

Deborah Johnson's Commentary on "In Need of a Helping Hand"

Commentary On
In Need of a Helping Hand

The sequence of events in this case illustrates how a seemingly altruistic action (furthering the goals of science) can lead, through subsequent events, to an awkward situation in which professors, post-docs and graduate students seem to fail to fulfill their responsibilities.

Part 1

The events described in Part 1 of the case suggest a situation that is far from ideal, although not unethical per se. The case description hints at something wrong because of Doug's feeling that he is not qualified for the assignment he has been given and because of Professor Cook's apparent lack of understanding of Doug's qualifications and/or his lack of involvement in the project. Without knowing many more details, it is difficult to determine whether Doug is overly concerned about his competence for the project or whether Professor Cook is being negligent.

Since Doug has doubts about his own competence and since he is unsure how to proceed, the ideal thing for him to do would be to tell Cook of his concerns. Of course, it is possible that Cook will fail to respond in a helpful way, but without Doug's expression of concern, it is difficult to fault Cook. He has no way of knowing there is a problem. If Doug were to express his concerns, then the two of them might be able to come to a shared understanding of how Doug (and Cook) should proceed.

By the end of Part 1 no one has acted unethically, although it seems possible that Cook is being negligent and Doug, in not talking to Cook, is not managing his situation well.

Part 2

As the situation evolves at the beginning of Part 2, it is still difficult to pinpoint any unethical behavior on the part of either Doug or Maria. Doug has sought assistance from someone who has relevant knowledge, and Maria has given Doug assistance. She has been helpful to him and, initially, at little cost to herself or her project, has helped Doug and promoted scientific work. If the case had stopped with Maria giving Doug tips on how to proceed and if Doug had proceeded to take charge of his research building on the tips but becoming independent, there would be no ethical issue. The case would simply illustrate an altruistic act by Maria, an act illustrating cross-fertilization of ideas and the value of cooperation in science.

However, that is not how the case proceeds. Instead, Maria continues to help; Doug continues to rely on Maria's help; and Maria is being distracted from her research for Professor Black. Moreover, Doug never informs Professor Cook of Maria's involvement in the research. While it is difficult to spell out in detail the responsibilities of professors, post-docs, and graduate students, especially in a way that anticipates every possible situation that might arise, this case confronts us with a situation where the lines of responsibilities are or are about to be crossed. The case points to more than one responsibility being ignored or neglected. Let me focus on each of the actors.

1. Maria: Maria has responsibility for the research that she is doing for Black, and while there may be nothing wrong with her helping Doug, she should not neglect her work for Black -- unless, of course, she gets permission from Black to devote her time to Doug's project.
2. Doug: Doug may already have a responsibility to acknowledge Maria's contribution to the research. If he continues to rely on her help, that responsibility will be even greater. Maria should be acknowledged either by making her a co-author on published papers or through some other form of acknowledgement. Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules for determining how much involvement justifies co-authorship vs. acknowledgment. In either case, Doug is doing the research for Cook, so he has a responsibility to inform Cook about Maria's involvement in the research. Not only is this his responsibility, he is begging for trouble down the road, if he doesn't tell Cook soon.

3. Cook: It would seem that Cook is being negligent in his supervision of Doug, especially since he does not appear to be asking for information about how the research is proceeding. At the same time, Doug is contributing to the problem by not telling Cook what he should be telling him.

This case illustrates the subtle but important responsibility issues in research relationships. The parameters of these relationships are rarely made explicit so they lurk beneath the surface. Often the responsibilities of professors, post-docs and graduate students become visible only when the grossest violations occur.