

## *I Rub Your Back.....*

Dr. Cooper, a tenure track assistant professor, noted that one of the senior researchers in his area of research, Dr. Wittgenstein, had recently published an important paper in the field and had generated some valuable reagents in the process. Cooper contacted Wittgenstein and asked if he could obtain these reagents, telling Wittgenstein how he planned to use them. Wittgenstein agreed to send the reagents to Cooper and even mentioned that he was making additional reagents that might be used for Cooper's future experiments.

After a year of successful experiments using the reagents, Cooper's group wrote a paper and submitted it to a prestigious journal that rapidly accepted and published it. Shortly thereafter, Cooper received a phone call from Wittgenstein who asked why his name had not appeared on the paper. Cooper replied that providing reagents does not merit an authorship credit. Wittgenstein countered that it is nevertheless common courtesy to do so and that his lab works incredibly hard to generate these reagents. Wittgenstein then informed Cooper that he would not share any reagents with him in the future, nor would he supply him with additional quantities of the original reagents that Cooper used.

Cooper dismissed this all as a bad experience. Nevertheless, he called several colleagues who confirmed that while the official rules say that you do not include people as authors who simply provide reagents, everyone does it.

Over the next several years, Wittgenstein continued to send reagents to other labs who would include him as an author on their papers. These labs flourished and received continued funding. Cooper, however, suffered considerably. His having to generate reagents on his own took over two years, during which time he lost a competitive edge with other labs. This, in turn, jeopardized Cooper's bid for tenure. On the other hand, Cooper did consider contacting those journals where Dr. Wittgenstein's name was appearing and filing numerous complaints, but he dismissed this idea as too uncollegial.

While Dr. Cooper was clearly correct in following rules of authorship credit, it is just as clear that others weren't. Their's was an ethically dubious reciprocity arrangement where Wittgenstein's supplying them a reagent would result in his receiving an authorship credit. Had there been better policing of such arrangements, this sort of thing would presumably happen less often. But as it presently stood, the consequences from acting ethically seemed career jeopardizing for the Dr. Coopers of the world, and career-aggrandizing for the likes of Dr. Wittgenstein. Sadly, as the majority of the scientific community was inclined to follow the less ethical course, Dr. Cooper found himself suffering for doing the right thing.

As an aside but to top it all off, Dr. Wittgenstein insisted on authorship credit for himself but not for his trainees, who did all the work in generating the reagents.

Any ethical suggestions?

### *Expert Opinion*

Dr. Cooper might feel that all his moral courage accomplished was getting his head handed to him on a platter. Surely Cooper was in the right. As discussed in other dilemmas on this website, authorship requires a “significant intellectual contribution” to the paper, which Wittgenstein clearly did not make.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, if ethical behavior as Kant or Mill suggested tends to be “other regarding”—that is, that ethical behavior fosters the welfare of other persons or is done for the sake of ethical principle—Wittgenstein’s expectations of authorship were decidedly self-interested and would misrepresent his role in Cooper’s publication. Representing Wittgenstein as an author would violate the ethical obligation of veracity. But Wittgenstein and others like him have no problem with that, probably owing to the comfort level that has evolved among researchers over decades of naming authors for extra-intellectual reasons (e.g., out of courtesy or as a favor, as an acknowledgement of their power or prestige, or out of gratitude for their supplying some material that enabled the experiment but not the manuscript).

In taking his stand against Wittgenstein, was Cooper not a bit naïve in failing to anticipate that Wittgenstein would expect an authorship credit? Was Cooper let down by his past advisors and training committees who failed to teach him the “informal curriculum” of how things really happen in academic publishing? We are not condoning the unethical here but rather considering that had Cooper anticipated Wittgenstein’s expectation of authorship, he might have been able to negotiate an understanding with Wittgenstein that could have prevented the problem. For example, he could have told Wittgenstein at the time he made his reagent request that his policy is not to offer authorship to researchers who supply him with reagents, but that he would be delighted if Wittgenstein would formally contribute to the manuscript, perhaps by writing some of the opening literature review. Certainly, Cooper should have been suspicious of Wittgenstein’s name appearing on so many papers. And regardless of Wittgenstein’s response to Cooper’s offer, Cooper’s being more deferential and respectful, political as it might be, would have helped. Obviously, when these issues are handled more delicately than confrontationally, the outcomes tend to be better.

Cooper should also have kept his own supervisor informed of all this and made sure he got his backing. We do not believe that Cooper had a categorical moral obligation to make a cause celebre out of this incident per his filing complaints against Wittgenstein with other journals. But that is certainly his option, depending on how much career damage Cooper is willing to absorb. Our experience has been that the usual response to loud accusations of powerful people violating rules is that they often find new and more devious ways to get around the rules or, very commonly, will launch a prolonged counterattack, which can result in unpleasant and often career-damaging

affairs. Cooper must realize that although he might feel a strong urge to fight this dragon, it would be dangerous for him and his career to press on at this time.

One thing that can be done to curtail the notoriously common practice of offering authorship to persons who contribute nary a sentence to a manuscript is for all scientific journals to adopt the policy of a number of outstanding ones (e.g., JAMA): Demand listing the **nature of the contribution** of all the authors at the end of the article. This drives the principle of veracity home because Wittgenstein would either have had to contribute to the article or the authors would have had to lie (i.e., claim that Wittgenstein contributed this or that to the article when he didn't).

Perhaps this kind of journalistic practice would make scientists who are too generous with assigning authorship credits think twice about misrepresenting other investigators' roles. But as it currently stands, Dr. Cooper is sadly learning that it is the rare university where a faculty member's path is not cluttered with politics and challenges such as this one. Cooper must clearly decide whether and to what extent he wants to fight this battle, but he might consider the advice of Italo Calvino on how to manage "the inferno" of the living:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it.

The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.<sup>2</sup>

#### References:

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: *Writing and editing for biomedical publication*. October 2007. Available at <http://www.icmje.org/>
2. Calvino I. *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1978, p. 175.