

Author's Commentary on "Fair Play"

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This complicated case raises multiple questions that do not have straightforward answers. The case primarily concerns ethics of authorship and publication, but it is also about relationships among scientists in the same workplace and the same field but in different phases of their careers. The fact that the apparent instigator is a student simply makes the story more troublesome, for we usually encounter exploitation by the dominant party. Nevertheless, the underlying principles for discussion remain the same: In order for science to truly advance, we need openness, collaboration, data sharing, scholarship and peer review.

Of primary importance is the apparent miscommunication and/or lack of communication between Abbott and Mary. The relationship between student and professor entails a number of very important elements: power, fairness, equality and scholarship. It is expected that the adviser/faculty member will prepare the student not only scholastically but academically and emphasize the special needs the relationship should address and foster in the student, who is a future adviser him- or herself. It is also expected that the faculty member (due to age difference, experience and academic responsibilities) will facilitate communication between the two. Often, however, the faculty member does not realize the distinction between mentoring and advising. It is useful to discuss their differences in order to attune students to what they may expect or strive to get from their adviser in terms of quality relations. It is also useful to stress that oftentimes one's character interferes with his/her ability to maintain adequate or proper communication.

A second point for discussion is Abbott's failure to supervise her laboratory adequately. It is likely that the problems presented by this case may have been avoided if data ownership practices had been clearly articulated. Not only should laboratory policies be known to all co-workers but the departmental, school and institutional policies should be known to all faculty, post-docs, students and technicians. Because the institution is the primary owner of data, patents and legal rights in most instances, students can only benefit from knowing their rights in

terms of the research performed. For example, could a former laboratory co-worker copy or use data produced in that laboratory when no longer working there?

It is useful to discuss Jonas's rules in conjunction with Abbott's failure to establish clearly articulated and ethically accepted practices. What action is one to undertake in case of inadequate or absent practices, and how would one recognize the absence of standards? Is there a difference in the response based on who poses the question (a student, a post-doc, a technician)? Although it is expected that academicians will achieve an adequate balance among teaching, research and publication, there is an inherent dilemma of commitment - even a conflict of interest - in the very nature of academia. The competitiveness of maintaining a tenure-track faculty position helps distort priorities and results in the use or abuse of students and post-docs.

Why are these standards necessary? To protect the integrity of the scientific process; to maintain the self-correcting attitude of the scientific community; to ensure the practice of sharing materials upon request; and to assure proper allocation of credit.

Despite the fact that ethics cases do not often conclude in clear judgments, in this case we can label Mary's actions as undoubtedly wrong. Her verbal agreement, in addition to her multiple obligations toward her former adviser, dictates that she communicate her intentions and seek advice and collaboration for publication of her results. Her action betrayed fundamental scientific principles about collaboration and data sharing and their necessity for the advancement of science. It also undermines trust in her as a fellow scientist and the importance of peer fellowship.

How should Abbot respond? She could speak to Mary; she could speak to Jonas, or she could ask advice from a third party. She could submit a written complaint to the conference organizers, requesting that they remove the abstract. Finally, she could approach Jonas's dean. Should she do that after she has sought communication with Mary, Jonas, both, neither?

The strained relationships Abbott's action may create should be considered in light of her position as a not-yet-tenured faculty member, a scientist in need of publications and a woman-scientist.

References

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