

Tom's work?

I

Dear John,

I got your email address from the NPC who encouraged me to contact you if I had queries or concerns regarding codes of practice. I hope you will forgive the intrusion!

I've recently had a really strange episode at my university. I've just finished my first year, and am about to transfer to a PhD - I'm confident this will take place. I would really appreciate your considered opinion on what has gone on, and who was in the right.

I will cut a long story very short.

In April my supervisor wrote and submitted a paper, completely without my involvement. In August I finally saw the paper (I'd paid no interest as I had been told it was on my co-phd's topic). I had been listed as third author. I read the paper, and after some research through my own work, I discovered to my horror it was made up of **literally** 80% of my own words, that had been cut and paste from various sources available to my supervisor. What's more, the paper was presenting an original idea I had had earlier in the year, and presented to my supervisor at the time. I had at that stage also written a very rough mock paper, capturing the concepts etc, which was in his possession. This original approach now forms my phd proposal.

My supervisor had published it, as first author, with someone who had written nothing as second author, me as third author, and never said a word about it to me then or since.

I challenged him by email, as I was so distraught I really didn't want to face him. I had a very close relationship with him, and the fact he had done this was to me a total betrayal. He refused to even begin to apologise, and just claimed he'd been confused about the origins of the work (I assure you, he has only two students, and there was absolutely no possibility of this). I pointed all these things out, including the fact he'd referenced another work within this paper as himself being first author, when in fact I had authored and had published that work myself (he was of course mentioned as second author being my supervisor).

I've been consistently requesting an emailed response, and have remained polite and firm in that. He continued to refuse to discuss it anywhere other than behind closed doors. I went in confidence to see my second supervisor for advice, as he still refused to offer an explanation. I agreed with her not to lodge a formal complaint, and she promised to go and speak to him on my behalf. I had after all presented paper evidence backing up everything I had said, and she couldn't really ignore it. I never heard any more. He himself then involved the head of research and head of research group, and apparently forwarded "my complaint" on to them - although I never saw it. They had a

meeting with me, and just tried to placate me and tell me he hadn't meant anything bad by it. Obviously I wasn't convinced. I know full well what he had done.

I never lodged a formal complaint, but I've just received an angry email from him informing me he is stepping down as my supervisor, and as the PI of my research project (there's only two students). He accused me of abusing and insulting him, when all I had done was request a response to my queries by email - he kept insisting he would only speak to me behind closed doors. The head of my research group has stepped in and offered to be my supervisor and take over the project - both my phd and the project look set to succeed at the moment.

There are many other factors that make this worse - e.g. he went on a two week holiday with his girlfriend to present the paper in a very nice destination, without mentioning it to anybody. The personal betrayal is extremely painful. I've never been so let down by a person holding such a position of responsibility to me in my whole life.

And that's it. I never asked for a change of supervisor, I never lodged a formal complaint, and I certainly never insulted or abused him. The whole department seems to have closed ranks, and no-one will offer an explanation as to what's happened. Otherwise, I was perfectly happy.

Does any code of practice affect any of this, or do you have any insight with you experience that could possibly shed any light on what's happened? I don't know whether I was justified in being upset legally, though I know I certainly was personally, as he'd had many opportunities to tell me about it, and still wouldn't explain right to the end. I'm scared I'm now going to have had my name blackened around the department, when I really haven't done anything to deserve such treatment. Perhaps there's things I ought to be doing to cover myself against this?

Thanks for taking the time to read,

regards,

Tom Price

Q1 List the main issues that have arisen here

Q2 What would be your advice to Tom?

