

Academic credit where it's due

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GETTING appropriate credit for one's work sometimes can be a difficult, drawn-out affair. This has special significance for junior or marginal researchers, such as PhD students, research assistants and junior research fellows.

In 1943, Albert Schatz was a young PhD student consumed with finding a drug that could be used against the deadly disease tuberculosis. He discovered the antibiotic streptomycin and was first author of publications reporting it. The head of the lab where Schatz worked, Selman Waksman, then began to take more of the credit, highlighting his own role to reporters while not mentioning that Schatz was in the same building.

Schatz and Waksman jointly signed the patent for streptomycin. Schatz found out a few years later that Waksman had a secret agreement to provide information to a pharmaceutical company and was receiving large royalties from the patent. Schatz sued and was declared co-discoverer with a small share of the royalties.

Waksman's self-promotion paid off not just in money but also in scientific fame when he – but not Schatz – received the 1952 Nobel Prize for medicine. It turned out that the Nobel committee had never heard of Schatz. Only in the past decade have historians begun recognising his role.¹

In day-to-day research, the stakes are seldom as high as this, but the passions aroused by claims over credit are just as acute. Credit is, after all, the basis for getting recognition, jobs, promotions and awards.

In many places it is standard practice for supervisors or lab directors to put their name on research papers by students or subordinates. If the supervisor has contributed significantly in ideas, work and writing, this is fair enough. But sometimes the supervisor has done little more than discuss the research and read through the student's draft offering a few comments. In extreme cases, the student's name may only appear in the acknowledgments – or not at all.

Although the practice of supervisors claiming credit for the work of subordinates is widespread, most complaints are voiced privately. One person who wrote to me stated: "I suspect that a systematic survey of those employed on outside research grants would illustrate that there are real grounds for complaint in the area of misrepresentation by supervisors of the work."

Public complaints are far less common. A recent letter to *The Australian* newspaper stated: "Many senior scientists don't allow new graduates to take credit for their own ideas. I feel that this is a particularly insidious form of plagiarism, and it's not new. Promotion in research is dependent on research 'credits', that is, papers published. However, if a young researcher blows the whistle on his/her supervisor's plagiarism, there is no job at all."²

Occasionally details of a case are publicised. One that recently came to light involved Professor Kevin Lafferty, director of the John Curtin School of Medical Research at the Australian National University. One charge made against him was that in a 1983 paper in the *Annual Review of Immunology* he and his co-authors had not properly acknowledged work by Dr Ted Steele, then a junior researcher in the school. Another was that an article that appeared under Lafferty's name in two magazines was actually written by another professor at the school, Gordon Ada.



In December 1995 a paper appeared in the *Records of the Australian Museum* under the names of Griffin and Stoddart.³ Dr Des Griffin is director of the museum and Helen Stoddart a technical officer. It so happens that the paper in question was the subject of a long-running dispute in the museum. The authors of early versions of the paper were listed as Griffin and Diane Brown, and a significant proportion of the text and all the figures of the published version are identical to these early versions. Yet the published version does not include Brown as a co-author nor even mention her in the acknowledgments.⁴

Neither of these cases received anything like the attention recently given to author Helen Darville's newspaper column in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*. After it was pointed out that a large slab of the text was the work of another writer, Darville was promptly condemned and dropped as a columnist.

These and many other cases are examples of disputes over credit. Yet it is hard to discuss them dispassionately because of the dreaded P-word: plagiarism.

Plagiarism is often treated like a mortal sin. It is assumed to happen only rarely and to warrant the most extreme penalties when discovered. Students are warned against perpetrating this heinous crime and then, if discovered, may be given a fail for an essay or sometimes an entire course.

The reality is that plagiarism is quite common. Plagiarism means taking someone else's ideas and presenting them as one's own. This happens when an author fails to acknowledge a source for an idea, whether it is an article, a seminar or a casual conversation. Waksman's grab for sole credit for the discovery of streptomycin can be said to be a form of plagiarism.

Plagiarism of ideas is hard to avoid. Furthermore, there are obstacles to giving full and appropriate credit. For example, most academic journals only want references to scholarly sources. It is not dignified to acknowledge in print that one's ideas were inspired by a conversation at a party, watching television or reading a popular magazine. In some fields there is no formal procedure for giving credit. It is not standard to put footnotes on musical scores or newspaper articles.

The more usual idea of plagiarism is use of someone else's words as one's own, namely without proper acknowledgment. In academic circles word-for-word plagiarism is considered a serious offence. Yet it is standard practice in many parts of society. Most politicians, celebrities and business executives are plagiarists. They

give speeches or issue statements under their names when actually the words were produced by speechwriters or staff. When mentioned, this is called ghost-writing. In this sort of institutionalised plagiarism, powerful individuals take credit for work of employees. That this often takes place with the consent of everyone involved does not eliminate the misrepresentation involved.⁵

Meanwhile, what is to be done when there are allegations of plagiarism? It is hardly feasible to go to court, like Albert Schatz, since the stakes are seldom so large.

