Author's Commentary on "In Need of a Helping Hand"

Commentary On
In Need of a Helping Hand

Part 1

Part 2

"In Need of a Helping Hand" presents a scenario that individuals may commonly encounter in a research setting. The case itself does not present a specific ethical dilemma, but rather highlights situations that could lead to serious ethical concerns surrounding issues, such as adviser-advisee relationships, conflict of commitment, and authorship.

A successful research environment fosters the development of strong working relationships among individuals, including but not limited to the principal investigator, research technicians, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students. The success of young investigator is highly dependent upon the success and guidance of their research advisers, who may or may not be their mentors. For example, the postdoctoral period traditionally is considered to be an additional "training" period in which individuals ideally have the opportunity and freedom to pursue their own ideas, while securing a solid foundation for their careers and contributing intellectually to the laboratory and to the research endeavor. The career development of the postdoctoral fellows requires both the advisers (in this case Cook and Black) and the advisees (in this case Doug and Maria) to play an active role. This case is meant to bring some of the issues involving scientists-in-training to light and to serve as a stimulus for a healthy discussion of these issues.

Part 1

The case begins with Doug working on a project that is closely related to his dissertation research. This situation allows Doug ample time to become familiar with

the new lab and to gain confidence in a new setting. Later, Cook asks Doug to undertake a more difficult and challenging project, which Doug agrees to do. However, Doug chooses not to disclose his hesitation and makes no attempt to discuss his feelings with Cook. At the same time, Cook makes no attempt to determine Doug's ability to undertake the new project. This point is where some of the problems begin, since Doug does not indicate his lack of expertise in purifying proteins to Cook and Cook makes no effort to evaluate Doug's knowledge and abilities in the area of protein purification.

Cook has given Doug ample time and opportunity to get used to the laboratory and feels that he is ready for a more challenging project. He cannot know that Doug has hesitations, if Doug does not express his concerns. However, as the situation develops and Doug grows increasingly frustrated, Cook does not seem to have time for Doug. Cook appears to be willing to talk with Doug but repeatedly postpones their conversations to an undetermined time. Cook appears to have a conflict between his commitments to the lab and to the class that he teaches. Cook fails to see Doug's hesitation and does not spend enough time with Doug to discuss his project and career goals.

In any adviser-advisee relationship, it is imperative for both parties to maintain open communication. At the beginning of Doug's post-doctoral appointment, Doug and Cook should have discussed their expectations and goals. Doug should be honest with Cook in saying that he has little experience with protein purification, but that he is willing to pursue the project with adequate resources and guidance. At the same time, Cook should ask Doug whether he is comfortable with the project and provide ample resources. In addition, the adviser and advisee should meet periodically to assess progress.

With the adviser-advisee relationship comes certain responsibilities that both parties must meet. Doug has a responsibility to be honest and to work toward the goals of the lab, while Cook has a responsibility to advise Doug on his research efforts and to provide a stimulating research environment that will allow Doug to grow as a scientist. Cook seems to have a conflict of commitment since his teaching responsibilities seem to be taking precedence over his responsibilities to the lab. Whether Doug should have taken on the project is debatable. In my opinion, Doug should have agreed to the project but mentioned that he would need guidance since he would be working in an unfamiliar area. Both Cook and Doug are failing to fulfill their responsibilities in this adviser-advisee relationship.

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Part 2

In Part 2 of the case, Doug begins to seek assistance from another post-doc, Maria. Maria is willing to help Doug, but along the way she begins to feel that she is providing too much assistance. Her own work begins to suffer as a result of her altruistic efforts. Due to Doug's unwillingness to be realistic about his abilities, he has created a situation in which he becomes reliant on another post-doc for advice and guidance. Maria should inform Black of her contributions to Doug's project and ideally Doug, Maria, Cook, and Black should meet to discuss relative contributions to the project and authorship of any papers that involve Maria's contributions.

This situation has the potential of becoming increasingly complicated if it is not handled appropriately. On one hand, Doug does not seem inclined to acknowledge Maria's contributions and is merely preoccupied with completing the protein purification project and impressing Cook. However, due to his preoccupation with the project, Doug may not have considered discussing authorship issues with Maria. As a result, Maria should confront Doug and insist that they discuss the project and her contributions with their advisers. Given this scenario, several outcomes can be imagined: 1) Cook does not understand why Doug went to others outside of the lab for assistance and becomes angry with Doug. 2) Black is not as sympathetic as Maria and reprimands Maria for her contributions to Doug's project. 3) Both Cook and Black are pleased with the collaborative efforts between laboratories and commend Doug and Maria for taking the initiative to work together.

This case represents a situation that could affect anyone working in a collaborative research setting. It is important to be open and honest from the beginning, making sure people are thinking along the same lines and expectations are mutually understood. It is easy to see that if these things are not done subtle actions could lead to serious ethical dilemmas and even breeches of scientific conduct.

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