Countering Supervisor Exploitation[1]

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Some academic supervisors take undue credit for the work of their research students, causing damage to their careers and morale. Students should consider whether to acquiesce, leave, complain, or resist. Students should be prepared for supervisor tactics of cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, and intimidation. Options for addressing exploitation include prevention, negotiation, building support, and exposure.

Keywords: supervision, exploitation, research students, plagiarism, universities, co-authorship

Fran was a PhD student in a research team. She became highly productive but was distressed that she had to share credit with non-contributors. Her supervisor put his name on every paper, even when she had done 90 per cent of the work, and often her supervisor added one or two other names. In one case she had never heard of her nominal co-author.

Peter, a PhD student, made a discovery, which he eagerly shared with his supervisor. Six months later, his excitement turned to dismay and disgust when he spotted a recent article. His supervisor had published the results without even mentioning Peter's role.

Selena was preparing a postdoc application and obtained some useful feedback from her supervisor. She was startled, however, when he told her that he had put in a grant application in exactly the same area, with the same plan and hypotheses, in collaboration with a colleague. He had never before done research in this area.

Jim was a data-collection assistant for a professor at an elite university. Jim's degree was from a lower-status university, and the professor refused to write him a reference for undertaking an advanced degree at a more prestigious one. After ten months, the professor asked Jim to analyse the data and write a paper for a conference that Jim would present as his own. However, when the professor saw the high quality of Jim's paper, he demanded to be listed as the author.

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These are examples of exploitation by academic supervisors. The supervisors took credit for their students' ideas and research work, sometimes sharing the credit further with others in what is called gift authorship or honourary authorship, which is designed to curry favour with collaborators and patrons.[2] In this sort of exploitation, the ideas and work of students and subordinates are expropriated to serve the supervisor's career and reputation.

Other targets of this sort of exploitation include spouses, research assistants, and undergraduate students. Exploitation is sometimes accompanied by other forms of abuse, such as bullying, racism, and sexual harassment. The focus here is on exploitation of research students by supervisors; much the same analysis applies to other situations in which a researcher takes advantage of someone in a subordinate or dependent position.

Academic exploitation is a type of plagiarism: The ideas and work of one person are used by another without adequate acknowledgement. Exploitation can be so highly entrenched in some academic cultures that it is treated as standard practice. It can be called institutionalized plagiarism,[3] and it has persisted for decades.

In some scientific circles, research team leaders expect to be coauthors on papers by anyone in their laboratory as a matter of custom, irrespective of the leader's contribution. It is a type of tribute to the sponsor, a way of repaying the person who brings in the money. The team leader may need to be listed as the author of lots of papers to maintain the sort of publication track record necessary to compete for research grants. A research leader who renounces the practice of gift authorship is disadvantaged in the competition for funding.

Some supervisors expropriate the work of their students and subordinates as a personal advancement strategy, in defiance of norms against this behaviour. The prevalence of exploitation varies considerably across institutions, research units, and individuals. In some countries, exploitation of students is widespread and simply taken for granted. Senior male academics are the most common exploiters.

Commercial imperatives can lead to exploitation: Academics use student research to obtain grants and patents and even to set up and support businesses. David Dickson provides an example: 'A graduate student at Stanford University … complained to the university that her faculty adviser had informed a company for whom he consulted of her work, and the company had subsequently put a team on the problem and solved it before she was able to.'[4]

When research is not a high priority and does not bring much money or status, exploitation is less likely. Pressure to publish papers, obtain grants, and build a reputation can bring out competitive behaviours, and students are prime targets. They are mostly naive, trusting, and relatively powerless.

There are many honest supervisors who wish the best for their students and are horrified by exploitation. However, few of them ever speak out about the problem. There is a small amount of writing about academic exploitation, spread across a range of newspapers and journals.[5]

CONSEQUENCES

The impact of supervisory exploitation is often severe. Students, believing in the standard rhetoric about the intellectual goals of universities, are unprepared for unscrupulous practices. The result can be dismay and disillusionment. Some students acquiesce; others leave, quitting academic careers. Scholarship thus loses some of its most committed and idealistic prospects.

