Editor’s Message: The Joy of Research

I considered many ideas for my last CCR editorial but, in the end, decided to write about something that I think I share with every reader of CCR, yet is something we rarely acknowledge even in conversation, let alone in print: the joy of research.

For me, research is the process of exploring new ideas, formulating problems in areas yet undefined, and then using our ever-expanding toolkit of algorithms, technologies, and theories to solve them. I find this process to be deep, satisfying, and fun. It is fun to explore new ideas, fun to learn new tools, techniques, and theories, and fun to solve puzzles. I’m especially delighted during that brief, sharp, shining moment when it is as if a puzzle piece has clicked into place and confusion is transformed into simplicity. It is this that keeps me fueled as a researcher; it is the direct experience of the fun of research that converts the best of our students to our ranks.

To be sure, there are many other ways to have fun. One can climb mountains or hike forbidding landscapes; swim the waves or fly from continent to continent in search of exotic cuisines. I have done some of these, but find them all, to some degree, unsatisfying. These experiences are intense but ephemeral. Besides, it is hard to justify that they have any socially redeeming value. In contrast, research, especially the kind of work that is both theoretically challenging yet practically applicable, is not only fun but also worthwhile.

Of course, not all aspects of research are fun. Behind each sweet moment of success there can be many dreary hours of work, with little guarantee that a hunch may pan out. Each idea carried into practice, each paper accepted for publication, and each research project that benefits society builds on many discarded ideas, rejected papers, and failed projects. Yet, even in the face of these failures, I feel that the process itself is fun. I sympathize with Oscar Wilde, who wrote “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

I think every researcher, at some level, has a direct understanding of what I mean by the joy of research. I know this because our shared experience binds us despite barriers of geography, culture, and language. I find an instant rapport with other researchers when discussing each other’s work: the barriers to communication drop as we share our experiences, hunches, and ideas. The excitement simply shines through.

Unfortunately, we do not often share our sense of joy with outsiders. Our ideas are usually hidden behind walls of jargon, inscrutable mathematical notation, and the arcane conventions of academic publishing. This does not serve us well: baffled funders and soporific students do not aid our cause. Instead, we should let our exuberance and joy—tempered with gratitude to our employers—motivate us to share our ideas. By interpreting our work to non-experts we open channels of communication with those who can directly benefit from our ideas and innovations. For many of us, this is the one of the deepest motivations for our work.

So, let the joy of research be your touchstone. Share this joy with your fellow researchers, but share it too with others, that the fire in your work may ignite a light elsewhere, and that your work benefit society at large.

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CCR Editor