit, but it still appears that your position on transparency is insufficiently strong for someone who claims that it's their **responsibility to do everything they can** to support ECRs.

*>>>However, I philosophically don't feel comfortable leading a public charge on this front - I would rather focus on carrots than sticks, in part because I think they are more effective in the long run*

Unfortunately, the facts appear to contradict your statement. Ten (10) years after Bem's embarrassing scandal, transparency levels are still abysmally low in academia ([Hardwicke et al., 2019](#)), and we're no where close to implementing anything resembling even the most minimal transparency standard (e.g., open data w/ valid exemptions and disclosing COIs/funding sources). This is particularly problematic given the unprecedented high stakes and hyper-competitiveness of academia, in addition to the fact that many senior researchers, who still hold disproportionate power, are still mostly unsympathetic to new transparency & integrity standards, hence your use of the phrase "once the field catches up" (see also [Nosek's curious tweet](#) encouraging grad students who want to do real science to leave academia if the "academic culture can't catch up", again referring to the status quo established researchers).

So would you also be against sticks for pilots who fail to comply with bureaucratic safety checklists before flying the plane you just stepped onto?

And what about the bureaucratic compliance to enhanced transparency standards now required of all publicly-traded companies, as per the [Sarbanes-Oxley Act, enacted in 2002](#) in reaction to major corporate/accounting scandals at Enron and WorldCom?

[Quoted text hidden]

---

**Russ Poldrack** <poldrack@gmail.com>  
To: Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

Mon, Sep 28, 2020 at 4:07 PM

hi Etienne - I am not exactly sure what your goal is here. I've told you my philosophy - it's based in part on my belief (which as you note may be mistaken) that carrots are better than sticks, as well as a more fundamental distaste for bureaucratic rules. of course I don't think that rules should never be employed, but I personally would not enjoy doing science if it became overly bureaucratic. you can disagree with my distaste for bureaucracy, but ultimately that's a function of different value systems, not of facts. I'd be interested to hear what you are hoping to get out of this conversation....

best  
russ

[Quoted text hidden]

---

**Etienne LeBel** <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

Tue, Sep 29, 2020 at 11:05 AM

To: Russ Poldrack <poldrack@gmail.com>

Hi Russ,

Thanks for your follow-up. Some responses:

The enjoyability of science is irrelevant.

We're dealing with an unprecedented crisis of confidence in academia, unprecedented high stakes and hyper-competition, billions of dollars on the line, tons and growing evidence that the majority of published findings from academia continue to be [plagued by QRPs, reproducibility and replicability problems](#) (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16), and **you STILL THINK that minimum transparency levels should NOT be required?**

I think you're gravely wrong on this, though of course my position could be off. I guess we can just present the facts to the taxpayer and see what THEY think. I'm starting a show called "Saving Science" as a last ditch effort to make ACTUAL progress on raising standards in academia so that we can finally get our house in order (see below for the explicit goals of the show).

I may use your curious position as an example of 1 of the hundreds of factors/problems that are contributing to the glacial pace of (desperately needed) transparency reforms in academia.

Warm regards,  
Etienne.

#### **GOALS of the Saving Science show**

1. Raise public awareness of the deeply broken global academic system
2. Implement minimum transparency standards at UNIS & FUNDERS & implement a (minimalist user-friendly, & integrated) compliance system that ensures researchers, unis, and funders are actually meeting the new transparency standards (e.g., open data barring valid exemption & disclosure of COIs/funding sources).
3. Change laws to require open access (OA) -- & later open data -- of all publicly-funded research pan-nationally (following the lead of the Netherlands, France, & Belgium where, since 2015, 2016, and 2018, respectively, all publicly-funded research must be public domain OA by law.)

#### **Personal motivation:**

I'm motivated by

- (1) the ethical duty of intellectuals to report on matters of public concern &
- (2) the fact that properly functioning science is the best way to **finding better treatments for cruel medical conditions like suicide, cancer, and Alzheimer's, which have touched my family personally, and continue to afflict millions of people worldwide every year.**

[Quoted text hidden]

---

Russ Poldrack <poldrack@gmail.com>  
To: Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

Tue, Sep 29, 2020 at 11:47 AM

On Tue, Sep 29, 2020 at 8:05 AM Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com> wrote:  
Hi Russ,

Thanks for your follow-up. Some responses:

The enjoyability of science is irrelevant.

