

Karen Muskavitch's Commentary on "The Rat Race"

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The Rat Race

These days, we most frequently think of research ethics as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism (FF&P). This case, however, deals with ethics in the more general sense of a concern for what one *ought* to do. Here we are asked to consider what Cindy ought to do in her interactions with others in the laboratory, and also what Tom, the PI of the lab, ought to do in managing and leading his research group.

Before moving to consider what these people ought to do to in this laboratory, I want to note two reasons why consideration of this case is not so far removed from FF&P as one might initially suppose. First, the quality of intralab communications and relationships is a major contributor to the climate in the lab, as we see in this case. Climate, in turn, has been found to correlate with the frequency of perceived misconduct. Researchers have observed that in departments where the climate emphasizes competition and individualism over cooperation there is a higher probability that students will report observing misconduct committed by others in their department (Anderson, *et al.* 1994). Second, some have suggested that "significant misbehavior that . . . intentionally impedes the progress of research" should be included in the definition of research misconduct (Commission on Research Integrity, 1995), and Beth's actions with the joystick, if intentional, might be seen by some to cross over into sabotage and misconduct.

The more general ethical question of how Cindy and Tom, and by association others in the lab, ought to interact hinges on respect. We are accustomed to thinking about respect for persons as critical for the determination of ethical conduct in research involving human subjects, but we frequently forget that that is just a special case of the general requirement that we as ethical people treat others as autonomous individuals capable of making informed choices. Immanuel Kant wrote that one ought to "[a]ct so that you treat humanity . . . always as an end and never as a means only" (Kant as quoted in Rachels, 1993). That is, we are not to manipulate

people to achieve our own ends, and the primary way in which people manipulate others is through incomplete or biased information. Respect in interpersonal relationships requires clear and honest communication by all parties.

It appears that Cindy and Beth try to have good communication, although belatedly, with regard to the work on the research proposal. They manage over time to come to the conclusion that "the misunderstanding had been a result of poor communication." However, they do not seem to try to avoid future problems by making sure that the lines of communication are more open. Instead, when another situation arises two months later, Cindy confronts Beth with an accusation of sabotage, rather than seeking to understand what might have happened. If it had been a problem with an experimental technique, Cindy and Beth would probably have sought out advice and training, probably from Tom first. That is what they should do in this situation too. Unfortunately, they don't view their communication problems in the same light, and it appears that nothing is done.

Tom, the professor who is the head of the lab, may believe that he is respecting the independence of the members of his research group by allowing them to solve their problems without his interference, but what he is really doing is neglecting his responsibility to train these students in the skills needed to work in the larger research groups we see today. One assumes that he would not take such a hands-off approach if they were deficient in experimental or analytical skills, but interpersonal skills are also critical for collaborative research. Granted, most professors did not go into academic research because they discovered that they were people persons, and very few have training in management, but there are some things that can be done. The most important is to promote clear and honest communication, even if it is uncomfortable at times. Sign up sheets are a good start, but facilitating timely communication among lab members is also essential. He should have made sure that both Beth and Cindy knew what he had requested of each of them before they "met" in the lab that night to work on the grant application. Then, when Cindy brought up the problem with Beth and the joystick, it was his responsibility to step in if the two could not work things out. The fact that the two are not talking to each other and that the lab climate has changed are clear indications that it is time for Tom to step in. If nothing else, he owes it to the others in the lab, who did not cause the friction but are affected by it. Tom may need to go so far as to force Cindy and Beth and/or the whole lab to sit down, talk about the situation, and figure out a way in which the lab members can work together, perhaps with outside help.

How might the situation described at the end of this case have been prevented? Having in place a lab culture that values and facilitates open communication would help a great deal. Tom would need to make it a habit to meet with lab members individually or in working groups, and he would need to be present in the lab now and then to see how things were going. In order to prevent misunderstandings on "territory," I have known some research groups to draft written minutes of working group meetings so that all are clear on who is doing what. Discussion of cases like this one at lab group meetings can also help. It gives everyone a chance to consider a hypothetical situation in a less emotionally charged environment while also learning the group's expectations for appropriate behavior before a crisis. Then there is the "doughnut penalty," a mechanism for defusing the animosity that can be generated by an error by one lab member that affects the work of others. If someone mistakenly leaves a piece of equipment in a place where others can not find it and so impedes their research, for instance, the offender is required to make the situation right and then bring in doughnuts, or a similar treat, for the lab the next day. In this way the offender makes a type of public confession and penance, and all can then move forward with less danger of bitter feelings.

References

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