Ethics for Scholars:
A Guide for Students and Faculty in the Department of Journalism, University of Texas

The ethics of research are rarely taught in graduate school, yet scholars should know these basic principles governing the conduct of their craft.   Some of these principles may be intuitively obvious, yet others are not. They all bear repeating, especially in those classes that cover the foundation materials for beginning researchers. A quick review of research methods texts reveals that most devote a section to the ethics of research. However, this usually relates to how research subjects are treated, as in experimental studies, leaving more general principles of scholarly conduct unaddressed.   This short review is designed to focus attention on the principles that should guide scholarly ethical behavior, beyond the most obvious issues of plagiarism. As in other ethical realms, these principles are rooted in truth-telling, kindness, and fairness.

Above all, a scholarly community must be tolerant of intellectual differences. Debates over philosophical and professional differences are useful, as long as they do not involve personal attacks on the motives and character of others. If a student has a problem with a professor, he or she should take it up directly with that professor. After that, if need be, the graduate adviser is available for consultation. It is inappropriate for students to be unfairly drawn into intellectual or personal disputes among the faculty.   We would hope that differences of opinion can be worked out if approached openly, fairly and honestly, through the appropriate channels. Students should feel free to approach and work with any combination of professors they desire, with full confidence that any differences will be handled in a professional manner. Personal criticism of faculty by each other, especially to students, undermines this freedom.

The foundation of scholarship is the honest reporting of discoveries and assigning proper credit for them.   For scholarship to have any value, others must be able to believe what is written. They may not accept the conclusions, but they must accept that the facts are reported truthfully to the best that the author is able. The falsification of the data themselves, of course, constitutes the most profound ethical breach.

In reporting the words of others, special care should be taken that they are related accurately, in both their content and origins. Plagiarism is the dishonest appropriation of another's work as one's own. Any verbatim quotations must be designated accordingly. Paraphrased material should be cited so as to leave no doubt as to its origins. Accordingly, citations should be made as many times as needed in whatever style. When in doubt, err on the side of less ambiguity. In addition, an honest use of sources requires that material not be lifted out of context. Marshaling facts and sources to support an argument is standard scholarly practice, but carrying it too far may involve choosing only those words that fit your purposes, to the extent that it becomes an unfair representation of the underlying work.

In working with others on research, proper credit must be given to contributors. This can be problematic when students work with professors because a power imbalance becomes mixed into the scholarly collaboration. There is no one accepted practice: some professors may automatically require that they be included as an author on any work done by their students.   This may make most sense when the professor oversees an ongoing research program, with lab facilities, as in the hard sciences. But serious problems have arisen, for example in medical research, when the senior project director is listed as an author on works he/she had nothing to do with. This is less often a problem in communication research, but the underlying principle remains one of fairly assigning the origins of scholarly work.

If a student simply performs clerical work on a project , then it may be concluded that they made no

substantive contribution to the paper. Authorship should generally be reserved for those making significant contributions, in descending order of importance. How to define "significant" is best left to the participants' sense of fairness.   Many such problems can be avoided by setting out the ground rules of collaboration early in the process and making clear one's expectations regarding contribution and credit.

The senior author has the responsibility to ensure the accuracy of any work contributed by other authors. This is especially important when a senior scholar collaborates with more junior scholars, such as graduate students. Everyone whose name appears as an author is jointly responsible for the work, but practically speaking, the senior author often has the primary burden. Thus, with credit comes a measure of responsibility.

A scholar who is not comfortable with a work in its final form should attempt to influence changes, or failing a satisfactory result, ask that his or her name be removed from the authorship. This outcome is rare, but one should be prepared to exercise that option. So as not to come away with a complete loss, scholars who disagree with the direction of their colleagues may simply write a different work using the same empirical materials. Again, these issues are best addressed early in the creative process, but that is not always possible. Ethical scholars will recognize that intellectual agreement is not always possible, nor even desirable, and encourage their colleagues to find other outlets for their ideas.

Generally, professors do not share authorship on a student's thesis research, unless the professor made an unusually significant contribution to the work. Of course, professors may argue that they shaped all of their student's work through the teacher/student relationship. Everyone is taught by someone, however, so some line must be established to determine when the student may properly claim sole credit. Needless to say, to exploit the power imbalance in the teacher/student relationship to gain improper credit for scholarly work is an ethical breach in any case.

Presenting one's work in public, such as at conferences, raises other important issues. Again, its origins and ties to one's previous work must be honestly presented.   Scholars will often present similar ideas at more than one time and place, but original empirical work should not be presented at more than one conference in the same form.   The channels of academic presentation would become hopelessly clogged if the same papers were being presented many times over. Here it may be helpful to distinguish between panel appearances and speeches on one hand and presenting an actual paper. A scholar may be invited to speak at a meeting precisely because a group wants to hear that scholar's point of view, a view that may be presented any number of times and places. Paper presentations, however, are devised to give the academic community the chance to hear as much work in progress as possible in a timely manner, an objective that is defeated if papers are presented over and over in the same form.

 Most scholarly peer review channels, whether conference paper competitions or academic journals, depend on the exclusivity of the submitted work. Law review journals are the exception, accepting submissions under simultaneous review elsewhere (But these journals, one could argue, are not truly peer reviewed--edited as they are by students). Again, the process would quickly break down under the load of multiple submissions, which would also give the multiple submitter an unfair advantage. Before spending the time in the review process on a paper, editors and paper judges have the right to expect that it will not be quickly withdrawn if a favorable response comes elsewhere in the meantime.

Beginning scholars often wonder if it is permissible to send a paper to an academic conference, and, before its presentation, send it to a refereed journal. There is no reason why this should not be acceptable. Unfortunately, the time delay between paper deadlines and the actual conference, and that between journal submission and final publication make it hard to justify waiting until after a conference to submit to a journal.   Ideally, the scholar should take advantage of the feedback

gained at a conference to improve the journal submission, but this does not work as well in practice as it should. People don't go to conference sessions to hear papers that have already been published; it is assumed that these presentations represent work in progress.

Does the work a scholar engages in involve ethical choice? Certainly. And we needn't restrict our concerns to the treatment of human subjects, the area that has received the most formal scrutiny. Obviously scholars must be careful to protect the people they study, preserve their privacy, and share results with them where appropriate. In the broader sense, though, we must consider the many motivations for doing research. The most pragmatic of these involve professional advancement--promotion, raises, and tenure. Ultimately, scholars should be honest with themselves about these incentives. What is the point of conducting research that one doesn't believe in? It clogs the scholarly communication channels, and dilutes the impact of one's other work.

The academic bureaucracy has contributed to the quest for quantity of output as a gauge of professional merit. The easiest and fastest studies are the most tempting for the aspiring scholar, but these often simply plow old ground. New methods and new areas of inquiry may meet institutional resistance, but they help the field advance. Given this state of affairs, perhaps the most important ethical guide is to carry out work in which one truly believes and communicate it honestly, giving all due credit to the people and forces that gave it shape.

Note:

This guide was originally prompted by a plagiarism incident. The student was from another country and thought copying material, so as not to distort its meaning and wording, was a form of respect to the original author. It was not appropriately cited, however, and led to an unfortunate challenge from a journal editor. The student had contributed to a larger paper, with a faculty member as senior author, who ultimately was responsible for how the paper was produced. I have added additional information since then to this document, and would welcome any additional comments you may have for future versions.

I would encourage you to share it where appropriate in your classes.

Thanks,

Steve Reese
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