

# **TWENTY QUESTIONS: ETHICAL RESEARCH DILEMMAS FOR PHD STUDENTS (PhD Students and Research Ethics, Part A)**

## **THE ETHICIST: RESEARCH**

### *Ethics in the Academy of Management*

**Subject: *Twenty Questions: Ethical Research Dilemmas for PhD Students (PhD Students and Research Ethics, Part A)***

#### **Columnists:**

- Lorraine Eden, Texas A&M University, [leden@tamu.edu](mailto:leden@tamu.edu)
- Kevin McSweeney, Texas A&M University, [kmcsweeney@tamu.edu](mailto:kmcsweeney@tamu.edu)

**Date: October 16, 2014**

**KEY INSIGHT:** The PhD timeline, from admission through graduation, is a unique period in a scholar's life. It is a time when students are apprentices, learning from faculty mentors how to become researchers and academics. In the four to six years of a typical doctoral program, students engage in all stages of research from problem identification, literature reviews and theory development, through data collection and analysis, to writing, presenting and publishing their work. At each stage, doctoral students face ethical research dilemmas, similar to those faced by faculty members, but with unique aspects that come from being doctoral students. This blog post is the first of two pieces examining research ethical dilemmas involving PhD students. Part A consists of 20 research dilemmas that are meant to facilitate classroom or small group discussions among doctoral students and faculty about research ethics. Part B explores the unique aspects of doctoral students in the research process, implications for research misconduct, and possible coping mechanisms. My co-author Kevin McSweeney, a first year doctoral student in Management at Texas A&M University, and I welcome your comments.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Each of the cases below may or may not have an ethical dilemma facing the PhD student. The cases are designed to encourage discussion on different topics that face PhD students in their research activities. We recommend the following questions to start the discussion:

- Is there an ethical dilemma here? If yes, what is it and why?

- What are the available options facing the PhD student?
- What ethical course of action do you recommend and why?

## **A. ENTRY/ADMISSIONS TO THE PHD PROGRAM**

1. Aidan decided to go back to school for his PhD in Management and had talked with the doctoral program director at University X several times by telephone. The program director assured Aidan that he would be able to work with renowned Professor Macro if Aidan chose to do his doctoral studies at University X. Aidan's research interests aligned perfectly with Professor Macro's research. Aidan was also convinced he would develop excellent research skills working under Professor Macro's direction and might therefore have some publications before graduation. Aidan's official visit to the university as well as his interactions with the program director during the visit went well and further strengthened his views. However, Professor Macro was out of town during Aidan's visit so they did not meet. Nevertheless, the program director assured Aidan that Professor Macro loved to work with doctoral students. Aidan, taking into consideration the professor's reputation in the field and the program director's opinion that Aidan would be able to work with Professor Macro, accepted the offer to attend University X. After Aidan's arrival, however, the situation turned out to be quite different. He discovered that Professor Macro was going on sabbatical leave for a year and that his passion for working with doctoral students had lessened. It became quite evident that the program director had not consulted with Professor Macro about his willingness or ability to work with incoming doctoral students. Aidan feels that he has been misled.

## **B. RESEARCH PROJECTS**

### **Intellectual Property Rights**

2. Nicolas writes a term paper for his PhD seminar and presents it in class. Barbara, another PhD student in the class, is assigned to critique the term paper. Nicolas does not get a very good grade on the term paper and, after the class is over, he decides the term paper needs too much work to bring the paper up to publishable quality so he puts the paper on the "backburner." Barbara, however, really likes this topic and writes her own paper, which she submits to the annual Academy of Management conference. Barbara's paper is accepted for presentation at the meetings. Nicolas sees Barbara's paper on the AOM conference program and realizes that her paper is on the same topic as his term paper. He accuses her of stealing his term paper.

### **Authorship**

3. Two PhD students, James and Willem, are office mates. Each of them is working on a single-authored paper and they occasionally discuss their research ideas. They both know it is very important for their job search to have multiple papers on their CVs. James and Willem realize that, if they each added the other as a co-author, they would generate mutual benefits for each other: doubling their chances of a publication and beefing up their resumes when they enter the job market. They agree to go ahead and add each other as a co-author to the other's papers.

4. Xiao is assigned as a research assistant to Professor Micro and spends the semester gathering and analyzing data for one of Professor Micro's projects. Kevin is doing the same thing for Professor Macro. At the end of the semester, Professor Micro invites Xiao to be a co-author on a paper that will be based on their joint research; Professor Macro does not invite Kevin to be a co-author on a paper that will be based on their joint research. Xiao and Kevin discover the different treatment when they get together to discuss their research assignments this semester.

