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A Single Author Paper

Year

2000

Description

This case discusses the conflict between friendship and personal relationship on the one hand and professional responsibility on the other and how that conflict can lead to an uncomfortable situation or even result in unfairness.

Body

Mike is a bright, young post-doc working in a big research group in the physics department at Bambuka University. His life-long career goal is to conduct research in a leading research university as a professor. During one of his job interviews, he had a discussion about a particular problem in his field of expertise with the interviewer. In the course of the interview, he was not able to satisfactorily prove his point, because his theoretical arguments did not convince the interviewer. Upon returning to his lab, Mike decides to pursue the matter further and conduct an experiment to verify his argument. Mike's experimental background is not sufficient to obtain the desired results.

Lisa, Mike's friend, is a fourth-year graduate student working on her PhD in the same lab. She volunteers to help Mike with the experiment. Lisa is a talented experimentalist, and she successfully completes the experiment. Mike sends the results to the interviewer, thereby proving his point.

While working on this small experiment, Mike gets an idea for an interesting study, which, if done correctly, could yield a good publication in an important journal. But

Mike is discouraged, because he knows he cannot handle the complicated experiment alone. Lisa encourages him to proceed with the idea and promises to design and complete the experimental aspect of the project. Mike agrees and while he is working on the theory, Lisa designs and builds the experiment.

Mike is very excited about his theoretical results and shares them with his adviser. The professor likes Mike's ideas and tells him that it is time for Mike to get his name noticed in the scientific community. He encourages Mike to publish the results in a famous journal. The adviser also suggests that it would be better for Mike's career if he publishes the work in a single author paper. He says, "You worked on it exclusively, and it would be a wonderful opportunity to write a paper by yourself. It will be a stronger paper if you could validate your theory with experimental data."

Mike likes the suggestion. He doesn't mention that Lisa has already done a significant amount of work on the project. He tells Lisa that his adviser recommended his publishing results in a single author paper, and says, "I really think that this would help my career, plus that's what our adviser wants. How cheated will you feel if I publish this paper alone using all the data that your experiment provides?"

Lisa and Mike are good friends, and she feels obligated to help him. Even though Lisa is disappointed, she tells Mike to do whatever he feels is right. Mike decides to submit the paper as the sole author.

After this conversation, Lisa stops working on the experiment and Mike takes over. He did not design the experiment; therefore he cannot manage to get it to work and does not make any progress. Lisa does not offer any more help, and Mike doesn't ask her for any. Finally, Mike decides to submit the paper without the experimental part. It will be an interesting theoretical investigation, but it will not have the scientific impact that it could have had with the experimental validation.

Discussion Questions

1. Would Mike's adviser's advice be appropriate, if he knew about Lisa's contribution to Mike's project?
2. Was Mike responsible for informing his adviser about Lisa's contribution?
3. Should Mike have followed his adviser's recommendation concerning authorship?
4. Did Mike ask a reasonable favor from Lisa?

5. What were Lisa's options when Mike first approached her with his experimental problem? during the experimental process? when Mike stated his wishes to publish as a single author?
6. Should Lisa have continued to help Mike with the experiment after their conversation?
7. Why do you think that authorship credit can be such a divisive issue among researchers?

Notes

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