

Author's Commentary on "Who Framed Roger's Data?"

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This case touches on several points in research ethics. The points may be clear to a reader who can look at the entire picture over the course of a few minutes, but it is written to try to get the reader to look at the various steps as they may have happened -- over the course of a few weeks. The characters in the story had to deal with the issues far more slowly than one sees them while reading the case. Further, the individual steps from decision to decision are relatively small, and they may have appeared even more innocuous when addressed over a long period of time. The "slippery slope" concept is very relevant when dealing with the training of graduate students in ethical conduct in research, since the graduate years are those where they make s their first choices on where to stand in their professions.

The case is meant to address proper supervision of students, proper review of data and conclusions, ownership of data, honesty in reporting, and honesty in reporting. Jessica was included in order to provide a revelation of conflicting data and is not intended to be a significant part of the case at all. However, the case could become more complex if Roger were to act vindictively and grade her poorly based on his own biases.

The first direct question in the case asks whether any mistakes had been made before Jessica's arrival at the lab. The point addressed by this question is actually directed more toward the behavior of Hare and the committee. From the background it is clear that Hare did not take an active role in guiding Roger's development of the histochemical techniques and was not able to provide expert advice or critique regarding the results. This fact has relevance to Roger's possible misinterpretation of data. It also has relevance to the rest of the case as it gives an indication of Hare's approach to the education of students.

Roger's first relevant decision occurred when he decided not to report the conflicting results to Hare or Jessica. It could be argued that this decision was perfectly reasonable since these were only the first results produced by a novice researcher. However, Roger made an executive decision regarding data that was not his sole property. Perhaps it would have been more proper for him to mention to Jessica and Hare, even in passing, the possible relevance of what Jessica had found.

Roger's next actions were a mixture. It was good, scientifically and ethically, for him to follow up on Jessica's results. His decision to put her on a different project could go either way -- it really depends on his motivation, and the case is not clear on that point. Roger made another important decision when he completed the follow up experiments that confirmed Jessica's initial findings. The case made it clear that he did not relate his finding to anyone. In fact, he accepted thanks and praise for his monitoring of Jessica's progress and for keeping the lab "on track." It is now clear that Roger, whether it was his intent from the outset or not, is manipulating data and hiding results from the lab director.

Certain aspects of this entire situation may have been averted had Hare and the committee taken a more active role in Roger's training and guidance. This case clearly addresses issues of honest handling of data and of disclosure, touching on the ownership of data and the responsible use of laboratory resources and showing that Roger has responsibilities that go beyond his own interests. The case also demonstrates how small decisions can eventually create a situation that one would clearly have avoided were that situation one of the initial choices.