Exploitation also affects the ongoing operation of scholastic endeavours. The possibility of losing a proper share of credit leads many researchers to say little about their work, in case others would run away with the ideas. This undermines the collegiality and open exchange of ideas that is so valuable for stimulating creative endeavours.

It should be recognized that it is very difficult to give detailed attributions for all research ideas. It is desirable to do so as a form of courtesy that fosters a healthy social system for research,[6] but it is seldom possible to acknowledge every source, such as overheard conversations or media stories. Frequently, researchers hear or read things and then forget they have done so, imagining the ideas to be their own.[7]

However, the cases of exploitation relevant here are something quite different. Supervisors interact with their students on an ongoing basis and should be completely aware of their students' topics, methods, and findings as they emerge. Supervisors cannot accidentally forget that their students are working in a particular area. It is the supervisor's responsibility to respect the student's contribution and to fairly negotiate overlapping contributions in the area, including via co-authorship.

There is nothing new about exploitation in scholarly work. It is unfair, yet it is usually taken for granted by most of those involved. However, just because supervisor exploitation is commonplace does not mean it is acceptable. As with other inequities such as sexual harassment and child sexual abuse, awareness and action are needed.

OPTIONS

Students, when they realize they are being exploited, have several options:

1. Join in. This involves accepting some exploitation and trying to become an exploiter by claiming credit for the work of others, such as junior students.
2. Acquiesce. This means staying and not protesting about ill treatment.
3. Exit. This includes finding another supervisor, moving to another institution, and quitting studies altogether.
4. Complain. This includes making formal complaints to one's supervisor, administrators, grievance committees, or professional associations.
5. Resist. This means refusing to cooperate with exploitative practices, instead seeking to expose or challenge them.

Option 1, joining in, is unethical. Option 2, acquiescence, may be the only way some students can survive. Due to financial or personal reasons, exiting may not be possible, and complaining or resisting too risky.

Option 3, exiting, is often a good idea, especially early in your studies, before you have invested too much effort in a line of research. However, leaving does not challenge the system of exploitation nor prevent your supervisor from exploiting other students.

Option 4, complaining, sounds like it should be effective. If your supervisor did not realize what was happening, or its impact, then perhaps there is a chance of a different pattern of behaviour. However, if your supervisor is not responsive, complaining to higher authorities is nearly always a dead end or worse.[8]

Option 5, resisting, is the strongest response, but the most risky. It has the greatest potential for bringing about change, but also the greatest likelihood of leading to reprisals.

SUPERVISOR TACTICS

When supervisors are aware that their behaviour is dubious and could be questioned, they can take steps that reduce the risk of any adverse consequences to themselves. Students need to be prepared to react to five common tactics.[9]

1. Cover-up

Information about exploitative practices is hidden. Usually this means that information about who had ideas, who did the work, and especially the inadequate contributions of some co-authors is never shared beyond the supervisor or the research team. When colleagues know about exploitative practices, very seldom do they reveal what they know to wider audiences. As a result, exploitation has continued for decades as a subterranean practice. Many students only find out about it when they become victims.

2. Devaluation

Students, who are the victims, are frequently denigrated personally and their contributions to research projects dismissed as small, unoriginal, or insignificant. Students can be labelled as ungrateful, egotistical, difficult, misguided, or any of a wide range of other derogatory terms. The tactic of devaluation operates to discredit students as unworthy. Hence, anything done to them seems of little concern.

3. Reinterpretation

Supervisors and their colleagues often give explanations or justifications for their actions. Sometimes they lie about the magnitude or quality of their own contributions to research. They sometimes claim that the damage to students is not all that great. They might blame someone—such as a colleague or higher management—for decisions about co-authorship. Finally, they might sincerely believe that supervisors deserve co-authorship just for being supervisors, regardless of the level of their input.

4. Official channels

If a student makes a formal complaint to a manager, grievance committee, human resources unit, journal editor, or professional association, a favourable outcome is unlikely. Official channels usually favour those with more power. Official channels are usually slow and operate according to rules and procedures rather than fairness. If a complaint is rejected, the supervisor's behaviour essentially receives a formal stamp of approval.