Because plagiarism is treated as such a terrible transgression, nearly everyone runs for cover. There are worries about defamation and damaging of reputations. An open and honest discussion of how to give appropriate acknowledgments becomes virtually impossible. This can be damaging for both accuser and accused.

In the Lafferty case, the ANU vice-chancellor asked former deputy VC Ian Ross to do a report.⁷ Ross concluded that Lafferty had done nothing seriously wrong. He dismissed Lafferty being listed as author of an article written by Professor Gordon Ada as of no significance, noting that it concerned only "ephemera" (that is, not a scholarly paper).

Ted Steele, among others, was highly critical of Ross's report, noting among other things that he was not seen to be independent of the university and that he had taken no submissions and did not contact any of the complainants.

Journalist Bruce Juddery did a bit more investigation and found that the text supplied to the *Australasian Society for Immunology Newsletter* by Lafferty was not exactly what Gordon Ada had written – it omitted praise for another professor at the John Curtin School, Bob Blanden.⁸

In the case at the Australian Museum, in 1988 Diane Brown filed a grievance against Griffin concerning authorship of the manuscript. Under the museum's grievance procedures, Griffin, the director, was also grievance manager. He appointed the deputy director, Hal Cogger, as grievance manager in this case. Dr Betty Meahan, of the museum, was eventually appointed grievance investigator. Her 1989 report stated that "If this paper is to be published, even in a changed form, it would be appropriate for Ms Brown to be included in the authorship."⁹ Nevertheless, as noted before, the published version of the paper did not mention Brown.

Helen Darville, under the name Helen Demidenko, was author of *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, a novel that won the prestigious Miles Franklin Award in 1995. She was subsequently exposed for falsely claiming Ukrainian ancestry. Furthermore, a number of people claimed that passages in the book closely resembled previously published work. These charges of plagiarism were examined and dismissed by Darville's solicitor and by the book's publishers, Allen & Unwin. There was no independent investigation.¹⁰

In each of these cases, some observers saw a conflict of interest in the investigation of a dispute over authorship. To avoid the perception of a conflict of interest, there needs to be an independent and impartial assessment of authorship disputes.

It remains far safer to plagiarise than expose plagiarism by one's boss or colleague. For Ted Steele, failing to obtain credit in the Lafferty review paper may have been a factor in not keeping a position at the ANU in the 1980s. This year, after raising concerns about Lafferty's conduct, he was threatened with having his access to e-mail removed. At the Australian Museum, Diane Brown's position has been declared redundant.

A continuing problem is the enormous stigma associated with the word plagiarism. Until there is a more realistic perspective on the many types of everyday plagiarism, it will remain challenging to have a sensible discussion of claims and defences.

The deeper driving force is inequality in power. Plagiarism and other forms of intellectual exploitation thrive whenever managers and supervisors hold a great deal of power over subordinates. No wonder plagiarism is a taboo topic. Full exposure of institutionalised plagiarism would be most damaging to those on top.

¹Frank Ryan, *Tuberculosis: The Greatest Story Never Told* (Worcestershire: Swift, 1992); Albert Schatz, "The true story of the discovery of streptomycin," *Actinomycetes*, Vol. 4, Part 2, 1993, pp. 27-39.

²Kerryn Robinson, "Few rewards for science graduates" (letter), *The Australian*, January 21, 1997, p. 12.

³DJG Griffin and HE Stoddart, "Deep-water decapod Crustacea from Eastern Australia: lobsters of the families Nephropidae, Palinuridae, Polychelidae and Scyllariidae," *Records of the Australian Museum*, Vol. 47, December 1, 1995, pp. 231-263.

⁴Brian Martin, "A case of disputed authorship", <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/Martin.Griffin.html>.

⁵Gavin Moodie, "Bureaucratic plagiarism," *Campus Review*, March 25-31, 1993, pp. 10, 19.

⁶Brian Martin, "Plagiarism: a misplaced emphasis," *Journal of Information Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1994, pp. 36-47.

⁷Ian Ross, "Professor K.J. Lafferty: allegations of misconduct in research and plagiarism," January 28, 1997.

⁸Bruce Juddery, "Plagiarism and the spirit of generosity," *Canberra Times*, February 12, 1997, p. 14.

⁹Betty Meahan, memo to Hal Cogger, August 27, 1989.

¹⁰Gerard Henderson, "A collective hand writes wrongs," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 11, 1997, p. 17.

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