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Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



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Sympathy ill-placed . . .

Posted on July 29th, 2009 by earlehollland

Last month, the publication *The Scientist* did something really weird. In its July issue, it devoted **several pages** and **an editorial** that, in effect, supported some researchers who had acknowledged their scientific misconduct.

The magazine story, “*Life After Fraud*,” detailed three cases where researchers recalled their experiences after being the focus of misconduct investigations by both the feds and their own institutions. One of the cases involved a respected Ohio State researcher, although the names in all three cases had been changed.

These vignettes, told largely from the researchers’ points of view, all explained that the individuals involved had signed voluntary agreements with the federal **Office of Research Integrity** acquiescing to the charges and agreeing to sanctions generally prohibiting their serving on review panels and receiving federal support for research, usually for a period of three years or less.

These findings were then reported in ORI’s own publications and on its website, as well as being cited in the **Federal Register** and other government publications. Those latter citations were the crux of these researchers’ statements that they were being victimized long after their penalty periods had expired, since the information was searchable on the internet.

The premise of the story was that these researcher’s admissions of misconduct, by signing the ORI agreements, were lifelong sentences since a simple internet search by potential employers routinely yielded details about their cases to anyone who was interested.

Sympathetically, the story suggested the consequences guilty researchers faced were too harsh.

Surprisingly, the magazine’s editor, Richard Gallagher, in an editorial flatly said that the punishments in these and other scientific cases were too harsh, and advocated a purging of the records after the short “sentences” ended. While one can applaud Gallagher’s sympathy and altruism towards these scholars, it seems odd that the boss for a publication claiming to be the “magazine for the life sciences” would so easily forego the traditional watchdog role that journalists routinely play.



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But Gallagher writes: "It reminds me of the system present in US prisons, in which even after 'serving their time,' prisoners will still have trouble finding work because of their criminal records. But is it fair to compare felons to scientists who have, for instance, fudged their affiliations on a grant application when they were young and naïve?"

In fact, the rules and guidelines that govern oversight in cases of alleged scientific misconduct are extremely cautious and generous to those accused. The proceedings in these cases routinely extend for months, and in some cases years, before a finding is determined. The federal authorities rely on the accused's institution, and therefore his/her peers, to investigate the allegations. Those investigations are staged in seriousness, based on the implications of the evidence, allowing accusations without merit to quickly crumble through lack of substance. And all such inquiries and investigations are kept secret until the point when a finding of misconduct is reached to protect the reputations of those who are subsequently cleared.

Information about the cases remains confidential until after an institution's investigation has been completed and the findings are submitted to federal authorities for their concurrence. At that point, most researchers will have signed voluntary agreements agreeing to sanctions, as happened in the case of the scholars cited in this story.

What's missing in Gallagher's charitable stance is an acknowledgement of what the actual crime is – a breach of the public trust.

Our society has long-since agreed that people in certain roles may have a higher-than-normal obligation to the rest of us. Ministers must do no wrong. Lawyers and doctors have codes of conduct demanding professional behavior. Even journalists understand that a single incidence of plagiarism can cost them a career and embarrass them before tens of thousands of readers.



Why should researchers be held to a lower standard?

The truth is that scientific misconduct is an exceedingly rare event, and that rareness, in essence, is why when cases do occur they become such newsworthy episodes and remain in our collective electronic memory, the internet.

Few humans can say that they have never made a mistake, nor paid a price for it. As a society, we tend to be forgiving of those who admit their frailties and show remorse, and that's as it should be. But scientific misconduct betrays both our trust and the culture of science itself.

Rules of behavior for researchers are clear for all to see. They just need to be followed. __*Earle Holland*



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7 Responses to “Sympathy ill-placed . . .”

[Jeff Lorton](#) // Jul 29, 2009 at 8:23 pm

Agreed, the cost to society is too high to excuse this misconduct. As a company, we are seeing the research community, research funding organizations, and refereed/ peer reviewed publishers use our technology to enforce the rules of behavior. -Jeff Lorton jlorton@ithenticate.com

[On Research Blog: Why wipe the slate for repentant research cheaters? Other miscreants don't get that break. | Science News](#) // Aug 3, 2009 at 12:05 pm

[...] service than original news service), The Tracker was directed to a pointed and reasoned blog by Ohio State University's Earle Holland. The topic is the long-term impact on scientist's careers after they've been caught in [...]

[Clemento](#) // Aug 3, 2009 at 5:37 pm

In truth, immediately i didn't understand the essence. But after re-reading all at once became clear.

Xanax // Aug 6, 2009 at 12:10 pm

Mr Holland, you say “...scientific misconduct is an exceedingly rare event” ?

Scientific misconduct is NOT a “rare event”

It's VERY common. What planet are you on ?

[Bob Killoren](#) // Aug 6, 2009 at 2:31 pm

Two options seem readily apparent to me. First, the miscreant can write a book about crime and punishment or get a job on Fox News as an expert commentator, like Ollie North. But on a more serious note...

In the bad old days before federal scientific misconduct regulations, faculty who got caught red-handed were sometimes allowed to quietly resign and move on. If funding was involved money was returned to sponsors, and final reports were retracted... or sometimes not.

I recollect a case early in my career in which a faculty member was caught in the middle of the night “salting” an archaeological dig with artifacts. He not only admitted his guilt but also went on to say that he had written a fraudulent doctoral dissertation. Of course, he was fired, but no word hit the press, and as far as I could tell the institution took no steps to address the scientist's public record or to proactively share information with other institutions that might be potential employers. There was a kind of “don't ask, don't tell” policy — if no one checked job

references, nobody volunteered anything.

Trust, once lost, can never be restored – that was Humpty Dumpty's problem, wasn't it?

[Bill Bartmann Scam](#) // Sep 6, 2009 at 4:47 pm

Excellent site, keep up the good work

[sandraraven15](#) // Sep 9, 2009 at 7:18 am

Hi! I was surfing and found your blog post... nice! I love your blog. 😊
Cheers! Sandra. R.

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« We are what we read . . . Mere bumps in the road . . . »

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