Karen Muskavitch's Commentary on "O, What a Tangled Web We Weave!"

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The main issue raised by this case is the relationship between a graduate student and the student's faculty adviser. What should this relationship be like, and what can and should one do if the relationship goes sour? A secondary issue concerns how and when one should report misconduct by a faculty member.

Most will readily accept that misconduct is relevant to research ethics, but some will question whether the student-adviser relationship fits in this category. Because it concerns people's treatment of each other, many scientific societies and writers in the field of research ethics agree that treatment of graduate students is an issue in research ethics. A committee of the National Academy of Sciences included "Inadequately supervising research subordinates or exploiting them" among questionable research practices -- that is, "actions which violate traditional values of the research enterprise and that may be detrimental to the research process." (*Responsible Science: Ensuring the Integrity of the Research Process*, Vol. 1, p. 28, National Academy Press, 1992) With regard to relationships in research groups going sour, as is the situation in this case, Weil and Arzbaecher assert, "We can collect these ways of going astray under broader ethical questions about how to wield power responsibly and how to behave responsibly as one dependent on the power of others. As we proceed to point out the kinds of standards and practices that are needed, we thereby delineate role responsibilities in research groups. To fail to fulfill these role responsibilities would be to behave irresponsibly, that is, unethically."(Weil and Arzbaecher, p. 78)

In the past, it was often assumed that the student's research adviser would serve as the student's mentor as well. This assumption is still common in the natural sciences, but more and more people are using the term "mentor" as an honorific rather than as a description of an assigned role. For instance, *Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend: On Being a Mentor to Students in Science and Engineering*, states:

> In a broad sense, a mentor is someone who takes a special interest in helping another develop into a successful professional. . .A fundamental difference between a mentor and an adviser is that mentoring is more than advising; mentoring is a personal as well as a professional relationship. An adviser might or might not be a mentor, depending on the quality of the relationship. (National Academy of Sciences et al., 1997, 15)

While the best situation may be to have one person fulfill both roles, that is not always possible for a number of reasons. Concerning the choice of an adviser, the National Academies' Student Planning Guide says, "The ideal person can not only guide your career, support your research, and help to find you a job, but can also serve as a close and caring mentor - a 'research uncle,' as one author puts it. Obviously, this is a rare combination, but one worth searching for." (National Academy of Science, 1996, 69) Often the personalities of the student and the adviser do not facilitate such a close relationship, and even when personalities are compatible another person may be a better mentor in a specialized area such as teaching or preparation of presentations. In fact, it has been asserted that "[n]o mentor can know everything a given student might need to learn in order to succeed. *Everyone benefits from multiple mentors* of diverse talents, ages, and personalities." (National Academy of Science et al., 1997, 5) That can be especially true when the student is a woman and the faculty adviser is a man, as is the situation with Hogan and Simpson. It has been observed that "[w]hile academic advisors are supposed to serve as formal mentors for women, they do not always do an adequate job. . . . Women often react by reaching beyond their official advisors to find other mentors among faculty from other disciplines, peers, or classmates," just as Hogan reaches out to Rodriguez in this scenario. (Bird et al. 1993, 8) And the National Academy of Sciences et al. suggest, "You might decide to seek several advisers to broaden the range of counsel available to you . That is particularly important for women and minority-group students, who might wish to have a woman or member of their minority group as a mentor." (National Academy of Sciences, 1996, 75) For these reasons, having a mentor who is not one's research adviser, having more than one mentor, or developing group mentoring opportunities are now being encouraged.

When a student's relationship with a mentor who is not the research adviser goes sour, the termination of the relationship can be difficult, but it will not usually have long-term negative consequences for the student. However, termination of a

relationship with a research adviser can lead to a number of negative consequences including slowed progress toward one's degree, a change in the direction of one's research project, damaged reputations, and perhaps the need for a change to a different department or school. The *Student Planning Guide* offers the following advice:

> What can you do if the relationship with your adviser is a poor one? If the two of you cannot work it out, you should try to find another professor who is qualified and willing to take you on. In general, it is best to make a change as soon as you see that the situation is unworkable. . .Only if it is late in your student career should you endure a difficult situation rather than try for a better one. The head of the graduate program or the departmental chair might be able to help you to decide what to do and who might help you." (National Academy of Sciences, 1996, 75)

The *Guide* also notes, "It is very important to remember that the education of a graduate student is the responsibility of an entire department, not just of a single adviser." (National Academy of Sciences, 1996, 70) However, not all departments acknowledge this responsibility, and the effects of changing advisers will depend on many factors including the department's attitude toward such changes, the details of the specific situation, and how the student and the advisers, old and new, negotiate their way through the change. If it is possible to be civil and rational throughout, the change may be beneficial to all concerned, but rumors, accusations, and recriminations can easily poison the atmosphere.

