

Anecdote from Editors Desk

Anecdote 4- Data Falsification: Student-guide Collaboration and a Subsequent Fall Out

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“Ideal teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own.” –Nikos Kazantzakis

The India folklore is full of stories based on exemplary Gurus and their equally virtuous disciples. The concept of a teacher is almost sacred to the ethos of India. In fact, we celebrate Guru Purnima (5th July) to mark the birthday of Ved Vyasa, who is often called the Guru of Gurus. Dronacharya, Valmiki, Vishwamitra are some of the names that have passed through generations and even now, after thousands of years, are considered to be examples of how a teacher ought to be. Similarly, some of the supreme and outstanding disciples were Eklavya and Karna.

A teacher not only imparts education but also shapes up his student into a fine human. Modern day equation between a teacher-student has seen an immense change. The evolution of human has led to change in its needs, emotions, priorities and this has touched all the aspects of life. With this has evolved the relation between a teacher and his student. However, it is expected that the basic concept of a teacher has not changed.

This anecdote is about how a teacher made his student follow a path of dishonesty which COPE (Committee Of Publication Ethics) would clearly label as ‘fraud’.

We published an original article, in the dentistry specialty of JCDR. Sometime later, a professor wrote to us claiming falsification of the data in the same article. The person did not point out the fabrication per se. He undersigned the mail, from where we could see that he belonged to the same institution and department as that of the authors of the article. After receiving the complaint mail, we swiftly wrote back asking for the exact detail which is claimed to be false. For the next few days we wait for a reply, which never reached us. So we wrote to the corresponding author (Principle Investigator of the research) for a copy of the thesis. We specified that a complaint had been received against the article; we also mentioned the name of the complainant. The author replied without delay and couriered the photocopy of the whole thesis book to the journal office. She also said that the complainant is none but her thesis guide. Here, we must mention that the guide was not among the authors of the article. Those were the initial few years of JCDR, when the authorship was not scrutinised very critically. Just the basic checks were run. The ICMJE and COPE guidelines were followed but the specialised concept of authorship in thesis works were not in place within the editorial. So, the missing thesis guide among the author list of the article, remained overlooked. After much pain we learnt the uniqueness of Guru-Shishya issues [1] to this part of continent and changed the policies on authorship likewise [2]

Within the next few days, we indeed received the thesis copy. The Editor-in-Chief along with a senior editor take-up the task to read the book and try to mark regions in the result

section which appear falsified or fabricated. *It was a tedious task since they had no idea about what or where could be the scam.* To their relief, it was not very hard to find. The difference between the data shown in the article and the thesis lied in the total number of samples used in the study. The author had clearly doubled the ‘N’ keeping all other data and statistical interpretations same.

We confronted the author asking for an explanation. She naively told us that it was her guide’s idea. During the time when the thesis was on, he had suggested her to double the data while drafting the thesis as an article for publication. He rationalised saying that it would make an impactful article with a larger sample size and that, may be no journal would even take up the article with its existing sample size. So, within a year of completion of the Post Graduation, the student/author completed the draft keeping in mind her guru’s words. When it was time to submit the article for publication, she requested the guide to sign the copyright form which he refused. As, per the author’s version, she kept on appealing to him but he did not change his mind. She confessed to us that, there was a fall out between them during the last year of her Post Graduation which may have erred the guide.

Now that we had proof of data falsification, we retracted the article. The guide (complainant) never communicated with us during the whole time.

It may be assumed that, the thesis guide may not have ‘advised’ the student to fabricate data and may have just made a passable comment. But the student took it as a matter of concern and followed her teacher. It is very vital to maintain academic integrity, especially when a person acts as a supervisor or a guide. The morals that he/she passes on, besides the academic knowledge, have a long bearing on the personality outcome of the student.

Equally, relevant is to accept that the student too lacked a strong moral ground. She had already completed a specialty education program for five years during her graduation. It was not difficult to understand the difference between what was ethical and unethical.

The guide may have refused to sign the copyright to sabotage the thesis-article publication. Had he not brought his ego in between, he would have stalled the data fabrication (again as assumption, though). Some journals may not encourage studies with negative findings (‘Dissemination bias’) or studies conducted on a small set of participants. This may have been deeply engraved in the student’s mind that curtailed the concept of research mis-conduct.

There is a lot of literature on academic dishonesty, especially data falsification in thesis projects. But we did not find any articles regarding the scale of involvement of the research guide in such misconducts.

This anecdote tries to bring out the importance of a fine teacher. The ownership of high intellect does not necessarily make a teacher good or efficient. At the same time, a student should not lose own moral grounds and must possess quality of good judgement.

REFERENCES

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