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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

To Publish Alone

Year

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Description

This case raises issues of standards in authorship, acknowledgment of contributions of students, unpublished and published data and mentor-student relationships.

Body

Dr. Richard Gump, an associate professor in the State University biology department, has been invited to present the findings of the research conducted in his laboratory at the Annual Meeting of Biological Scientists. Gump submits an abstract summarizing what he will present in his talk, which is subsequently published in the meeting's book of abstracts. Since Gump is the presenter, he is the only author listed on the abstract. His presentation includes an acknowledgments slide and mentions the contributions of the graduate and undergraduate students and post-doctoral fellows involved in the project. This approach is considered standard procedure for summary presentations at this meeting, and perhaps even generous in the mention of an undergraduate.

After the Annual Meeting of Biological Scientists, Gump is invited to submit his findings to a journal published by the society. He writes a manuscript that is essentially a review of the seminar he gave at the meeting. This review provides a broad overview of what had been accomplished in the field previously and where his laboratory's work fits into and extends the body of knowledge. The review does not provide any specific data, and all figures are in the form of summary cartoons.

He assumes that it will be published in a journal dedicated to the proceedings from the annual meeting and therefore decides not to alter the authorship from that of the abstract.

A few weeks later, the manuscript is returned to Gump. He is informed that a primary research article containing original data is required, which will be peer-reviewed and published in a regular issue of the journal. Gump casually mentions to his students that his manuscript must now be a research article and laments having to be "creative" in his writing. He explains that he is trying to make it seem like a real research paper without presenting anything new. The students tell Gump that they are uncomfortable having their important findings initially published in such an obscure journal and wonder aloud how it will affect future publication possibilities. Gump assures them that there is no reason for concern -- nobody in their field or potential reviewers for future publications would read this journal anyway.

Gump then rewrites the paper, including a section on methodology and actual results of experiments run by his students. He references published articles and abstracts from other meetings (on which he was not first author), where most of the data he has used have been disclosed by his graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. Also included are some unpublished graphs and figures developed by the students, and these are not referenced. Of the work included in the manuscript, Gump has performed less than 5 percent of the research. The references in the manuscript state, "This technique was conducted as described in [insert appropriate abstract reference here]." This type of referencing is often used in the biological sciences to mean that the author of the paper has performed the experiment using the techniques described in the manuscript/abstract cited. In this case, Gump is using the same phrasing "creatively" to mean that the entire experiment was done by the authors of the citation (e.g., his graduate students and post-docs).

The names of those scientists who performed the experiments were not mentioned anywhere else, either as authors or in the acknowledgments section. Gump did not ask permission from any other person involved in the research to publish the data. The issue of authorship, therefore, never arose. The students discovered the true nature of the paper only after they received a post-publication reprint.

Discussion Questions

1. What should/could the students do?
2. Is Gump extending basic courtesy to the researchers in his lab? Does an issue of impropriety or scientific misconduct arise in this case? If so, what?
3. As director of the laboratory, should Gump be required to ask permission in order to publish data generated in "his" laboratory?
4. Was Gump's inclusion of published abstracts in his reference section adequate recognition of the real researchers' contributions?
5. Should Gump's students now be allowed to publish their data in a different manuscript (with different authorship)? Does the assumption that nobody involved in Gump's area of research will be likely to see this publication excuse publishing the same data twice?

Notes

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Hypothetical / Fictional Case

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