5. Intimidation and rewards

Students are sometimes threatened, implicitly or explicitly, to agree to exploitative practices. They may fear losing their scholarships or receiving a bad reference. In the worst scenarios, a vengeful supervisor will sabotage job applications by contacting potential employers. On the other hand, students who agree to exploitative practices may be promised help getting grants and jobs.

PREVENTION

The best option is to avoid supervisors, departments, and universities—and even countries—where exploitation is common. Before you begin a degree or a postdoc, it is vital you find out about a supervisor's behaviour and track record. If possible, talk to the potential supervisor's current and previous students, including any who dropped out. You might also seek advice from student representatives. If an academic seems overly keen to supervise you or is reluctant to recommend alternative supervisors, you should be cautious.

> *Arrabella carefully investigated supervisors before beginning her PhD. She talked with several academics, looked at their publication records, talked with several of their current and past students, and had several long sessions talking to Dr Jones, her best prospect, about expectations and practices. Only after several months did she make a decision and enroll. She did well.*

If you know about exploitative supervisors, you can warn others. This is best done discreetly. For example, if you are an academic and your colleague has a terrible record with students, you can advise potential new students to talk to other students first, without mentioning your colleague's name.

If you have been the victim of an exploitative supervisor, you can warn others. This needs to be done carefully. If you know other students who have been treated badly and the abuse is clear and obvious, you can be forthright. If the problems are less clear-cut, it is better to be cautious in your comments. The safest advice is to recommend talking to other students first.

As a supplement or alternative to spreading news about supervisors to avoid, you can recommend supervisors who are fair, supportive, and generous, and who have supervised many students to graduation. As well as giving your own endorsement, you can suggest talking to this supervisor's other students.

NEGOTIATION

> *When Sal started her thesis under Professor Alexandra, she asked for a session to clarify expectations about authorship and collaboration. At the meeting, she said she expected that every co-author should make a significant contribution to the research and that the nature of the contribution be specified in writing. Sal and Professor Alexandra signed a statement about authorship expectations; later on, as Sal prepared work for publication, they had discussions about appropriate authorship.*

Negotiation is a desirable approach to authorship matters. It is best to raise this matter early in your candidature or job. However, sometimes issues only arise later on. If you are a major or significant contributor to a paper, you can say you refuse to accept extra authors or inappropriate authorship. It is valuable to take notes on all meetings, to document your own contributions, and to make written agreements. For example, if you have an informal discussion about authorship, you can send around an email summarizing decisions made so that there is a record.

Negotiation can start or restart at any time. When you or someone else proposes a research project or publication, you can spell out expectations concerning who does what and how people's contributions are to be acknowledged. If you have a reasonable relationship with your supervisor, then you should query anything you think might be inappropriate.

It can be useful to spell out principles or rules for authorship and for the order of authors. For example, you can ask each person involved what they think are the expectations for being a co-author or for being the first author. Sometimes co-authors have different ways of thinking about authorship, or they have not carefully thought through the application of their principles. If your university, profession, or research system has guidelines for authorship, it can be useful to review these and discuss how they apply to your circumstances.

In case of a serious disagreement, it can be useful to consult a disinterested person who can recommend a resolution or even be an arbitrator. This person should be acceptable to all parties, known for his or her independence and integrity, and knowledgeable in the field.

Negotiation is usually the best way to deal with authorship matters. It requires a degree of openness and trust.

BUILD SUPPORT

> *Marni inadvertently discovered that her supervisor had recently presented a paper to a conference, reporting results from the project she had been working on for two years. He presented the work as his own, though he did mention her input. Before taking action, she decided to investigate further by tracking down his other conference presentations and papers. In this way, she located three former students and research assistants for whose work he had taken credit. Armed with statements from two of them, as well as records of their published work and his conference talks and papers, she was prepared to confront and expose him.*

If your supervisor takes credit for your work and you try to challenge this, it can sometimes be a matter of your word against your supervisor's. This is a losing proposition, because supervisors usually have more credibility and influence within the research hierarchy. If you can find others willing to support or join you, you are in a much more powerful position.

