Recently, while reviewing a manuscript, I had a sense of déjà vu. The ideas presented sounded very familiar and suddenly it became clear why—I wrote them! This is the fourth time in my career that I have reviewed a manuscript submitted for publication and found myself reading something I had written. Given that there are many people far more prolific and eloquent than I am, I can only wonder how widespread is this problem. In three of the four situations I encountered, my papers were published in journals outside of mainstream sport psychology journals; perhaps that is why the “authors” copied from these papers: less likelihood of detection. It is not my nature to be so cynical; however, ethical issues seem to be reaching epidemic proportions. As editor of TSP, I come across 2-3 ethical predicaments each year. As a reviewer for other journals (something I now do infrequently due to TSP responsibilities), I come across 1-2 more situations each year. I can only imagine what is uncovered by those individuals who more frequently review manuscripts for our field. Rather than harangue readers with threats of retribution, it is much more my nature to examine why ethical standards are breached and consider how to minimize the occurrence.

A recent conversation I had with a doctoral student invoked these issues. As we were talking about his dissertation research, the student was projecting how many different manuscripts he would be able to develop from his data. My initial response was to use this as a teachable moment and discuss the issue of fragmented or piecemeal data (APA, 2001), also known as the “least publishable unit.” First, I explained that the same data cannot be reported in more than one research manuscript. In this particular dissertation, the student made comparisons across three different groups. One of these groups has received very little research attention. Therefore, the student suggested that it would be valuable to highlight the data from those individuals in one manuscript. However, he also was interested in developing a separate manuscript including the analyses comparing all three groups. Consistent with the APA Publication Manual (2001), I expressed that authors are “obligated to present work as parsimoniously and as completely as possible” (p. 389).

The author is with the Women’s Studies Program and School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43402. E-mail: vkrane@bgnet.bgsu.edu.
Large studies should not be broken up into multiple manuscripts as that will waste valuable resources (e.g., journal space, reviewers’ time). The conversation took a predictable turn as potential tenure concerns were raised.

Arguably, we live in an academic culture that often resorts to counting publications rather than encouraging good science (Thomas, 2003). As an editor, I would much rather publish an article with multiple studies or relax page limits to present a whole qualitative study than see several short, incomplete reports published. However, I know this is a “hard sell” to many individuals seeking tenure. Still, I continued my attempt to enlighten this student. Flooding the literature with studies using the same data (also called duplicate publication), “distorts the knowledge base by making it appear there is more information available than really exists” (APA, 2001, p. 351). For example, should a future researcher conduct a meta-analysis, unknowingly the same data may be entered multiple times—resulting in inaccurate findings. As my student and I continued this discussion, it became obvious that the “do it for the better of science” lecture was not working. Quickly reframing the issue, I tried a new approach.

Another perspective is to consider how to present one’s research in the best light possible. On one hand, researchers can go the route of the least publishable unit. For example, I have seen multiple submissions in which one paper includes an assessment of goal orientation, while a second paper includes the assessment of motivational climate, often related to the same independent variables. The obvious benefit of the least publishable unit tactic is seen as one’s vitae expands. Yet, readers often have a different perspective; they may interpret each article as simplistic and minimally contributing to our understanding of a phenomenon. In other words, the author is perceived as less capable conceptually and methodologically. On the other hand, presentation of a conceptually and methodologically complete study establishes the competence of the researcher. Further, contrary to the perceived “expanded vitae” benefit, many mediocre publications actually may impede tenure progress. When credentials for tenure are evaluated, the quality of research and its contribution to the knowledge base are considered. Piecemeal publications judged as substandard may obstruct tenure.

Admittedly, difficult decisions have to be made. From my perspective, ethically, there is only one correct response (it is written in the APA Publication Manual). However, as we know from the moral development literature, there are multiple interpretations of right and wrong. In the sport psychology literature, there are examples that seem to support the acceptability of breaking large studies into multiple publications. Some of the early qualitative research published in the late 1980s and early 1990s presents single studies in several journal articles. However, it is important to point out that each study was identified as a part of a series, often including the sequence number in the title. Also, consider that at that time, there was very little qualitative literature in sport psychology journals. Thus, manuscripts that detailed the procedures helped the field advance to where we are today concerning the qualitative research. Now, there is no need to publish separate papers describing methods. Additionally, epistemological shifts underlying qualitative research further encourage whole written reports rather than fragmented publications.

When multiple components of large-scale projects are published, each component should have a different purpose. Thus, although the method will be similar, the review of literature, the data or variables presented, and the discussion