Dear Tom,

Some interim thoughts:

1. The good news: you are now registered for (?upgraded to) a PhD on a topic that interests you, with a satisfactory supervisory team (?) and two more years' finance. Now for the bad news.
2. But a substantial part of your own original ideas written by you have been 'published' in a refereed journal and presented at a professional conference (+ possibly presented in other places?) without your knowledge.
3. Can you clarify how had your ideas been attributed in each case which you know about? Eg were you joint 'author' of the conference paper etc? although not first author of the article, was there any indication of the contribution each author made to the article?
4. Have you thought of getting in touch with the editor of the journal, the conference organising committee etc? In a sense it is they who are in error in not establishing the true authorship of the work. Did your supervisor tell them the truth in his submission?
5. Have you done a search to make sure that he has only used your work in these two instances? Try googling parts of your text or using the plagiarism software available in most universities that is supposed to catch student plagiarism. If it has happened twice to your knowledge it is possible that this is not the full extent of his use of your work.

I fully appreciate your dilemma which you are trying to resolve by asking for an informal internal consideration of the issues, but is any likely outcome of this going to meet your requirements? Specifically, unless this supervisor has a record of misbehaviour etc, I anticipate that the Head of Research's main aim will be to keep this under wraps, make sure that the University does not discover the extent of the problem, grovel a bit and present you with some abject apologies and assurances that it will not happen again, and in return require you to undertake to take the matter no further.

This would not really address your dissatisfaction and leaves you with a substantial part of your original work wrongly attributed and in the public domain, so that, when your thesis is presented, and when you decide to publish yourself, the ideas will be seen as second hand, derivative etc - which would further build up your supervisor's credibility and blight your own academic career. Also, how would you reference the plagiarised work in your own publications, thesis, CV etc?

In the light of your answers to the above I might want to suggest that, at the very least, having established the full extent of the plagiarism, part of your expectation would be that you would only be satisfied by corrections, explanations in all the journals, conference attendees etc which published your material. In a sense, this is more important than how the department/university deals with the issues. For the university,

a major issue will arise when they decide what to submit for the RAE, and the last thing they will want is a scandal...

What do you think?

John

Q1 **Comment on John's response**

Q2 **Suggest any alternative or additional suggestions for Tom**

John,

Thanks in advance for your efforts and taking the time to look into this for me, it's very much appreciated. I hadn't been aware of the NPC beforehand, but the support they have already offered me made so much difference I'm forever in debt.

Ok a number of things have taken place since I wrote my first email. First, I have a new supervisor. He has also taken over the research project which funds me. I don't know *how* that came about (ie did he fall or was he pushed). My previous supervisor tried to make it sound like he could no longer bear to work with me (ha! I will fill you in on the falsities of that if necessary – I'm extremely polite, and we behaved more like mates than professional colleagues), and nobody else has said anything.

My new supervisor is awesome. He's the head of the research group, and is already uncovering a load of things I haven't been doing, and is giving me new direction etc. He's also raised questions about a number of issues suggested by my previous supervisor. Its really made me realise how much you rely on your supervisor. My last one has let me down in so many ways. On a second note, the other member of the research project is also now discovering she has been poorly supervised for a number of other reasons. This is a complete aside, but its making me feel more aggrieved, and concerned that the matter can't just rest completely.

The situation is *currently* that I have carefully pointed out my position to the head of research in the department, and she will, she says, consider the evidence I have presented, which is, lets say, comprehensive. I said I didn't want to undergo a formal complaint procedure out of respect for the department, but I also pointed out the injustice of what had happened, that I felt very aggrieved as my supervisor seems to be getting away with it and even had the cheek to make it seem I've done something wrong, and that I wanted:

- An informal consideration of what had happened, and for my supervisor to have the errors in his conduct pointed out to him, and that I wanted reassurance he wouldn't continue to publish using the same theme - ie I want recognition, acknowledgement, and something to *happen*.

- I wanted my supervisor to be encouraged to apologise to me.

He's made a totally outrageous misrepresentation, treated me terribly badly, and actually tried to make out I've been insulting or abusive.

I'm .. *pissed off* is the best description.

I am aware there are a lot of details you're probably missing to enable you to consider this properly, just let me know what you need.

