



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Is There an Error?

Author(s)

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Year

2000

Description

Ethical issues that researchers face when it appears that there has been a serious error in data interpretation.

Body

You have recently graduated from Professor Older's lab and taken a job as an Assistant Professor at another university. While a graduate student, you had developed a new measurement method and built an elaborate apparatus for making the measurements. Before you left, you trained Student Next in the use of the machine and helped him get started on his own research. In your new position, you are now building an improved version of that apparatus to form the basis for your own independent research, and the tenure clock is running.

You notice a paper in a current journal by Student Next and Professor Older in which it appears that there has been a serious error in the data interpretation, because of a subtlety in the apparatus which Next appears to have overlooked. Since you know that at that moment Professor Older is on sabbatical and traveling out of the country, you contact Student Next, who assures you that there is no error; but because of your insistence, he promises to discuss the matter with Older when he

returns.

The next thing you hear on the subject, through conversation with a colleague nine months later, is that Professor Older has signed Next's thesis, and Next has gone to a position in industry.

- Has some kind of error been committed, by either Next or Older or both?
- What, if anything, should you do?

Notes

Caroline Whitbeck introduced methods and modules for discussing numerous issues in responsible conduct of research at a Sigma Xi Forum in 2000. Partial funding for the development of this material came from an NIH grant.

You can find the entire sequence on the OEC at [Scenarios for Ethics Modules in the Responsible Conduct of Research](#). Some information in these historical modules may be out-of-date; for instance, there may be a new edition of the professional society's code that is referred to in an item. If you have suggestions for updates, please contact the OEC.

Contributor(s)

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