

CLOSEOUT FOR M97100038

On 27 October 1997, an NSF staff member¹ informed us of an allegation of misconduct in science. A scientist² alleged that the subject³ had published a paper that exploited the idea of an inexperienced researcher,⁴ without that researcher's permission. The scientist said that while the researcher was participating in an NSF program,⁵ she showed the subject the text and tables for a paper that she was planning to submit for publication and described her research and ideas related to it, but did not explain that they were confidential. Approximately one year later, the subject published a paper⁶ containing observational data about one of these ideas. The data had been extracted from a larger historical database managed by one of the subject's co-author's.

Our comparison of the paper with the description of the researcher's idea confirmed that the paper contained observational data related to the idea. The data had been gathered years before the researcher's conversation with the subject. We learned that such observational data are maintained in large databases and may not necessarily be published until new theories are advanced. It is not atypical in this field for researchers to gather data from these databases and publish them in support of, or to refute, these theories. We learned that the subject, who is well published in this field, may have been working on this idea prior to his conversations with the researcher. The researcher had received NSF funds to work principally in another scientist's laboratory⁷ but had also visited and analyzed some data in the subject's laboratory.

When we contacted the researcher for information, she requested confidential source status. To pursue this matter further, we would have had to contact the subject. If we had done that, the subject would have correctly deduced the researcher's identity. The researcher did not want her identity revealed because of the detrimental effect it would have on her career. Without contacting the subject for information, the evidence in this case does not permit a

¹ Dr. [REDACTED] is a program manager for the [REDACTED] program in the Division of [REDACTED] in the Directorate for [REDACTED]

² The scientist is [REDACTED]

³ The scientist is Dr. [REDACTED] in the Department of [REDACTED], [REDACTED] University School of [REDACTED]

⁴ The researcher is [REDACTED] a graduate student attending the [REDACTED]

⁵ The researcher's participation in NSF's 1996 Summer Institute [REDACTED] program was supported by NSF [REDACTED]

⁶ The citation for the paper is: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

⁷ The other scientist, Dr. [REDACTED] is based at the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] in [REDACTED]

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distinction between two possibilities: first, that the subject had benefited from his conversation with the researcher and after learning about her idea, had gathered data from the database and published the paper; and, second, that the subject had been working in this area prior to his conversation with the researcher and he had not benefited unethically from their conversation. We concluded there was insufficient substance to proceed further with this inquiry and closed the case.

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