As for my intentions. Well I'm *VERY* happy about my new supervisor, so I'm content that the rest of my phd is in safe hands. I'm very unhappy about what my last supervisor has gotten away with, aggrieved personally, and determined it won't simply be ignored

because I've had the goodwill not to pursue it formally so far. The matter currently rests privately with the Head of Research, from whom I am **hopefully** awaiting a good response. She indicated it was being considered so I must at least give them time to do the right thing.

I'm aware of the effect a formal complaint, which I feel I really ought to make, would have on me within the department, and want to avoid it if possible.

I want **acknowledgement** from my supervisor, yes. I want assurance he won't do it again (he is for example still supervising two of my friends). I am not prepared to move universities, as I'm now **really** happy with my new supervision, and my life is heavily based here, I've already been in this town five years.

Cheers for now,
Tom

Q1 Discuss Tom's situation and strategy

Q2 Outline any further options for him to pursue

Dear John,

I've just been to see the head of research again, and:

- She pointed out I can reference the paper in future pointing out I am the main author. Because of the order of the names, whilst it wasn't intended to be so, its actually alphabetical, so anyone else reading the paper won't be aware who the main contributor is. The string of publications I have planned for the future will leave that in no doubt anyway. At some universities its even standard practice that the supervisor's name goes first (man that stinks), though not here.

- The matter is going to be discussed with the school director of research, and should result in a school-wide written policy on the subject. I think this is a massive positive, to prevent the same thing happening to anyone else in the future.

- Privately, my old supervisor is going to get "talked to" about it. The head of research is now acknowledging to me in private she totally agrees about the facts of what has happened.

- My old supervisor has lost his role as PI of the research project, and is no longer my supervisor. His other two research students know what's gone on, and one has already switched supervisor. The second is away at the moment, but intends to switch when he gets back. I think this is a very fitting punishment, he isn't going to look much good.

- I've been assured if he was selected for RAE appraisal, this paper will be kept out of it. He's also already been warned about further publications, and I'm going to set a load of triggers on databases to make sure that's the case, like you suggested.

I think I'm fairly happy, but I want you to know I would like to support or promote you and the NPC in any way I can, though I'm not sure how.

Addendum

21 October 2005

Dear John,

I did say I would update you on the outcome of that issue I had with my supervisor, over which you were so kindly supportive. There have been all sorts of rumours spreading around the department in the weeks since, and a leading member of the

department has resigned their chair; apparently (according to rumour) this had something to do with their handling of my complaint in advising my ex-supervisor.

It even turns out it was suggested that he might have pulled the plug on the research project that funds me to save his own career. I'm dismayed and disgusted that such a thing could have been contemplated.

I hear all information second-hand. Nobody apart from my student colleagues relays anything to me within the department whatsoever. It's an uncomfortable feeling.

My ex-supervisor has now (as of today) lost all three of his PhD students, but he still continues to try and argue that he did nothing wrong. It leaves me with a horrible feeling, and part of me wishes I had pursued an official complaint. It's still awkward to walk around the department for fear of bumping into him. So many people tell me so many different things, and I get left wondering sometimes if somehow it was excusable, although I know in my own mind it wasn't. I hate intra-departmental politics, it feels like justice or just plain decency is impossible to achieve from the point of view of the student.

Has my anonymised case study proved useful? Do you have a general "conclusion" that you draw from the case, and if so, I would love to hear it, as I would very much respect your opinion.

Very best regards,

Tom

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24 October

.... I believe my ex-supervisor may have found out about the existence of this case study through the 3rd phd student when they had a bit of a "falling out" (he had been away and came back and told the supervisor just what he thought of him). Hope that's not an issue. He certainly doesn't know any more than that, and it shouldn't be of issue as it is entirely anonymous.

It is a little difficult at the moment, but I'm determined to stick in there. I want my PhD! At the same time I've just started up a company so everything seems fairly positive.

Best regards,
Tom

Team task:

On the acetates provided draw up

- 1. The main elements of a policy on IPR as they affect supervisors and postgraduate research students**
- 2. An indication of appropriate procedures and sanctions in cases such as Tom's**
- 3. Suggestions for making complaints procedures more effective**