



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Sherry's Secret

## Year

2006

## Description

This case questions the ethics of a mentor using the work of a doctoral student's work as his own.

## Body

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## Part 1

Sherry is a doctoral student in the lab of Dr. Buddy Norman. Her dissertation research is near completion when Norman asks her to begin writing a paper for publication. When she shows him what she has written, he asks for a copy of her disk, which includes her unfinished manuscript and data. "How much longer will it take you to complete the experiments and write your conclusions?" he asks. "About two to three months," she replies.

A couple of months later, Sherry arrives early in Norman's office for a progress meeting and sees a manuscript acceptance notice on his desk. Peeking at the slip of

paper, she sees that it refers to her work. She is shocked, since her research is incomplete. She decides not to say anything, thinking that Dr. Norman will bring it up. He doesn't.

Later that night, Sherry looks for the manuscript on Norman's desk. She finds a completed document describing the experiment that she is working on, with positive results and a suspicious looking graph. She decides to confront her professor on the apparent fabrication of data. Although the results reported in the graph are consistent with what she has found and expects to find, they dishonestly report results that she does not have.

Sherry confronts Norman the next day. She demands that the paper be recalled. He replies that the paper has already been accepted and is probably in press by now. He tells her that she is listed as first author and that submitting a retraction at this point would look very bad, affecting her career as well as his.

Norman goes on to say that the lab has been waiting for a breakthrough for a long time. The grant that pays the salaries of the technicians and other students is up for renewal soon. (Sherry has independent funding.) He explains that he is confident that her research will pan out. All he did was extrapolate a line and write the conclusions, submitting the article a little early. Without this publication, there is almost no chance for his grant to be renewed, and the lab would have to be shut down.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Should Sherry attempt to recall the paper? Or should she say nothing and hope that her research backs up Norman's "predictions"? What is the ethical thing for her to do?
2. If Sherry decides to retract the paper, would you classify her action as "whistle-blowing"? What effect could that have on her career as a fledgling scientist?
3. What ethical issues are raised by Norman's actions? The fabrication of data aside, is it within his rights to complete Sherry's manuscript and submit it?

A possible conclusion would be for Sherry to contact the editor of the journal, stating that she has found an error in her figure. She could ask that the journal postpone publishing the paper until the problem is resolved. This option might allow Sherry to

avoid ruining Norman's career -- and her own.

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## Part 2

Sherry decides that "whistle-blowing" could sink her and the whole lab, and that the livelihood of her co-workers is more important than a few data points that may prove to be correct after all. She urgently works to finish her research. If Norman's extrapolations are sound, she will say nothing. If they are incorrect, she is in big trouble, as her data won't be reproducible. However, she feels that enough time will pass between publication and graduation for her to advance on to her post-doc before any questions could arise over the validity of the paper's conclusions. She will just keep quiet for now and hope for the best.

### Discussion Questions

4. What are the ethical stumbling blocks in Sherry's reasoning?
5. How would you approach a solution based on the facts?

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## Part 3

With a sigh of relief, Sherry sits back and looks at the graph she has constructed from her finished data. It is almost identical to the figure in the journal in front of her, open to her article. Norman's grant has been renewed, and she is making plans for defending and moving to Indiana for her post-doc.

Kirchoff, a former student visiting from Russia, walks in and peers over her shoulder. "Why are you comparing data?" he asks. When he takes a closer look, he notices that the author is Sherry, and his face clouds. "Oh. Very bad. Very bad." Sherry sees his look of recognition.

After questioning Kirchoff, she learns that Norman had fabricated data of other students, who felt powerless to stop him. Sherry contacts those others, who confirm

Kirchoff's claim.

## **Discussion Questions**

6. What should Sherry do now, in light of this new information?
7. If Sherry reports Norman, do you think she should also be accused of misconduct? Why or why not?
8. What are Sherry's obligations to the new students in the lab?

## **Notes**

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 2, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 1998.

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Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 2, 1998

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