

Deborah G. Johnson's Commentary on "Informal Discussions/Formal Authority"

Commentary On
Informal Discussions/Formal Authority

This case demonstrates very well how the vagueness and uncertainty of conventions on credit and ownership create subtle but complex problems in the practice of science. Part 2 illustrates the subtleties of the authority relationship between student and professor and how this relationship exacerbates issues of credit and ownership.

Questions about the behavior of Professor Black and Sean can be raised at each stage in the case description. For Professor Black, there seem to be two important questions: 1) Was he wrong to talk to Sean initially? That is, was it inappropriate for him to use Sean as a sounding board? and 2) Was it wrong for him to use Sean's ideas in the article he was co-writing with Dr. Hong?

In principle, neither type of behavior seems problematic. A professor talking out the interpretation of data with a student seems an ideal situation for student learning and training. The student sees how a professor thinks through a problem and gains practice by participating in the activity. Moreover, if the ideas that Sean had suggested to Professor Black had been published by someone else (ideas that Professor Black had unaware of), then there would be no problem here. Sean simply would have assisted Professor Black by pointing him to ideas and literature already published. We would assume that Professor Black could then read up on the ideas and make use of them in writing the paper.

A problem arises because the case description indicates that Sean's interpretation has not been published, and that Sean plans to present it in his thesis and, presumably, eventually publish it. Publication will establish his role in the development of an important idea. The case contains a degree of ambiguity about the status of Sean's contribution. He has both given Professor Black articles that point in a certain direction and shown him a model he has developed, which, we

gather, goes beyond the literature. However, it is unclear whether Professor Black is using one or both of these contributions. Simply using (and citing) the articles provided by Sean would not justify co-authorship, while using a model developed by Sean would seem to justify including him as a co-author. Nevertheless, it may be quite realistic to pose a case in which this issue is unclear, for it is often difficult to distinguish the original part of a new idea from what has been suggested in the literature but not yet pulled together into an articulated theory or model.

Sean's behavior does not appear to be morally questionable. On the contrary, he has been open with his ideas, willing to assist and to share what he knows. This type of behavior has traditionally been highly valued in science. The most important goal is generally thought to be furthering knowledge; giving and getting credit is a means to this end, not an end in itself. Given what happens in the case, we might say that strategically Sean should have held back some of his ideas, but that is to say what might have been better for Sean and his career; it is not to say that his behavior was immoral.

Another major question about Professor Black's behavior is whether he was wrong to leave the decision on co-authorship up to Sean. Here I think Professor Black is wrong. In leaving the matter up to Sean, he is saying, in effect, that he has no concerns about or responsibility for standards of authorship and credit in science. He is refusing to deal with these issues in his own work. That is a double wrong: It is a refusal to accept responsibility for his own behavior, and it is wrong because Dr. Black's behavior serves as a model for Sean. In effect, he is telling Sean that scientists can treat authorship and credit in a cavalier (almost reckless) manner.

Professor Black and Sean have at least three options in dealing with this situation. 1) The specific claim of Sean's thesis can be removed from the paper. The case does not give us enough detail to know whether that is possible without ruining the paper. Could it be written in a way that points in the direction of Sean's thesis but doesn't scoop it? in a way that draws on the literature, but not Sean's model? 2) Sean's work could be cited in the paper and described as a forthcoming and extremely promising thesis. 3) Sean could be made a co-author of the paper.

It is difficult to decide which of these three options should be chosen without more details. For example, would co-authorship of the paper hurt or help Sean in defending his thesis and publishing it in the future? To what extent are the ideas Professor Black has used already in the literature?

In any case, Sean should be asked for permission to use anything that might have implications for his thesis or future publications. Whether or not he should be made co-author depends on what he agrees to and what is actually published. Professor Black should take responsibility for the final decision. Moreover, if the situation continues to be gray, Professor Black ought to err on the side of giving credit and/or authorship.