As well as finding others who have been poorly treated, it can be very helpful to find established researchers who, on the basis of documentation, will vouch for your case. Independent opinions count for a lot.

Building support can be difficult. Many will sympathize with you but will be afraid to speak out, fearing reprisals. Some have budding careers they do not want to jeopardize. So don't expect a lot of enthusiastic support. Some may even be afraid to be seen talking with you.

Often the most promising approach is to first track down others and talk to them informally. If there is one individual willing to take a stand, by joining you or providing documentation, your position is greatly strengthened. Then you can approach others saying that two of you are working together. With greater numbers, others may be willing to join you or provide you with more information.

Sometimes an outsider does the organizing—for example a journalist, a social researcher, or an integrity campaigner. The outsider might have his or her own agenda—a journalist will be interested in a story—or might simply want to promote fairness while operating behind the scenes. It is possible to learn from the experiences of community organizing, though the context is quite different.[10] Exploited students can usefully think of themselves as an oppressed group and learn from the struggles of other oppressed groups.

EXPOSURE

> *Cath knew about the problems with Dr Zel, who was notorious for taking credit for his students' work. She talked to several students and wrote an account of several episodes, changing names and some details, and posted it on a blog under a pseudonym. After alerting Dr Zel's students, the blog post was soon known around the department.*

Exposing abuses is a powerful way to challenge them. This means telling people about the problem in an informative, credible way.

Case studies, in which names and details are revealed, can be highly effective but also risky due to the possibility of legal action. So sometimes it is better to write anonymous accounts.

Journalists are often interested in stories about plagiarism and academic fraud, and sometimes will write articles about exploitation. However, mass media are receptive to only certain types of stories, specifically ones that are current and local and contain some shock value.

Social media are more accessible. Using anonymous remailers, it is possible to send an email without being identified. Another possibility, also anonymous and admittedly more extreme, is graffiti in restrooms.

Because exposure of exploitation is so powerful, extra care needs to be taken to be absolutely sure of all facts. This is vital to avoid harming an innocent academic and to avoid being discredited by mistakes.

In ethical terms, exposing abuses anonymously is less than ideal. However, if the usual response to open disclosures is disbelief and reprisals, then it is quite understandable that disgruntled students will take the path of anonymous disclosure. This is in the tradition of whistleblowers leaking documents.[11]

A DEVIOUS OPTION

If your supervisor has a record of publishing your text without giving you any credit, you can make such behaviour risky by salting what you write with plagiarized material or factual mistakes. There are some prominent instances in which politicians and other public figures — and even the occasional academic — have been embarrassed by allegations of plagiarism. They never gave credit to their assistants and speechwriters, and therefore were expected to take responsibility when the work was not up to scratch.[12] Note that skill is needed to undertake this option.

SUMMARY

If you or someone you know is the target of academic exploitation, you are in a difficult situation. Your bargaining power is low because of your junior status. Sometimes it is better to leave and curtail the damage. It is important to know there are options. Preventing problems and using negotiation to address ongoing disagreements is the best option. If these do not work, building support and exposing abuses can be effective. The more who resist, the easier it becomes for others to join.

APPENDIX 1: RECORD-KEEPING TIPS[13]

- Keep meticulous records of your research work, including copies of work in progress, and all correspondence. You can use a mobile phone's camera to record copies of lab notes, documents, and other relevant information with dates and times.
- Email copies of your work, including draft articles, to yourself or friends so you have record of what you did and when you did it.
- Make notes on all meetings, including every meeting with your supervisor.
- After significant meetings, send a summary to one or more of the people who attended.
- Keep copies of all your work, correspondence, and records in multiple locations, some of them off-site.

APPENDIX 2: ADVICE FOR SUPERVISORS

If you are a supervisor, you have advantages over students and subordinates. They depend on you for guidance, advice, knowledge of the field, and sometimes funding. Unfortunately, it is very easy to take advantage of a position of power to exploit others.[14] Therefore, a general rule for responsible supervisors is to make extra efforts to avoid taking advantage of students and subordinates. Give them the benefit of the doubt in assigning authorship or first authorship.

