

ACADEMIC EXPLOITATION

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For academics, credit for research work is important. It serves as a form of currency for obtaining jobs, promotions, grants and prestige. Not surprisingly, credit for original ideas as well as for the end result of painstaking experimentation, data collection and mustering of arguments, is zealously guarded.

Plagiarism is the most blatant example of stealing credit. It is much more common than is usually recognised.¹ Closely related to plagiarism is faking of results, which in effect claims credit for work not done. Faking is also more common than is usually recognised.²

What I call here academic exploitation is the taking of credit for work done by a person in a subordinate position. A variant is pressure on the subordinate to do work of a type or in a way which allows the superior to obtain undue credit. The exploiter's greater power in the relationship is used in establishing and retaining the unfair distribution of credit. An implicit or explicit threat of reprisals, such as a bad recommendation, is used to deter objections.

Exploitation is one of the seamier sides of academia, something which is seldom discussed or even acknowledged. The following examples illustrate some typical forms of exploitation. The examples are some of the ones about which I have received first-hand verbal or written accounts during the past decade. To preserve the anonymity of all involved, names and some other details have been altered.

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

2. Wing was a student from a Third World country studying for a Ph.D. 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 projects were unsuitable in themselves as thesis projects but were closer to Dr Williams's own interests. When Wing found that these projects of Dr Williams were not working out, Dr Williams would not listen to any comments. Eventually a confrontation erupted. After this Dr Williams was very hostile and tried in various ways to sabotage Wing's progress, by complaining to the head of the department and the dean, by interfering with Wing's research, by not carefully reading the draft of

Wing's thesis, and by writing poor recommendations for Wing's applications for post-doctoral positions.

After considerable difficulty and a very trying time psychologically, Wing received his Ph.D., having obtained valuable support from other members of the department.

3. 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 to keep up with the latest writing in his speciality, but instead had Joan do the reading and write summaries of the material for him. When Dr Smith on occasion did write a paper, Joan would spend long hours with him pointing out inadequacies and bringing him up to date, and also track down references for the paper and sometimes rewrite parts of it. For this contribution 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.

Dr Smith had exploited many female assistants and students over the years in a similar way.

4. 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 attempted to take all the credit: visitors to the laboratory would leave with the impression that Elizabeth only washed the glassware. This continuing exploitative situation greatly aggravated Elizabeth. Dr Jones also made 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 this overcame only some of the exploitation. Later Elizabeth left the laboratory, the university and science.

5. 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 go off and research the topics and write papers on them. (Often Penny found that the ideas were useless.) On one occasion Dr Brown wanted to put himself in the good graces of grant administrator Dr King. So Dr Brown used one of Penny's studies for a departmental report. The authors were listed as Brown and King.

6. 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. In one report prepared for circulation to members of such a panel, Alex did almost all the work and writing, but modestly omitted his name from the paper, thinking that Dr Wilson would surely list him at least as co-author. But Dr Wilson without comment used the paper as his own.

How common is academic exploitation? It is impossible to say precisely because there have been few investigations of the phenomenon. Some types of academic exploitation seem to be quite common:

- Informal comment plus a few published accounts³ suggest that many academics in positions of power obtain joint or sole authorship of research papers to which they have contributed little or nothing. I have been informed of numerous examples of this practice.
- A frequent special 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 an article by Ron Witton about this form of exploitation was published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*. But the explicit examples included by Witton to illustrate this practice were deleted due to a threat of legal action from one of the writers mentioned.⁴

- 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.⁵

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, which is, regrettably, not an 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*.⁶

Why is academic exploitation so little studied? One reason is that it is not in the interests of the exploiters to expose the phenomenon, and the exploiters are usually in positions of power and able to prevent exposure by the implicit or sometimes explicit threat of bad recommendations or defamation suits. Second, exploitation contradicts the genteel, professional image of academia which is promoted for public consumption; even academics who oppose exploitation are hesitant to disrupt the smooth running of the system. Third, studying exploitation does not nicely fit in 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 of things.

Outside academia, not giving credit for the work and ideas of subordinates is certainly widespread. Most letters and speeches of parliamentarians are written by their assistants, and articles and reports ostensibly authored by senior bureaucrats are usually written in part or whole by subordinates. Indeed, wherever power or status differences exist in intellectual work — and these are particularly acute in corporations and state bureaucracies — then exploitation becomes a strong possibility.⁷

If academic exploitation is reasonably common, this has several implications for an understanding of academia.

- a. Professional responsibility and standards are not enough to keep academia running on a sound ethical course. But because academics are assumed to behave properly, there are insufficient informal and formal avenues for exposing exploitation and obtaining justice. If such avenues existed, they would act as a deterrent to exploitation.
- b. Tenured academics have some protection against exploitation, since they cannot be easily dismissed as a reprisal for opposing it. But tenure provides no protection for those who apparently constitute the bulk of those exploited — students, assistants and wives.
- c. Exploitation is clearly tied up with hierarchy in academia. Most of those exploited are in junior positions. Scholarly discourse is supposed to take place on the basis of the quality of scholarly contributions, not on the basis of the formal positions or other characteristics of those who make the contributions. But in practice there are strong political power differences in academia which belie the relevance of the model of egalitarian scholarly interaction.⁸ Exploitation is one symptom of these power differences. Exploitation also reinforces power differences, by providing credit for work done to those who already have a relative surplus, and removing credit from those who have the least opportunity of getting ahead.
- d. Exploitation, as a symptom of academic hierarchy, is closely tied up with sexism and racism. The top levels of academia are predominantly male, white and middle class. Women and racial minorities, when found in academia, are usually at the lower levels. The hierarchical distribution of power in academia allows sexual and racial discrimination to occur in a covert manner: the work of women and minorities is used to further the careers of those already in privileged positions, thus maintaining and justifying the hierarchy.⁹

e. The vaunted image of many academics who have a high research output, especially those academics with many subordinates, should not be accepted uncritically. How many famous scholars made their greatest breakthrough on the basis of ideas or work of wives, assistants or students? It is impossible to know. But until more information is available, it would be unwise to uncritically accept publication and citation counts as reliable indicators of research capability.

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References

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3. See for example an anonymous letter in *Drug Intelligence and Clinical Pharmacology*, vol. 11, p. 244 (1977). (I thank Clyde Manwell and Ann Baker for pointing out this reference.)
4. Ron Witton, "Academics and student supervision: apprenticeship or exploitation?", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 70–3 (1973).
5. Hanna Papanek, "Men, women, and work: reflections on the two-person career", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78, no. 4, pp. 852–72 (January 1973); Martha R. Fowlkes, *Behind Every Successful Man: Wives of Medicine and Academe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).
6. Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 192.
7. Charles Goodell, *Political Prisoners in America* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. v (Acknowledgements): "I wish to pay special tribute to Michael Smith, without whom this book would not have taken its form or substance. He faithfully and arduously transmuted into type the ideas evolved from our long discussions, as well as contributing many of his own . . . he literally gave a year of his life to this book." Then why was Michael Smith not at least a co-author? Perhaps because he was "only" a New York attorney, whereas Charles Goodell had become well known as a member of the U.S. Congress.
8. Brian Martin, "The scientific straightjacket: the power structure of science and the suppression of environmental scholarship", *Ecologist*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 33–43 (Jan/Feb 1981).
9. Revealing case studies of sexism in academia and science include Joan Abramson, *The Invisible Woman: Discrimination in the Academic Profession* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975); Anne Sayre, *Rosalind Franklin and DNA* (New York: Norton, 1975).