

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "When in Rome: Conventions in Assignment of Authorship"

Commentary On
When in Rome: Conventions in Assignment of Authorship

This case is distinctive in raising questions about how to interpret international standards in a local setting. Observers from outside science often assume that there are transnational norms that bind scientists into a single international community. It may be reasonable to claim that there is an international system of scientific research, but standards or norms that are recognized across research communities -- even in this country -- are notoriously difficult to identify. The Vancouver Convention offers a nice example of internationally agreed-upon standards that cover more than 500 medical journals. For considering how general standards should guide conduct in particular situations, the Convention, therefore, is a good choice.

But, of course, in the complexity of circumstances, other issues arise as well. One is the responsibility of Charles's adviser, who is absent from the account. Another is the obligation of the host adviser, Dr. Williams, to orient his intern, Charles, to his lab and explain their local practices, which he himself contrasts to "Western" practices. A third issue is the responsibility of graduate students to seek information about the practices and norms that prevail in the research groups where they work.

Charles seems to have shown initiative in arranging the internship on his own. His adviser, however, must have recommended him to Williams or approved the arrangement, if only passively. It appears that she did not have a conversation with Charles to prepare him for another research setting, or at least alert him to the need to find out at the start the ground rules in Williams's lab. Charles seems caught up in the prospect of proximity to the "great scientist"; he would have benefited from preparation for the concrete realities of another lab. Apparently, his prior experience as a graduate student had not prepared Charles to be alert to local procedures and

social relationships in the lab. Charles bears some responsibility for his naivete. Students should not move passively through graduate study, taking little notice of the social environment and failing to ask questions. When so much depends on personal relationships, students cannot afford to exclude them from their purview. In their later careers as scientists, they will need to help manage relationships in research groups.

Williams is at fault for leaving Charles to learn the ground rules in his lab by unsettling experience. The disagreement was avoidable. At a minimum, Williams should have explained local expectations with regard to recognition, authorship and publishing. When Williams says, "Naturally, I have circulated copies of the paper to each person for their comment and approval," he seems to be describing his usual practice, a convention in the lab. Why does he use the word "natural"? Perhaps he regards his practice as so clearly justified or so obvious that he does not realize it needs to be pointed out and explained. Such lack of awareness cannot be defended.

It is only at the juncture of their disagreement that Williams offers an explanation of his practices. Whether those practices meet the criteria of the Vancouver Convention is difficult for the reader to determine. Williams has an obligation to explain in detail how, in his view, the practices in his lab are in compliance. He is entitled to criticize the standards on the basis of local notions about the scientist as a group member, but when he submits articles to the journals governed by the Convention, he is ethically bound either to comply or to explain his deviation to the journal and seek approval. It is undermining to standards when a clear deviation on the part of a "noteworthy figure" is recognized and tolerated. That Williams believes his practice is superior to the standards does not justify deviation from standards that capture a reasonable understanding of authorship.

However, the notion of "substantial contribution" is an open concept that can generate honest disagreement. An explicit local policy about what ranks as a "substantial contribution," formulated with examples, should help to produce reasonable consistency and reduce disagreement in the research group. The frequency of disputes about ideas being stolen or given away attests to the interdependence Williams mentions. That interdependence makes it necessary to formulate and justify ground rules, wherever the lab is located.