

Author's Commentary on "The Chance Meeting"

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The Chance Meeting

Questions 1-3

The objective of this case study is to invoke discourse on two issues: 1) a possible conflict of interest between mentor and student and 2) the dissemination of information within academia.

Common reasons for attending a research conference are to learn what the competition is focusing on and to assess the progress of their research. This valuable information is used to avoid being "scooped" and to gain technical knowledge that can provide a "leg-up" on the competitors. What Dr. Smith has done is not too unfamiliar to a graduate student attending his or her first conference and something seemingly taken for granted by more senior students and, unfortunately, researchers.

But by what authority does Dr. Smith act? Often, such actions are taken under the pretense that they are in the student's best interest (i.e., so Lisa won't be "scooped" and can publish). It is very easy for a mentor to become increasingly occupied with the success of the lab, as judged by size and amount of funding. This focus can easily lead to the belief that the success of the lab justifies actions that are believed to better chances of success. In other words, the end (i.e., promotion for Dr. Smith and publications for Lisa) justifies the means (i.e., instructing a student to compromise her relationship with a friend and to withhold knowledge from the scientific community).

But doesn't the position of a mentor entail fostering personal growth and the teaching of students? Does this responsibility include teaching students that publishing supersedes friendships and the sharing of information with peers? The

situation is further complicated by the fact that this information involves Lisa's thesis project, and Dr. Smith has a significant influence over when and if she will complete her degree. In most cases, a successful graduate career is based on the number of published articles. The bibliography, along with a letter of recommendation from the mentor, will greatly influence a graduate student's career. Should a person's thesis be based on published data? If the student is "scooped," should that damage the student's ability to graduate? Is Dr. Smith acting in Lisa's best interest, or is he thinking about his ability to get future funding? How much influence should a mentor have on when and if a student should graduate?

Steve is Lisa's peer, and collaborations are often based on previous relationships. Is it possible that by withholding information, Lisa is jeopardizing her future potential to set up fruitful collaborations?

Question 4

The quest for research funding has created a highly competitive environment where advantages are sought and adamantly held. In addition, because of the duration of most grants, many scientists plan no further than three to five years ahead, thus masking the long-term consequences for the scientific community of withholding information. These actions serve to impede the overall advancement of science. In addition to generating data, the ability to conceal possible advantages is now a determinant of success, and this situation jeopardizes the advancement of knowledge as a whole. Taken together, these issues are possible conflicts of interest.

Isn't Dr. Smith's responsibility to his student and the scientific community greater than that to his lab? Dr. Smith assumes that his actions offer no ill effects but simply are part of today's cutthroat research environment. In truth, his actions serve to propagate unhealthy practices that only hinder scientific progress.