

A Mess of Authors

I worked with Dr. Z on data analysis that led to my writing a manuscript draft. Dr. Z assisted with the data analysis but did not own the data and would not be senior author. Upon reading my manuscript, Dr. Z said it was not acceptable for publication, whereupon we then worked on it for 6 months. During that time, I would email him revisions, which would come back with “not good enough” remarks, but little direction for revision. When I evinced my frustration, he would say we were nearly done and I just needed to work a little harder to complete it.

At the end of the 6 months, I decided I would leave Dr. Z’s lab. Dr. Z did not take this at all kindly. In fact, he said some rather unflattering things about my work, and stated that he wanted to submit the paper himself as first author and not even include me as an author.

My new lab director Dr. N, who did own the data and to my mind had a clear claim to being first author from the start, informed me about what Dr. Z was saying. Dr. N said he felt I had the right to submit the paper myself and that we could remove Dr. Z completely from authorship—which confused me even more. I wasn’t comfortable going behind Dr. Z’s back, especially as he had originally made numerous suggestions affecting the project’s design. But clearly, Dr. Z and Dr. N were at odds and I felt I could easily get caught in their crossfire.

The primary question I was left with was how to sort this authorship mess out. Dr. Z, in my mind, certainly deserved some authorship credit, but my current advisor was disagreeing. Also, he insisted that I be first author, which was flattering but, I thought, somewhat undeserved. As it turned out, the paper was never submitted. I feel badly that it wasn’t. How could this mess have been worked out?

Expert Opinion

So, the projected paper never gets published, perhaps owing to the collapse of what might be called “research virtues.” In their book, *Responsible Conduct of Research*, Shamoo and Resnick offer the following as a kind of Aristotelian list of traits and practices that are conducive to good research and as well as productive research relationships¹:

- | | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| * Honesty | * Openness | * Freedom |
| * Objectivity | * Confidentiality | * Social Responsibility |
| * Integrity | * Respect for Colleagues | * Efficiency |
| * Carefulness | * Respect for Intellectual Property | * Education |
| * Competence | * Equality of Opportunity | * Legality |
| * Animal Care | * Human Subjects Protection | |

Dr. Z and Dr. N appear very much to lack collegial respect, respect for intellectual property, and objectivity. Furthermore, as the troubles start from Dr. Z’s consistent rejections of the student’s revisions, accompanied by his failure to supply concrete, constructive criticism, we might fault Dr. Z’s educative or mentoring style for leaving the

student in the dark—a problem, it seems worth noting, that is not unknown in graduate studies.

Once the student decides to quit Dr. Z's lab and move to Dr. N's, professorial egoism seems to take over on both sides. We assume that Dr. Z is insulted by the move and seeks to discredit the student's claim to authorship. Dr. N on the other hand suggests discrediting Dr. Z's contributions entirely and having the student be first author. No wonder the student is bewildered: Neither Dr. Z nor Dr. N appear to be acting ethically or professionally but rather to be venting their spleens at one another and dismissing customary rules of authorship.²

Obviously, collaboration is essential in research and as Shamoo and Resnick point out—although it is certainly a matter of common sense as well—there can be no collaboration without trust, respect, integrity and collegiality. Drs. Z and N are hardly setting a positive example.

While it is easy to imagine this clash of personalities occurring in a commercial research lab, it is hard to imagine that it would result in the ultimate deliverable, i.e., a decent manuscript, never seeing the light of publication. Management in industry would doubtlessly have some sort of supervisory mechanism that would not have allowed all this work to go for naught. What seems to be seriously lacking in this case is an institutional mechanism that would not only recognize everyone's contribution to the work, but that would assist Dr. Z and Dr. N to work more collegially.

One wonders if the student had a mentor to whom he could have gone when he started experiencing "issues" with Dr. Z. Was Dr. N his mentor? If so, then Dr. N could have exerted some positive leadership but didn't. Although it is a bit unclear—what was the student doing with Dr. N's data, working with Dr. Z in Dr. Z's lab?—Dr. N seems to lead the project, so he should have been made aware of what was going on between the student and Dr. Z and have acted to attend to their communication problem. One also worries that this is probably not the first time Dr. Z was vague in giving directions and slowed a student's professional momentum. (And Dr. Z needs to know about that.)

Perhaps this case is valuable in its illustrating what happens when professorial narcissism or egoism trumps the kinds of virtues that Shamoo and Resnick encourage. Of course, human beings will come to disagree with one another, but it is lamentable that they cannot agree to disagree agreeably.

In summary, to have averted these problem, the following might have worked:

- Dr. Z should have been more thoughtful and explicit in advising the student. It would probably have taken Dr. Z only a few minutes to jot down some concrete suggestions to the student every time an issue arose, rather than leave the student to guess the intent of Dr. Z's vague and imprecise suggestions (maybe "musings" or "meanderings" are better words). This is a very serious failing on Dr. Z's part because it not only causes considerable consternation and anxiety on the student's part, but stymies the creative process, delays the project, and slows the student's career momentum.
- The student should have felt comfortable in approaching Dr. Z and frankly discussing his quandary, which Dr. Z should have taken to heart. Instead, the

student and Dr. Z go limply back and forth for 6 months, until the student decides to throw in the towel and move to Dr. N's lab.

- It is lamentable that the student felt he had to leave Dr. Z's lab. Had there been a mechanism in place to address the problems mentioned above, this might not have had to happen. Where was the student's advisor during all this? Was there even one in place?
- Upon coming to Dr. N's lab, virtues like respect for colleagues and respect for intellectual property should have held sway, rather than the acrimony that the student describes. Dr. N should have sat down with Dr. Z to negotiate their authorship arrangements in a professional way. The idea of neither Dr. Z nor the student having authorship seems patently unjust to both.
- The paper is never written because the principals didn't try hard enough to respect one another and set aside their differences. Perhaps there was an institutional remedy—going to the lab director, section head, departmental chair, dean, etc., but it was apparently refused.

In the end, one feels badly for the student as well as for science and the toil that goes into. Surely the student was entitled to a professionally positive experience which, given the likes of Dr. N and Z, didn't happen. Just so, the student was entitled to the recognition his work deserved, which failed to materialize as well. Thus, this case is a good example of how a failure in professional comportment or relational behaviors can spoil the interests of science and the educational process.

Reference:

1. Shamoo AE, Resnik D. *Responsible Conduct of Research*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003:20-21.
2. See, for example, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication. Updated October 2007. Available at <http://www.icmje.org/>

[©2009 Emory University](#)