

CLOSEOUT FOR M-93070039

On 27 July 1993 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] brought an allegation of misconduct in science to OIG's attention. The complainant, [REDACTED] is a faculty member in [REDACTED] at [REDACTED]. In a letter to the program director, she alleged that the subject, [REDACTED] a faculty member in [REDACTED] stole an experimental idea from her NSF-funded proposal [REDACTED] entitled [REDACTED]. She said that the subject published results from the stolen experimental idea in an article¹ he co-authored with other scientists.

The complainant said the subject contacted her to propose that they consider submitting a joint application to NSF. In response to the subject's suggestion that they exchange grant proposals, she sent him a copy of her pending NSF proposal, which was later funded. After they exchanged proposals, she heard nothing further from the subject. About a year later the complainant discovered the subject's co-authored article that reported results from several experiments, one of which appeared similar to one experimental idea she presented in the NSF proposal she sent to the subject. The subject's co-authored article had been submitted for publication about two months after the complainant's NSF proposal was funded, and about seven months after she sent a copy of her proposal to him. Also, she noted that one paper cited in the subject's co-authored article as support for the experimental idea, in fact, did not support it. The complainant said that, although it was possible the subject developed independently the same experimental idea, she thought that the time between his receipt of her NSF proposal and his co-authored submission seven months later as well as the use of a paper cited as support for the idea that did not support it, suggested that he stole her experimental idea.

OIG noted that the subject was the third of three authors on his co-authored article. OIG determined that none of the authors, including the subject, ever reviewed any of the complainant's NSF proposals.

OIG learned that the experimental approaches described to test the experimental idea were different in the subject's co-authored article and in the complainant's NSF proposal. This lack of similarity suggested that the subject could have developed the experimental idea independently.

¹ The article, entitled [REDACTED]

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The complainant pointed out a paper cited in the subject's co-authored article in support of the experimental idea. She claimed that the paper did not support that idea, and that this fact strengthened her allegation that the idea had been taken from her proposal. However, OIG learned that the subject herself had cited the same paper in an earlier proposal in support of the same experimental idea. Neither the subject nor his co-authors had the opportunity to read that proposal, nor was the paper cited in the proposal the complainant sent the subject. Hence, it seems that the complainant and the subject, with his co-authors, independently discovered this reference and similarly misinterpreted it. We concluded that the subject's use of this paper did not add to the credibility of the complainant's allegation, and would even help to support the subject's independent discovery of the experimental idea.

OIG considered contacting the subject to ask for additional information. However, OIG decided that 1) because the available information did not support the allegation of misconduct in science, and 2) because the complainant, as the subject's only source of her NSF proposal, would be easily identified as the source of the allegation, the available information was sufficient to close this case.

This inquiry was closed and no further action will be taken.

cc: Staff Scientist, Deputy AIG-Oversight, AIG-Oversight, IG