The secondary issue, the misconduct charge against Simpson, will be addressed in the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions

Question 1

This question explores the reasons why Hogan might not want to publicly accuse Simpson of plagiarism. Naturally she fears direct retribution and damage to her relationships within the department and the discipline. While I agree with the NAS panel that "every case of misconduct in science is serious and requires action," (**Author?** *Responsible Science: Ensuring the Integrity of the Research Process*, p. 31), I do not believe that the action must be either direct or immediate in this case. That

is because the risk of potential harm to Hogan is so great while the risk of harm to others if she delays is minimal. Although Simpson goes too far when he assets that plagiarism is a harmless little transgression, it is true that it is not on the same level as publishing falsified data from a human clinical trial. Therefore, Hogan has some time to stop and carefully consider her actions.

First, she must be absolutely certain of what she saw, and she should have documentation; photocopies would be best. How much was plagiarized and where? Was it direct copying or a paraphrase without citation? Second, she needs to know her institution's regulations and the various routes by which she might make an accusation. Third, she needs to talk to a trusted faculty member like Rodriguez in confidence to check her reasoning and actions. Fourth, she needs to come up with as many creative possible courses of action as she can and then decide which is best. And fifth, she needs to design and carry out a plan of action. Steps four and five will probably involve consultations with the trusted faculty member.

These are steps that the discussion group can follow. The brainstorming to develop possible courses of action, and the investigation of institutional misconduct regulations and procedures might be the most valuable elements of the discussion. For instance, some may realize that it is not clear that Hogan needs to be directly involved in the accusation of misconduct at all. If Simpson publishes the book with the plagiarized material, then the author who was plagiarized could make the accusation, rather than Hogan. She need only make him/her aware of it, and that could even be done indirectly.

Question 2

Here we are asked to consider the conflict between Rodriguez's obligation to honor Hogan's request for confidentiality, and Rodriguez's obligation to her institution and the scientific community to report Simpson's plagiarism. As a faculty member and a member of the scientific community, Rodriguez has a responsibility to see that probable misconduct is reported to the proper authorities, but that does not have to be done immediately. It does not seem likely that the plagiarism will result in immediate, serious harm to anyone if it continues to go unreported for a while longer, and Rodriguez, like Hogan, needs to take time to learn about the facts of the situation and the local regulations, and to consider her options. She might even want to talk to a faculty friend in Simpson's department to sound out the situation there. Barring the risk of immediate harm to others, it is important that Rodriguez give

Hogan time to develop her own plan for reporting the plagiarism, both because of her promise to Hogan to keep it confidential and because knowledge of the breached confidence would deter other students from seeking necessary advice in delicate matters. Thus, Rodriguez needs to respect Hogan's wish to develop her own plan for making the accusation, but Rodriguez does have an obligation to be sure that an accusation is made in a reasonable amount of time if the evidence for plagiarism is sound. A way needs to be found to make Simpson accountable while minimizing the possible harm to Hogan and herself, perhaps by having the accusation come from someone outside their institution.

Question 3

Some might argue that untruthful answers are never morally justified, but in this situation Hogan's untruthful response to the chair's question may be her best course of action, considering the possible consequences. However, that does not mean that Hogan has no responsibilities toward other graduate students, the academic community, or Simpson. Rather, it means that she may be able to fulfill those obligations through actions that pose less risk to herself.

Question 4

Many scientists believe that it is possible to have a successful mentoring relationship with a faculty member outside one's department or discipline. In discussions of mentoring with graduate students, I am learning of an increasing number of such successful pairings, particularly among students who have more than one mentor.

Questions 5 and 6

As written, the case indicates that Simpson's plagiarism leads Hogan to decide that she cannot continue to be advised by a person who knowingly engages in such unprofessional conduct. However, an adviser could engage in other types of unprofessional behavior that might make the continued relationship impossible for the student. These questions ask what a student could and should do in such a situation.

There are many reasons why the relationship between a student and his/her research adviser might go sour, short of unprofessional behavior. However, the basic advice is the same for almost all situations: Try to resolve the situation through improved communication and/or changes in procedures; if not, change advisers as

soon as possible. What varies from situation to situation is whether the student should report the unprofessional conduct by the adviser, and to whom the report should be made. If the behavior is likely to be repeated with other graduate students and to have a deleterious effect on them as well, then the student has some obligation to report the behavior and so attempt to protect others. The report might be made to the graduate studies director of the department, the departmental chair, or some other senior faculty member who would have the standing to do something to change the adviser's behavior. Alternatively, a student might go to the university's graduate school administration, an advocacy office, or an ombudsperson, if one exists.

As discussed in the comments on Question 1, it is important to consider the person to be approached, the timing and the form of the complaint when projecting possible consequences and determining the best course of action. There is always the danger that the student, especially if she is a woman, will be viewed as a whiner and/or not tough enough for the academic world. The manner in which the complaint is made needs to be carefully considered to ensure that it is a factual report of observed incidents and not a formless recitation of grievances. In some cases it may be best to switch advisers first and report the unprofessional behavior later.

Question 7

I think that most will agree that Simpson is not qualified to train graduate students to become professionals in the field if he knowingly engages in plagiarism and thinks of it as typical behavior. The more interesting discussion would concern whether his behavior toward Hogan while her adviser would make him unsuitable to advise any graduate student. What are the minimal qualifications for an adviser? How can we help adequate advisers become great advisers?

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