

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "To Publish Alone"

Commentary On
To Publish Alone

This case highlights the behavior of a leader (PI) of a laboratory research group in a sequence of events involving presentation and publication of his research group's work. The central concern is whether the PI adequately acknowledged the contributions of his trainees in the published version of his presentation, whether he treated them appropriately in failing to get consent to or inform them of his including their results in the published paper, and whether he competed with them unfairly in getting research from the lab published. Further issues are his misrepresentation of originality and authorship in the published paper, a question of whether he is encouraging students to violate the norm against publishing the same work in two different journals, and, more generally, of his setting an example of lack of scrupulousness.

In the absence of background information about this PI and his laboratory group, his behavior is a bit puzzling. His status as associate professor and his concern with his own publication interests suggest that his own career is of utmost concern to him. But then it is a puzzle why he would want to publish original research in a journal that his trainees regard as too obscure for them. Did he make himself sole author and omit acknowledgments to allow the students to publish under their own names elsewhere?

It is unfortunate that the PI seems not to have joined with his trainees in taking a problem-solving approach to the task of turning the original review paper into a primary research article containing original data. He needed their cooperation to produce a suitably revised article. A discussion in advance might have taken up such questions as: Why publish original work in this journal? Would a subsequent publication with trainees acknowledged or listed as authors include enough additional results to justify publication in a second journal? How will credit and authorship be handled for each publication? Such a discussion might have ensured

that trainees would be spared the distress of learning only when they saw the reprint that they did not share authorship or receive acknowledgment.

It appears that students had a reasonable expectation that the PI would not use their research without acknowledgment or consent, for his own purposes, unless he had explicitly claimed exclusive ownership of all their data in advance. The PI appears to present a cynical attitude toward publishing. "Put a new spin on the article, and you have a creative paper." "If you think the audiences are sufficiently different, you can publish the same results in two different journals." "Leave it unclear who performed the experiment so that you can deny having excluded your trainees." These are not responses that could be made universal laws.

The PI took advantage of his position of power in unilaterally deciding without informing the trainees that he alone would get the advantage of publication of a paper that included work they had done. He offers an ethically flawed model of a scientist in his casual attitude toward "creativity" and the prohibition against publishing the same work in more than one journal. Whatever the significance of the trainees' experiments and findings, he leaves them feeling justifiably cheated of recognition and credit.

However, the trainees may have missed an opportunity to bring more into the open when they complained about having their findings published in an obscure journal. That was not the only ground for discomfort over how the PI was handling publication of the article. They should have been concerned about publishing the same material in two journals. With a post-doc among them, they should have been aware of the norm against doing that. They should also have been concerned about the PI's readiness to put a "creative edge" on a review piece and to that extent to misrepresent. It would be a delicate matter to raise this last issue with the PI, but the trainees should find a senior person with whom to discuss it.

Without knowing much about the personalities and relationships in the lab, it is difficult to say what the trainees should do beyond trying to take care about their own publication interests, being on guard against similar behavior by the PI in the future, or perhaps looking for another lab with a more scrupulous PI.