### **Order of Authors**

5. Nadia and Christof are third year PhD students who will be on the job market next year. Nadia is working a joint research project with Professor X; Christof is doing the same with Professor Y. One day,

Nadia and Christof are discussing their current research projects. Nadia tells Christof how excited she is to receive third authorship on the paper she is working on with Professor X. Christof mentions that he will be the first author on a paper he is working on with Professor Y. Nadia asks Christof how they determined the order of authorship. Christof admits to Nadia that Professor Y did most of the work on the paper, but Christof would be on the job market shortly so Professor Y agreed to give Christof first authorship. Nadia is perplexed. She tells Christof that Professor X, a foreign-born professor from a power-respecting culture, believes that authorship should be determined by seniority. Professor X was therefore unequivocal in assigning authorship based on seniority. Since Nadia had the least seniority on the project, she was automatically the last author regardless of her contribution. Christof informs Nadia that other professors in their department practice the same authorship philosophy as Professor Y, not Professor X.

6. Alain works with Bianca and Carlos, under the direction of Professor X, on a research paper. Alain is in his first year; Bianca and Carlos are both in their fourth year. The terms of authorship are solidified at the beginning of the project as follows (Professor X-Bianca-Carlos-Alain). Alain feels that the authorship agreement was fair and is excited to contribute to a project that has a high likelihood of being published. As the project progresses, Alain finds himself contributing more to the project than either Bianca or Carlos. The paper goes through several rounds of reviews, in which Alain does more work than either Bianca or Carlos. The paper finally gets accepted at a top journal, with the original authorship agreement, despite the incongruence in contributions made by the three PhD students. Alain does not want to upset too many people so he asks Denise, a fellow PhD student, for her opinion on the topic. Denise tells Alain that Professor X tends to give authorship order preference, regardless of actual contribution, to his more senior PhD students who will be entering the job market.

7. Andrew, Barbara and Cameron are co-researchers on a project. All three are PhD students: Andrew and Cameron are in their second year; Barbara is on the job market. When they started this project, they agreed that the order of authors would be alphabetical because they each were contributing equally to the project. Now the paper is finished and they are getting ready to submit it to a journal. Barbara approaches Andrew and Cameron to ask if they could change the order of authors so that she can be first author. Barbara argues that she is on the job market and so needs the publication more than they do. Barbara promises to return the favor by being third author on the next two papers coming out of their work together.

### **Errors and Omissions**

8. Justin and Kara are working with Professor X on a joint paper. They are on a tight deadline; submission for the annual Academy of Management meetings is only two weeks away. Justin is tasked to collect some missing data for their empirical work. He is also in the middle of exams and so quickly gathers the data without checking the numbers. Kara discovers that the data are flawed, but realizes that if she brings this to the attention of Professor X they will likely miss the window for submitting the paper to the AOM meetings.

9. Isabella is a research assistant for Professor X on a project that extends work Professor X had already published in a top-tier journal. She is very excited to be included as a co-author on the paper Professor X is writing based on the research they have been doing. When Professor X invites her to read and comment on the first draft of the paper, she realizes that multiple paragraphs in the paper are identical to those in the earlier publication.

### **C. RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS**

10. Lukas, while in the PhD program at University X, is working on a good paper that he likes very much. He wants to give the paper at a conference where he can get some good feedback on the paper prior to submitting it for publication in a journal. Lukas also likes to travel and sees that there are conferences coming up in Vancouver, San Diego and Miami, places where he has not visited and would like to visit. His department has the funds to send PhD students to these conferences. Lukas decides to submit the same paper to all three conferences, and he is delighted when the paper is accepted for presentation at all three venues.

11. Rebecca is the lead author on a paper with two other PhD students Tomas and Jean Luis. Rebecca submits their co-authored paper for presentation at the annual Academy of Management meetings, but does not inform her co-authors, believing that they had a joint understanding that she would submit the paper to the AOM meetings. Jean Luis, as part of his work on other three research teams, had already agreed to submit the three papers to the AOM meetings; Jean Luis, therefore, was in violation of the Rule of Three that limited submissions by any one author to three papers. Jean Luis tells Rebecca that he is violating the Rule of Three. Rebecca suggests that she take Jean Luis's name off their joint AOM submission now. If the paper is accepted and they do present it at the meetings, they will put Jean Luis's name back on the paper and slide presentation; he can attend the session and present too. They will tell everyone in the session that Jean Luis is a co-author.

## **D. DISSERTATION STAGE**

### **Datasets**

12. Kayla has been working for a year, building a dataset for her dissertation. This dataset extends the original dataset provided by her dissertation chair by adding new variables and years. Kayla's dissertation chair has several publications out of the original dataset. Kayla discovers, to her horror, that there is a major error in the variables constructed in the dataset and that the error is large enough to potentially invalidate the papers that her chair has already published. Kayla does not know whether (1) she should fix the error in her own dataset, (2) tell her chair about the problem and (3) whether to inform the journals where the papers were published that they are fundamentally flawed.

13. Ashley has spent a year developing her dissertation dataset and is very proud of the work she has done. She believes the dataset will enable her to answer several unanswered questions in her field of study. She is getting close to defending her dissertation and her chair has asked for her to share her dataset with him. This particular professor has a reputation for not including PhD students as co-authors on his research projects. Ashley is worried that the professor may use her dataset, without including her as a co-author.

