

Author's Commentary on "The Rat Race"

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The Rat Race

This case can be discussed on at least in two levels. First, it explores the convolutions of human relationships. This could have happened in any setting; it just occurred in a research laboratory. Second, the accusations of both parties do appear at face value to breach ethical conduct within a research setting and sometimes in an apparently blatant way. The ethical dimension of the case will be examined by the application of virtue ethics.

When this case is viewed from a larger context, the evolution of relationships within this laboratory raises issues of virtue and character. Character is uniquely human and can exhibit itself within any human activity. Scientific research as a human activity is then open to consideration from virtue ethics as we consider relevant issues of character. With the interrelated notions of character, personal integrity and scientific integrity, one can examine the responsibilities and actions of those involved in this case.

Cindy could be said to be one of those people who has considerable aptitude and dedication to her work, incurring the envy of those around her. Because she is such a go-getter, Beth may have been unduly envious. The initial miscommunication between Cindy and Beth over the manuscript, perhaps a breach in etiquette but not ethics, sowed the seed of discord on already fertile ground.

The second incident, the accusation of sabotage, is a serious charge. It goes beyond pettiness and is a substantial breach of research conduct. It is serious for both the accused and the accuser, but the burden of proof lies with the accuser. In response to Cindy's accusation, Beth offered a reasonable account: that it had been a matter of simply forgetting to switch the joysticks at the end of a long day.

However, Cindy did not believe this explanation and related her account of the situation to Tom. Tom responded by keeping a certain distance from the growing problem. The other graduate students in the laboratory keep their distance also, but perhaps behind closed doors they had definite opinions on the matter. At this point

the issue becomes one of lab harmony and trust, as well as personal and scientific integrity. What are the responsibilities of those involved?

Simple misunderstandings arise in everyday situations, and usually can be resolved by direct communication. It is obvious that Cindy did not believe Beth, which resulted in more or less open hostilities between the two for a period of more than a year. Their bad relationship must have created tension within the lab, with Tom and definitely between Cindy and Beth. Tom, the PI, did not get involved, nor did the other graduate students. Did they have an obligation to? And if they did, what course of action would be appropriate?

If this were a one-time misunderstanding, I could understand Tom's letting things slide. However, these situations kept coming up. I think in order to foster greater cooperation between the researchers the PI had an obligation to address the situation directly. The reason for this obligation resides in the understanding of scientific integrity. If these students are required to work with other people as a team in some other setting, such as industry, government or academia, and similar situations arise, they do not have a good model on which to base future decisions. If scientific integrity is achieved by cultivating good habits, it seems then these people did not have that kind of guidance from the lab they left. In new situations, they may transfer habits that are not congruent with personal and scientific integrity.

This discussion raises the further question of the responsibility of the other, some more senior, graduate students. The situation could have been raised in their lab meetings, addressing and restoring trust within the lab. But they might ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?" It could be argued that Tom and the other graduate students should have taken a more proactive stance. The popular conception of scientific integrity includes notions of a community of people working together to solve some of the greatest questions we have ever asked of nature. As such, scientists are perceived, for good or ill, as a species of intellectuals who have the greatest good in mind and are given responsibilities and are commonly expected to act in accordance with this. Scientists are expected to be responsible researchers and to put aside personal issues for the greater good of science and society.

Regardless of the validity of such popular notions of science and scientists, the people participating in the scientific endeavor have, at the least, responsibilities to the concept of scientific integrity. They have a concern to maintain the trust and support of the public, who are the ultimate sponsors of science. Self-policing of science, which does work for the vast majority of the time, needs to permeate all

levels of the scientific enterprise, including interpersonal relations. From this perspective, then, the other graduate students in the lab could have voiced their concerns. Is this matter really a breach in research ethics, or is it a breach of personal integrity? I think it is both. Cultivating scientific and personal integrity early in one's career will in the long run produce interpersonal habits that will facilitate the goals of scientific research.