



The Purpose of Research



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Opinion

On April 15th, 1989, a bad decision cost the lives of ninety-six men, women, and children and injured over 700 others. The site was the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield, England, where a semi-final match was being played between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. The decision was to allow the opening of the Gate C exit off Leppings Lane in order to alleviate a crush of fans at the turnstiles rather than delay the start of the game [1,2]. When the gate was opened, direct access was given to the central pens on the soccer pitch level. The pens quickly filled and the crush became lethal within moments [1-3].

As the first victims died, the decision maker lied about the situation, most likely to eschew blame and protect himself [2]. The decision maker was David Duckenfield, Chief Superintendent, responsible for and overseeing the law enforcement presence at the match [1-3]. He stated that drunken fans without tickets had forced the gate and overwhelmed law enforcement [2]. His lie was immediately broadcast by the BBC covering the match, as it was ended, after only 6 minutes of play [2].

Armed with this lie, the medical examiner performing the autopsies of the victims, collected samples and ran tests that served to help criminalize and defame the dead and the survivors of the disaster [2]. The medical examiner collected blood alcohol levels for all of the victims, aged 10 to 67, believing the information would be important [2]. Law enforcement ran criminal background checks of all victims, and questioned their families extensively about drinking habits [2]. The lie was by this time an accepted truth and it was up to the medical examiner and investigators to find the information that supported that truth, even if it was further lies.

Research is always the search for truths. No matter what the focus of the research, there is a hypothesis to be tested and disproved or supported. There are data to be collected and analyzed, checked and rechecked. There are conclusions to be presented, couched in the tentative, uncertain language that permits the reversal or the support of findings through further or later research when technology or science or larger data sets allow for a clearer picture of a phenomenon to be developed. However, what happens when outside influences and interests mask the pursuit of honest answers through research?

Research is a pure academic pursuit of truth, but researchers are human. Human beings are fallible, corruptible, and deceivable. Human beings are subject to and succumb to the influence of outside forces; politics, authority, financial concerns, media, personal safety and popular misconception. This is a well-known aspect of humanity, so much so that most threats to validity in research focus on the human error, misconception, and misinterpretation. The problem becomes that there are humans on both sides of the research and when researchers succumb to human failings, they inevitably fail other humans.

Research is powerful and its scope is often times completely unpredictable. Research influences politics, policies and procedures. It can inform legal decisions and financial dealings. It can alter educational systems and impact the trajectories of thousands of lives. It can change the world, for better or worse. This is equal parts exhilarating and terrifying, because most researchers pursue their hypotheses and seek their truths for positive reasons. Those that think about the impact of their research are usually seeking to clarify scientific or social phenomena, to improve situations. However, most do not think of the scope of research beyond wondering how many subscribers to a particular journal will chose to read their article.

Technology and globalization have changed the scope of research's impact. But, these outside factors do not identify and separate good research from bad, they simply broaden the audience, increase the possibility of research being found. A simple internet search provides a wealth of information now, millions of opinions and research that supports or detracts from each of them. Because of the wealth of information and access to research provided by our ever changing technology, it becomes even more important for researchers to consider the impact of their research and its potential interpretation as well as to remember the power the ability to conduct research provides to them.

Knowledge is power; the pursuit of knowledge, like the pursuit of truth can empower us all. As researchers seek to explore and explain the wide variety of phenomena that occur on this planet, they can do so much more than attempt to answer questions. They can identify problems, right wrongs, highlight injustice.

They can stop the perpetuation of lies. They can improve lives and a circumstance, all that is necessary are the researcher's skills and passion. Thankfully, the Hillsborough disaster found such a researcher willing to pursue its truths¹.

Research throughout the years since the Hillsborough disaster has proven time and time again that the lies could not possibly explain what had happened [2,3]. Those lies ran contrary to available evidence and data. In the end the injustices perpetrated in the investigation of the Hillsborough disaster were perpetuated and remained until criminal charges were finally handed down in June of 2017 [4]. That is an unacceptably long time for survivors

¹Dr. Phil Scraton has devoted decades to the pursuit of truth and justice in the aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster. His book, Hillsborough: the Truth available through Transworld Publishers is the definitive work on the disaster and its aftermath. His passion for research and the depth of his skill is truly to be commended.

and the families of victims to live with the dark shadows of the lies told about them and their loved ones. It behoves researchers of all disciplines to use their skills and their passion to keep truths at the forefront of the human experience and whenever possible, to provide help and influence positive change.

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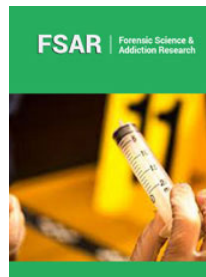
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