

I Can't Say No

A few years ago, I did something distinctly unethical.

I was in the process of submitting a paper, which had gone through all its revisions and been approved by all the investigators in the study. Literally at the time I was uploading the paper into the manuscript submission site, I was contacted by one of the investigators.

She wanted me to add the names of three more people. They worked in the same department as she, and they all had a mutual agreement to put each other's names on papers they were submitting. These additional “authors” had allowed us to enroll several of their patients for the study, but they only had a general idea of what the study was about and definitely did not contribute anything of intellectual value to the paper.

My problem was that I was in no position to say no. Had I denied the request, these individuals could have kept me from completing my thesis which required their assistance to recruit patients. Also, they could have hindered my post-graduate job search. When I discussed all this with my advisor, he agreed that to add their names was unethical, but he too was powerless in dealing with the situation. So, the three were added.

To make matters worse, I found out later that the investigators receive bonus money from their department at the end of the year based on publications. I can't help but think such an inducement was in the back of their minds when they all agreed to put each other's names on any research papers they submitted.

And maybe the worst part of all this is that if the situation were to arise today with one of my students, I'd probably advise him or her to handle it as I did. The penalties for not playing along, even if the game is unethical, are too uninviting.

Expert Opinion

Of course, the dilemma contributor is correct to indict as unethical the addition of three more names to his author list, as those persons contributed nothing of intellectual substance to the paper. Similarly, the “I put your name(s) on my papers and you put mine on yours” is a remarkably dishonest policy which, as practiced in a department that provides bonuses to investigators based on their number of publications, amounts to fraud.

The ethical problem that this scenario raises, however, is how does an institution “police” its investigators so that these kinds of behaviors do not occur. (Just imagine if a *New York Times* reporter found all this out with indisputable evidence and published a front page expose!)

Although this first recommendation might seem disingenuous, it isn't: The investigators who engage in this “authorship inflation” practice must understand it is unethical. Given the never-ending pressure to publish, it is easy to see how investigators might convince themselves that they are doing nothing wrong, i.e., that virtually any contribution of any kind—perhaps just a word of advice from another

investigator—amounts to an “intellectual contribution.” Alternatively, some investigators might passionately insist that colleagues who supply materials (such as reagents or access to potential research participants) deserve to have their names on the author list because they made the experiment possible.

This sort of self-deception can only be sustained if the institution fails in its ethical responsibilities to maintain a culture of responsible conduct of research. Institutional ethical responsibilities minimally include routinely providing continuing ethics education to students and faculty that communicates, in the case of authorship, all of the following: (1) the fundamental principle that governs authorship, i.e., “a significant intellectual contribution”; (2) concrete examples of what that principle means, e.g., by way of case studies involving granting authorship based on “a word of advice” or, notoriously, the supply of reagents; (3) explanations of why the institution has adopted these authorship principles and why they must be sustained; and (4) where investigators who are experiencing authorship dilemmas such as the one recounted here can go for help and institutional support.

If it is the case—as it certainly seems to be—that a tremendous amount of trust must be granted to investigators in view of the impossibility of any institution’s monitoring their conduct every minute of the day, then certain investigators might need to be occasionally reminded of and impressed with the significance of practicing the virtues. In other words, that:

- misrepresentation in any form is wrong;
- good science consists in the pursuit of truth in all respects;
- good scientists, like good chess players, do not cheat;
- maintaining a falsehood requires constant strain and effort and is usually uncovered anyway;
- those who participate with one another in sustaining a falsehood cannot trust one another and, hence, cannot engage in good science or sustain good collegial relations;
- falsity in one aspect of research is likely to invite falsity in other aspects;
- rewards can only improve productivity if they are provided for genuine accomplishment.

Authorship rules should also be promulgated in departmental policy manuals.

Moreover, journals have very explicit requirements for authorship that often have to be signed by all the authors. In the present case, if the dilemma contributor attested to the fact that all the authors made a “significant intellectual contribution” to the article, he or she might well be accused of misrepresentation (as well as certain of the authors who attested to the same).

Of course, authorship rules or criteria must be enforced by administration and leadership. But it is unrealistic for administration and leadership, especially at large universities, to scrupulously investigate and assure the integrity of the author list of every publication. Consequently, research environments must cultivate an atmosphere where investigators feel safe in speaking up about practices whose moral propriety they question. In such instances, the troubled investigator should:

- (1) Ascertain whether the practice he or she questions is in fact a rule or policy violation by collecting as much information as possible (e.g., policy and procedure statements, the ethical literature, etc.) to determine whether or not the practice in question is indeed an ethical violation;
- (2) Discuss all these findings along with a remediative strategy with a trusted, experienced colleague who has a reputation for integrity and confidentiality;
- (3) Approach the presumptive wrongdoers (or if this is an unrealistic expectation, approach one or more trusted persons in positions of power), discuss the problem, and work to correct the problem with an ethically acceptable intervention; sometimes, and often depending on the gravity of the issue, this might entail notifying leadership or administration of what has occurred;
- (4) If #3 fails, take the matter up the chain of command, such as the University's Office of Research Integrity, until a resolution that accords with ethical guidelines is reached.

In all of this, the investigator must feel safe and confident that any attempt to retaliate against him or her will fail and likely result in the situation worsening for the retaliator(s). Moreover, the investigator must feel robustly confident that a constructive leadership response as in #4 will occur. Otherwise, it is unlikely that a complaint will be undertaken. The contributor of this dilemma is unable to take all of these steps—although it sounds like he or she has performed the first two—because he or she cannot count on leadership for support.

This dilemma points to a lack of organizational or institutional morality, such that moral transgressions are condoned; indeed, they seem to be normalized at this institution. Until that changes, one can understand the dilemma contributor's frank admission that little should be expected by way of correcting this problem. Organizations should only expect their personnel to routinely take the high moral ground in forwarding an ethics complaint if the complainant anticipates a fair and safe hearing and a serious organizational response to the complaint. And organizations can only expect their researchers to sustain a culture of responsibility if they are proactive in educating researchers about what is expected from them. Imagine how much more easily this ethical dilemma could have been resolved early on if, upon receiving the contact from the investigator, the dilemma contributor had been able to respond, "But I don't know if we can do this – remember the workshop last month in which we learned that it would be a violation of institutional policy to list authors who had not made an intellectual contribution. I don't want to get any of us, or our institution, into trouble."

Summary: Ethical dilemmas such as the one described above can be compounded, indeed enabled, by organizational lapses that condone wayward policies and practices. In such instances, leadership, integrity and character that enforces ethical guidelines and provides a safe working environment for ethics complaints to be heard and discussed is utterly indispensable. Cultivating a culture of responsibility in the conduct of research requires proactive, ongoing, and multiple educational efforts to make clear

what the standards are, how they are to be applied in practice, and why the institution has adopted them.

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