If you have a track record in the field, giving extra credit to students and junior colleagues is a win-win option. As the senior author, others are likely to give you more credit than the formal authorship line alone would indicate. Therefore, having your student be listed as first author or even sole author gives the student maximum credit while you still receive considerable recognition.[15]

APPENDIX 3: ON OVERESTIMATING CONTRIBUTIONS

It is important to realize that researchers commonly overestimate their contributions to joint projects. When two co-authors are asked, independently, what percentage of the work they contributed, the two figures usually add up to more than 100 per cent.

Does this mean each collaborator is trying to grab undue credit? Not necessarily. Each collaborator knows intimately exactly what he or she contributed to the project but usually knows comparatively little about what other collaborators did. One's own effort looms large whereas the efforts of others are unknown or invisible.

One way to counter this problem is for each collaborator to write down what they have done, perhaps indicating the amount of time or effort involved. This can raise the contributors' awareness of their contributions. It is important to realize that equal time does not necessarily mean equal significance. An experienced researcher can accomplish some tasks much more quickly. Writing half the text for a paper is equally significant whether it takes one hour or ten hours. Expressing contributors' work as percentages of different research components—such as project formulation, literature review, data collection, analysis, and writing up—can be helpful. The exercise of making explicit the contributions of collaborators can help counter the tendency toward overestimation.

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NOTES

1. I thank the many students and others who have told me their stories and helped me understand the dynamics of exploitation. For helpful comments on drafts, I thank Jerry Ravetz, Lynne Wright, and others who prefer to remain anonymous.
2. See Marcel C. LaFollette, *Stealing into Print: Fraud, Plagiarism, and Misconduct in Scientific Publishing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1992), 91–107.
3. See Brian Martin, 'Plagiarism: A Misplaced Emphasis,' *Journal of Information Ethics* 3, 2 (Fall 1994), 36–47.
4. David Dickson, *The New Politics of Science* (New York: Pantheon 1984), 78–9
5. For example, Anjana Ahuja, 'I'll Take Credit for that, Thanks—Science,' *The Times* (25 February 2002); Damien Kingsbury, 'Junior Academics Too Often Plagiarised,' *The Australian* (8 February 2012): 29; Peter A. Lawrence, 'Rank Injustice,' *Nature* 415 (21 February 2002): 835–6; Brian Martin, 'Academic Exploitation,' in Brian Martin, C. M. Ann Baker, Clyde Manwell, and Cedric Pugh, eds., *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson 1986): 59–62; Eugen Tarnow, 'An Offending Survey,' *Salon* (14 June 1999), http://www.salon.com/1999/06/14/scientific_authorship/; Ron Witton, 'Academics and Student Supervision: Apprenticeship or Exploitation?' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 9, 3 (1973): 71–3. The problem is also mentioned in passing in various publications. For a bibliography on co-authorship, see http://coauthorship.com/.
6. See Jerome R. Ravetz, *Scientific Knowledge and its Social Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971), 256–7.
7. The technical term for this is 'cryptomnesia.'
8. For more on this, see Brian Martin, 'Plagiarism Struggles,' *Plagiary: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Falsification,* 3 (2008), http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/08plagiary.html.
9. For more on this framework, see Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2007); 'Backfire materials,' http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html.
10. The classic reference is Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Random House 1971). See also Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (Boston: Twayne 1984); Eric Mann, *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer* (Boston: Beacon Press 2011).
11. See *The Art of Anonymous Activism: Serving the Public While Surviving Public Service* (Washington, DC: Project on Government Oversight, Government Accountability Project, and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility 2002), especially 7–16; and Kathryn Flynn, 'The Practice and Politics of Leaking,' *Social Alternatives* 30, 1 (2011): 24–8.

12. For an academic case, see Jacob Hale Russell, 'A Million Little Writers,' *02138 Magazine* (November/December 2007): 78.
13. I thank an anonymous reader for suggesting the creation of a list of these points.
14. For research on the corruptions of power, see David Kipnis, *The Powerholders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1976).
15. Robert K. Merton and Harriet Zuckerman, 'Age, Aging, and Age Structure in Science,' in Robert K. Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1973), 497–559. The phenomenon by which those who are well known gain more than their share of credit is called the Matthew effect, about which there is a body of writing.