I am not sure that's true. if you want science to be successful as an enterprise you need incentives for people to work tirelessly at it, and for me (and I'm guessing many others) the most important incentive to do that is the pure joy of being able to ask and occasionally answer fundamental questions about the world.

We're dealing with an unprecedented crisis of confidence in academia, unprecedented high stakes and hyper-competition, billions of dollars on the line, tons and growing evidence that the majority of published findings from academia continue to be plagued by QRPs, reproducibility and replicability problems (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16), and **you STILL THINK that minimum transparency levels should NOT be required?**

I agree that we are ethically and professionally obligated to practice a minimum level of transparency - which is exactly what I have been advocating for several years now in nearly all of my talks, and in my practice (e.g. building data sharing sites, developing the BIDS standard and standards for methods reporting, developing reproducible analysis tools, encouraging better coding practices, etc). What I don't agree with is the suggestion that I am obligated to publicly advocate for specific legal or regulatory solutions to enforce this obligation.

I think you're gravely wrong on this, though of course my position could be off. I guess we can just present the facts to the taxpayer and see what THEY think.

I never said that we shouldn't attach transparency requirements to research funding - I understood you as proposing broad regulations that would extend to all scientific activity. in fact I think that we should attach transparency strings to research grants, and I have in fact quietly advocated this with NIH staff for several years (as I mentioned before) - the question then is how to make it work in a way that is actually effective and enforceable. for example there are currently requirements by NIH for data sharing on large projects, but they are never enforced. there are currently requirements for registration of "clinical trials" at NIH (which includes much basic human research), but the system ([clinicaltrials.gov](http://clinicaltrials.gov)) is completely unwieldy and not well suited to registration of basic research studies so the registrations are often not effective.

I'm starting a show called "Saving Science" as a last ditch effort to make ACTUAL progress on raising standards in academia so that we can finally get our house in order (see below for the explicit goals of the show).

I may use your curious position as an example of 1 of the hundreds of factors/problems that are contributing to the glacial pace of (desperately needed) transparency reforms in academia.

I appreciate your work on this topic, and best of luck with the show. I think it would be misguided to frame me as part of the problem, but you should do what you feel you need to do.

best

RUSS

[Quoted text hidden]

[Quoted text hidden]

---

Etienne LeBel <etienne.lebel@gmail.com>

Tue, Sep 29, 2020 at 12:14 PM

To: Russ Poldrack <poldrack@gmail.com>

*>>>> if you want science to be successful as an enterprise you need incentives for people to work tirelessly at it, and for me (and I'm guessing many others) the most important incentive to do that is the pure joy of being able to ask and occasionally answer fundamental questions about the world.*

Yes, but science can **\*\*ONLY\*\*** be successful as an enterprise if we all collectively abide by some minimum transparency level and hence can properly scrutinize, refute, and build upon each others' published findings. Without this, we will continue to have the situation where researchers will continue to use academic steroids to "achieve" more publishable results that don't reflect reality, and hence by definition CANNOT contribute to an actual cumulative enterprise of knowledge (hence a minority of bad researchers ruining it for everyone, a classic TRAGEDY OF COMMONS situation). And indeed the practice of "academic doping" which the current LOW LEVELS of transparency allows, could even be considered "rational" behavior given the still dysfunctional incentives of the academic system.

This means you won't be able to achieve your goal of answering fundamental questions about the world, which requires self-correction and critical refutations from other researchers, rather than just researchers building castles of sand on their own island, which appears to be the current situation in academia.

Including you would be framed as an example of a general problem rather than singling you out, because of course

there are thousands of other researchers who (wrongfully in my opinion) hold your position, but of course I do need to use concrete examples to make a general point for a general audience.

[Quoted text hidden]