### **Authorship**

14. Jordan's dissertation chair is an internationally famous scholar, traveling so much that she is seldom available to meet with Jordan. As a result, Jordan had basically written his dissertation by himself, with little to no help from his chair. When Jordan submits the dissertation to his chair, she tells Jordan that he must agree to put her name on all publications coming out of his dissertation or she will not sign off on the dissertation.

15. Patrice is working in his office on polishing up his dissertation, which will be defended next week. His chair comes into Patrice's office, very excited, and tells Patrice that she has secured publication of his dissertation with a well-known scholarly press. The only string attached is that the book must have Patrice's chair as a co-author and the chair must be the first author on the book.

### **Publication**

16. Javier's dissertation at a US university is well underway with one main chapter and two supporting chapters. Javier receives an invitation from a former undergraduate professor in Mexico inviting him to publish a chapter out of his dissertation in the professor's edited book. Javier will have a quick publication on his resume, making him more attractive on the job market. Javier will also have done a favor to his former professor who wrote a strong letter that helped Javier get accepted into this PhD program. Since the book will be published in Spanish, there is little chance that Javier's chapter will be read by non-Spanish speaking scholars. Therefore, Javier does not think publishing his dissertation chapter in this edited book will create a problem for him submitting the chapter for publication in a scholarly journal afterwards.

17. Karolina's dissertation consists of three papers, which is the norm at her university. While she is

writing her dissertation, Karolina and a faculty member submit one of her chapters to a journal and the paper is accepted for publication as a co-authored article before Karolina has defended her dissertation. The chair of Karolina's dissertation committee discovers that one of her dissertation chapters has been co-written with another faculty member, and the chair refuses to accept the chapter as part of her dissertation. Karolina's chair tells her that all three chapters must be sole authored and none published prior to her defense; Karolina must therefore write another chapter.

## E. POST-DISSERTATION

18. Stefanie's dissertation chair offers Stefanie the opportunity to use the private dataset that he had hand collected for his own research. Stefanie's chair requests, in return for use of the dataset, that he be included as a co-author on all publications by Stefanie that uses this dataset. Stefanie and her chair discuss this issue, and she agrees verbally to do this. Stefanie and her chair write several papers together. Ten years later, Stefanie writes and publishes a single-authored paper that uses the original dataset provided by her chair. Stefanie justifies the single-authored paper on the grounds that the theory development is hers and that "enough is enough"; 10 years of joint work is long enough to pay for the use of the original dataset. Stefanie's chair is furious, arguing that they had a verbal agreement that all published work coming out of the original database should be joint authored.

19. Fletcher and two other PhD students write an empirical paper investigating the impact of a particular set of variables on firm performance. In their paper, a second group of variables are treated as controls in the model. Fletcher graduates and takes a position at a foreign university. Once he is settled in, Fletcher starts a second project with colleagues in his new department. In this paper, the controls from the first paper are now independent variables, and the independent variables from the first paper are now controls. The two projects proceed independently, with only Fletcher aware of both projects. Both papers are submitted about the same time to different journals and, by chance, have a common reviewer. The reviewer tells both journal editors about the other paper and recommends that both papers should be rejected on the grounds they are too similar to one another.

20. Lorraine is carving her dissertation into papers for submission to journals where she hopes they will be published. She prepares two papers and submits them about the same time to two journals, making no reference in either submission to the other paper. Both papers use the same dataset and share most of the same variables; however, the theoretical arguments and hypotheses are different. Lorraine is pleased when the first paper receives a positive revise-and-resubmit decision from Journal A, but disappointed when the second paper is rejected after review at Journal B. Lorraine makes minor modifications to the second paper based on the reviewers' comments and submits the revised paper to Journal A, reasoning that the positive success that the first paper has received might be repeated with the second paper.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These ethical scenarios were developed by the authors to illustrate the various types of ethical dilemmas that can face doctoral students in their research activities. All individuals appearing in these cases are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to actual events or incidents is purely coincidental.

We gratefully acknowledge helpful comments by Chi Anyansi-Archibong, Jean Bartunek, Anthony Cannizzaro, Kathy Lund Dean, Michael Hitt, Benson Honig, Susan Jackson, Paul Sears, Laszlo Tihanyi, Anne Tsui, Erik van Raaij and Stuart Youngblood on earlier versions of this post.

**PDF DOWNLOADABLE VERSION OF THIS POST:** [THE-ETHICIST-BLOG-RESEARCH-2014-10-PHD-STUDENTS-PART-A-FINAL](#)

---

*The Ethicist Terms of Use: AOM, contributors to THE ETHICIST, and AOM officers, staff and volunteers accept no responsibility for the content of all postings on THE ETHICIST, including the opinions and*

*information posted or circulated by users on THE ETHICIST. The content of all postings is solely the responsibility of the users. AOM cannot warrant the accuracy of any information posted on THE ETHICIST and disclaims all warranties with regard to information circulated on THE ETHICIST. This disclaimer includes all warranties of merchantability and fitness.*