

Author's Commentary on "Sherry's Secret"

Commentary On
Sherry's Secret

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Sherry confronts a number of dilemmas in this case study. She faces the choice of doing what she thinks is right from her viewpoint and that of her co-workers. She also makes a few ethically questionable moves. This case study is designed to present a person to whom most people can relate, someone who sometimes thinks of herself first, not an unrealistically virtuous person. I want to introduce some so-called gray areas for discussion using a few issues that have come up in my own graduate career as well as some that I considered thought-provoking.

At the end of each section, conclusions can be drawn that will end the story, and I intended the reader to be able to do this, as indicated by the possible conclusion paragraph after the first set of questions. As the story continues, additional ethical issues arise. When the story ends, there is a wide avenue for discussion of what Sherry did and what she should or should not have done. The reader has a broad spectrum of issues for an animated class discussion.

Questions 1-3

The question here is whether Norman has been dishonest in his dealings with Sherry's work. Since Norman is also listed as an author, he should be able to revise work if he wishes. But did he really fabricate the data? Could he have been revising her work? It is a possibility that he did the experiment himself and got the correct conclusions. What Sherry should have done is to ask him in the beginning about the manuscript, or ask to help edit it.

If Sherry decides that Norman is falsifying data, should she tell anyone? The truth is that she probably would be blacklisted in her field, or at least make some serious enemies. She could be saying good-bye to any chance for success. Is it really worth all that?

All of these issues aside, Sherry should never have looked at papers on Norman's desk. Her action is a clear invasion of privacy.

Questions 4-5

Part 2 attempts to display a gray area for discussion. It brings up the question of responsibility or accountability for a publication. Sherry's decision not to "blow the whistle" this time is solely based on her self-interest, not on any sense of loyalty to anyone else in the lab. Is this decision any more or less justifiable than her earlier decisions, which took into account the fate of her co-workers?

Questions 6-8

In Part 3, I want the reader to think of what Sherry should do after discovering that others have shared her experience with Norman. Obviously, none of them have reported Norman, even though they knew what he was doing, and had discussed his actions among themselves. Should Sherry now sacrifice her career to prevent his jeopardizing the newer students? Her predecessors never warned her. Should she too turn a blind eye? After all, she is about to leave, and no one would ever know what happened.

Should Sherry also be accused of misconduct? She knew of an unethical situation (or one she thought was unethical) and did nothing about it. My point here is for the discussion participants to find out their own institutions' policy on reporting

unethical behavior. At some institutions, she would be held accountable; at others, not. Most institutions have no set policy for ownership of data and reporting misconduct because it is impossible to know the minute details and circumstances of every case. Misconduct is handled on a case-by-case basis, although each institution may have a highly structured procedure for handling such cases.

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