

Editorial

Publicizing Scientific Misconduct and its Consequences

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Fabrication or falsification of research findings and plagiarism are examples of egregious misconduct that are universally prohibited in the scientific community. Allegations of this type of research misconduct are taken seriously and, in the U.S., institutions that receive government funds for research are expected to conduct appropriate inquiries and investigations of disputed research or authorship in order to determine the veracity of the charges. When allegations are confirmed, sanctions are imposed.

One's reputation is critical to professional success and a finding of misconduct can be damaging. Indeed even those who are accused but exonerated can suffer serious negative consequences.¹ Recognizing the role of a professional reputation, both the National Science Foundation (NSF) through its Office of the Inspector General (OIG), and the Office of Research Integrity (ORI; which deals with findings of scientific misconduct within the Department of Health and Human Services) publicize findings of misconduct associated with the research that they fund. However these organizations differ in their approach. The OIG of the NSF publishes the salient features of the case, leaving out the names of individuals involved and using the situation as a "teachable moment", emphasizing the elements of the circumstances that are at issue and the behavior that is unacceptable. (Names are available only through Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] inquiries regarding active debarment cases.) The ORI also publicizes cases, when a finding is made, but includes the name of the perpetrator. This reflects the view that institutions and researchers have a need and right to know about the professional history of a potential employee or collaborator. Moreover, providing the names of those found to be guilty of scientific misconduct can serve an educational and preventative purpose by reminding the community that indeed some individuals may choose to violate the standards of the community, so it is appropriate both to be vigilant and to educate the community as to what behaviours are expected and what are sanctionable. These two different approaches underscore the question for authors and editors who deal not with the primary research record that must be maintained and

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sometimes corrected, but with the meta-issues associated with scientific misconduct. The question is whether the potential negative impact on reputation should be perpetuated (and hence punishment extended) as a secondary effect of writing about scientific misconduct. Setting aside the justice of the finding itself (which may sometimes be disputable), one can ask whether by continuing to identify individuals and link them to their misconduct, others in the community (in particular professional journals) are fulfilling a responsibility to emphasize the importance of upholding the standards of the community, or whether someone who has made a mistake should be allowed the opportunity to rehabilitate his or her reputation. This is a particular concern for junior members of the community and this question has arisen in considering “Scientific Misconduct and Findings Against Graduate and Medical Students”.² *Science and Engineering Ethics* has opted for the latter approach, in that we have chosen to present and discuss cases without attaching names of individuals to them in an effort to avoid further secondary sully of the professional (and potentially personal) reputation of the individuals involved. Our goal is to focus on overarching and recurring themes. Serious scholars wishing to know more about a given case can find that information in the references cited and through the author. However, we are much interested in the views of our readers on this issue and look forward to your feedback.

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