

Research and publication is academia's passport to promotion and prestige. But, asks **Brian Martin**, how much of the work some senior academics publish is actually done by them?

Exploiting the academic peons

ACADEMIC exploitation — a superior benefiting in some way from the work done by an inferior — is one of the seamier sides of academia, something seldom discussed or even acknowledged.

For academics, credit for research work is important. It buys jobs, promotions, grants and prestige. It is a severe blow to have someone else take all or a share of the credit for original ideas, painstaking data collection or carefully developed arguments.

The most blatant form of stealing credit is plagiarism, something much more common than is recognised. Closely related to this is the faking of results, which claims credit where none is due. This too is surprisingly common.

One form of academic exploitation is the taking of credit for work done by someone else. Another is pressure on a subordinate to do a certain kind of work or to work in a way that allows the superior to benefit. The exploiter's power in the relationship makes it possible to use implicit or explicit threats or reprisals — for examples, bad recommendations — to deter objections.

Some examples I have come across in the past decades (names have been changed):

□ Paul had recently completed his PhD, and, in collaboration with his supervisor, had written several papers based on his thesis. They passed one paper to the professor and head of the department for his comments. The professor added one sentence to the paper — plus his name as third author.

□ Wing was a student from a Third World country studying for a PhD in zoology at a major Australian university. Dr Williams, Wing's supervisor, although knowing beforehand of Wing's research interests, had invited Wing to Australia to work on



various projects in a different area. These were unsuitable in themselves as thesis projects but closer to Dr Williams's own interests. When Wing found that Dr Williams's projects were not working out, Dr Williams would not listen to any comments. Eventually a confrontation took place. After this Dr Williams was very hostile, and tried various ways to sabotage Wing's progress — complaining to the head of the department and the dean, interfering with Wing's research, not reading carefully the draft of Wing's thesis, writing poor recommendations for Wing's applications for post-doctoral positions.

After considerable difficulty, and a very trying time psychologically, Wing received

his PhD, having obtained valuable support from other members of the department.

□ Joan worked as an assistant to Dr Smith, the head of an English department at a small Australian tertiary institution. Dr Smith did not bother keeping up with the latest writing in his field, but instead had Joan do the reading and write summaries for him. When Dr Smith did write a paper, Joan would spend long hours with him pointing out inadequacies and bringing him up to date. She would also track down references for the paper and sometimes rewrite parts of it. For this she never received any credit.

Dr Smith enjoyed the company of young women, and this was one reason for the long hours of discussion with Joan. He asked her about her private life, used physical expressions of affection, and eventually reached the stage of overt sexual proposition. At this, Joan decided to leave. She later found that he had exploited many female assistants and students over the years in a similar way.

□ Elizabeth worked as a technician under Dr Jones in a chemistry department at a major Australian university. She designed most of the experiments and did all the work setting them up and running them. Yet Dr Jones tried to take all the credit; visitors to the lab would leave with the impression that Elizabeth only washed the glassware. This continuing exploitation greatly annoyed Elizabeth and was aggravated by a sexual approach. (Postgraduate students under Dr Jones were similarly treated.)

Elizabeth insisted on her rights, for example by putting her name on publications, but could only overcome some of the exploitation. She was driven to leave the lab, the university and science.

□ Penny was an Australian student working temporarily at a major United States university under Dr Brown, a high-

flying sociologist. Dr Brown would toss off ideas, and Penny would be sent off to research them and write papers. (Often Penny found that the ideas were useless.) On one occasion Dr Brown wanted to put himself in the good graces of a grant administrator, Dr King, and used one of Penny's studies for a departmental report. The authors were listed as Brown and King.

□ Alex was a researcher in biochemistry at a major scientific institution. Dr Wilson, Alex's superior, was an eminent scientist who sat on many panels and advisory boards. For one report to a panel, Alex did almost all the work and writing. Modestly he left his name off the paper, thinking that Dr Wilson would surely list him as at least co-author. But Dr Wilson presented the paper as his own without comment.

How common are cases of this kind? It is impossible to say because there have been few investigations. However, some types of academic exploitation seem to be quite common. For example, many academics know of instances where academics in positions of power have claimed joint or sole authorship of research papers to which they have contributed little or nothing. A frequent case of obtaining undue credit for the work of subordinates is when supervisors of advanced degree students become joint or sole authors of what is meant to be original work by their students. In 1973 Ron Witton wrote about this form of exploitation in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, but his examples were deleted because of a threat of legal action by one of the academics mentioned. **

Why is academic exploitation so little studied? One reason is that it is obviously not in the interests of the exploiters to expose the practice and they are usually able to prevent exposure by the implicit or explicit threats of bad recommendations or defamation suits. Second, exploitation contradicts the honest, scrupulous image of academics promoted for public consumption; even academics who oppose exploitation are hesitant to disrupt the smooth running of the system. Third, studying exploitation does not fit easily into any academic discipline or specialisation: no-one sees it as their professional duty to investigate it. Finally, some forms of academic exploitation are so common that even the exploited accept them as part of the natural order.

Clearly, professional responsibility and standards are not enough to keep some academics on a sound ethical course. But because academics are assumed to behave properly, there are few avenues for exposing exploitation and obtaining justice.

Tenured academics have some protection against exploitation, since they cannot be easily dismissed in reprisal for opposing it. But those most open to exploitation — students and assistants*— have no such protection.

Exploitation is obviously tied up with hierarchy in academia. Most of those exploited are in junior positions. Exploitation is one symptom of these power differences. It also reinforces power differences, by providing credit to those who already have a relative surplus and removing credit from those who have the least opportunity of getting ahead.

Exploitation is also closely tied up with sexism and racism. The upper levels of academia are predominantly staffed by white middle class males. Women and racial minorities, when found in academia, are usually at the lower levels. Their work is used to further the careers of those already in privileged positions, thus maintaining and justifying the hierarchy.

All this suggests that the reputations of many academics who produce large amounts of research, especially if they have many subordinates, should not be accepted uncritically. It would be unwise to accept publication and citation counts as reliable indicators of research ability.

* and wives

** [One of the innumerable changes made by the editors to my article as submitted was omission of the following important passage.]

The wives of many male academics contribute to their husbands' research work by literature searches, critical comment and discussion, provision of ideas, writing papers and typing. Probably in only a minority of cases do these contributions receive formal credit.

Robin Morgan has noted the particularly extreme case of Aurelia Plath who in the book *Letters Home* "writes movingly of having done all the reading and note-taking for her husband's book, then having written the first draft, and at last having put the manuscript into 'final form' for the printer. At some point in this process Otto Plath revised a bit and inserted a few notes -- including adding his name on the title page as sole author, a regrettably not uncommon practice. Yet another instance of appropriation of the wife's writing by the husband (in this case, F. Scott Fitzgerald) was explored by Nancy Milford in her absorbing book *Zelda: A Biography*".

- Brian Martin