

The Tyrannical Principal Investigator

A PI moves his lab to a different university, but a few of his postdocs and students stay back. Once settled in, the PI decides to rewrite manuscripts already in preparation, changing the authorship order to favor those who joined him. He also reserves the right to prohibit publication of any research conducted in his old lab, on the presumptive authority of his role as PI.

Is this ethical? Please comment.

© 2009 Emory University

Expert Opinion

At first blush, this PI certainly seems to be a vindictive fellow, trying to “punish” his former graduate students and postdocs for not accompanying him to his new lab by rewriting their manuscripts so as to diminish or delete their authorship status or claims. If the ethical propriety of his rewriting was challenged, would he be able to defend himself in any kind of morally convincing way?

Our response would inquire whether the PI’s rewriting of the manuscripts resulted in an occasional change of wording or phraseology or whether it resulted in a considerable overhaul of the papers’ intellectual content. If the papers’ experimental designs, methods, data gathering, analyses, findings, and implications remained essentially the same after the PI’s rewrites—such that the original content of the papers remained unchanged—then his behavior seems disreputable. To the extent that the disfavored investigators’ contributions were intellectually and substantively retained (and only reworded), their position on the authorship list should remain unchanged. On the other hand, suppose the PI was unhappy with the work of the students-who-stayed-behind, deciding that their contributions reflected “poor science.” His rewrites might be justified if he then proceeds to delete their work or replace it with new material that they didn’t contribute. To really pass ethical muster, however, he should be able to make his case for rewriting to some committee or the Office of Research Compliance.

Questions over the second issue of this dilemma, namely about the PI’s claiming a right to prohibit publication of any research conducted in his lab, might also go to the University’s Office of Research Compliance. We believe that in instances where the PI and members of his research team part ways, the individuals who performed the research should retain a **moral** right to publish without the PI’s permission, as long as the authorship credits accurately reflect the investigators’ contributions, are presented in good faith, and comply with the standard rules on authorship.

As noted in any number of these website cases on authorship, university-based investigators ordinarily do not own their research—their University does, assuming the grant award came to it, which is usually the case.¹ The research team serves as the University’s subcontractors/employees who promise to execute the research program described in the grant application. Thus, when a PI “takes” a grant with him or her to another institution, it is only with the permission of the University to which the grant was originally awarded. Indeed, the University reserves the right to retain the grant and appoint a new PI. Universities will sometimes not exercise that option upon a PI’s departure, however, because the University

might be unable to persuade the grantor that it (the University) could adequately replace the PI and the departing research team so as to keep its contractual promise to do the research. Also, just as universities might “lose” grants when a PI takes a grant and his research team to another institution, so universities “get” grants when new hires bring research awards with them.

From a purely ethical perspective, however, a PI’s belief that he has the right to prohibit publications from his laboratory *solely because he is the PI* is not convincing. From an ethical perspective, the PI must have substantive reasons, usually targeting the quality of the paper’s science, to justify withholding it. As long as a publication is submitted in good faith and complies with the usual expectations of authorship, PIs should welcome rather than prohibit the submission of such publications from their labs. After all, their professional responsibilities include not only discovering and disseminating scientific knowledge but advancing the careers of their laboratory personnel.

Our impression is that PIs often succeed in blocking such publications on pragmatic rather than moral grounds. For example, an investigator who believes she has written an excellent paper but wishes to remain employed in a lab will probably not stand up to the PI who opposes her submitting it. Although she could submit the paper regardless, her PI would likely become upset upon her doing so and might initiate some punitive action against her.

In the above scenario, however, the PI cannot directly harm his research team members who stayed behind. Should they wish to submit manuscripts on their own, however, they would have to consider whether the PI merits an authorship credit per his contribution. If the PI did make such a contribution but forbids the submission, the authors might just delete the PI’s contribution from the manuscript—which might prove impossible if the PI conceived and directed the bulk of the research program. If the investigators could ethically effect such a deletion and still wish to proceed with the submission, they could exclude the PI as an author and instead acknowledge him or her at the end of the manuscript—in which case professional courtesy would require contacting the PI and informing him of the intended submission. At that point, it is hardly inconceivable that the PI might submit a blistering note to the journal condemning the manuscript, which could easily doom its chance of publication.

Finally, if the research team would decide to submit the manuscript without any mention of the PI, they would be well advised to confer with their superiors and perhaps the University’s Office of Research Compliance. That office might decide, for example, that if the PI can take his grant with him to another institution, then that implies that he can exert a strong ownership claim over the data and hence control its dissemination. Thus, even if his intentions to control publications are maleficently motivated, a PI might be able to block publication of any papers coming out of his lab because his “ownership” of the data endures.

It is easy to see, then, how these pragmatic considerations and possibilities might dissuade investigators from submitting papers in opposition to their PIs’ wishes. Yet, if such a manuscript is actually a solid piece of work, then the losers from its nonpublication are not only the research team members who wrote it, but the scientific community that is denied the research findings and, by extension, whoever might someday practically benefit from them.

The easiest way to have averted this entire mess, of course, would have been to have negotiated all these authorship issues between the PI and his investigators prior to the PI’s departure. As the case actually unfolded, though, it seems we have a PI whose understanding of fairness is overwhelmed by feelings of vindictiveness and narcissistic wounding. In response,

he reverts to morally objectionable strategies to maintain his sense of power. This is the darker side of scientific work that academic institutions should take into account when they educate their scientists on responsible conduct in research. While PIs obviously exercise authority, its fundamental purpose should be focused on doing good research and good science. There is no reason why the exercise of authority cannot be tempered by a keen sense of humility. Tyrannical PIs like the one above might indeed be productive, but they hardly qualify as ethical role models.

References:

1. Shamo AE, Resnick D. *Responsible Conduct of Research*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003:119-138.