Author's Commentary on "The Co-Authorship Controversy"

Commentary On
The Co-Authorship Controversy

Questions 1-3

Questions 4-6

Question 7

Question 8

The main purpose of this case study is to stimulate a discussion of the criteria for authorship. However, as the scenario unfolds, several issues arise from the actions of the people involved. Several of the questions have been included to help initiate a discussion on how the actions of each character contributed to the eventual conflict.

Questions 1-3

In the first part of this scenario, McClair suggests some experiments that Platt should do for her thesis project. As a committee member, he has a right and a responsibility to suggest experiments that should be performed in order to reach the goals of Platt's thesis proposal. What is questionable is his suggestion that she go to a laboratory where similar work is being performed. McClair's motives are not entirely clear. Perhaps he is aware that Jones is low on funding and believes that going to England is an economical way for Platt to complete the experiments. On the other hand, he could be aware that Gleeson's laboratory has been encountering difficulties in performing experiments that Platt is familiar with. Although we do not know McClair's intentions, it is important to recognize the potential conflict of interest.

It was inappropriate for McClair and Gleeson to tell Platt that she was expected to share her data when her adviser had told her otherwise. McClair and Gleeson should have contacted Jones and clarified the conditions for Platt's trip. In fact, it probably would have been more appropriate for McClair to have approached Jones with the initial suggestion to do the work in Gleeson's lab so that she could evaluate the idea and define the expectations, prior to involving Platt. At the same time, Jones should have been more open with Platt about her concerns. Platt is also at fault in this scenario, however. First, she should not have taken the advice of a committee member over that of her own adviser. Furthermore, she should have insisted that the questions surrounding the sharing of her data and techniques be resolved before she left.

Questions 4-6

The criteria for authorship are not well established, and situations like the one in this case are not uncommon. Scientific journals are becoming more aware of this problem and have begun to set guidelines for authorship. A potential author should play an active role in one or more of the following capacities: 1) formalizing the idea, 2) performing the experiments and 3) writing the article. Furthermore, anyone listed as an author should read and understand the entire article and consent to its publication.

Whether or not Platt's presentations are relevant depends on the following factors. First, were the techniques reported in enough detail that someone could reproduce the experiments directly from the information presented, or did the presentation focus on the data, only mentioning the techniques? Furthermore, the guidelines of the meeting are significant. At some meetings, abstracts and "personal communications" are not to be referenced. The intention is that scientists can share scientific knowledge without the fear of being "scooped."

A collaboration allows for groups with varying areas of expertise to come together to solve a common problem. Although it is imperative that each member of a collaboration be involved in the work, the contribution from each group may not be equal. Therefore, the terms and limitations of the collaboration must be well defined in advance. In most cases, co-authorship is implied in a collaboration. This agreement is part of what distinguishes collaboration from cooperation.

Platt should have known what her role was prior to going to Gleeson's laboratory. Despite Jones's warning, Platt shared some of her data and techniques, perhaps within the limits of what she felt Jones was comfortable sharing. Furthermore, it is possible that Platt felt that the help she gave Gleeson's laboratory was reasonable considering the assistance she had received in performing her experiments. We do not know her exact reasoning, but it should be pointed out that Platt's first loyalty should be to her own research laboratory; if she were at all concerned about what was acceptable, she should have contacted her adviser.

Question 7

Looking at Gleeson's reasons for excluding Platt from the paper, we can see arguments for each side. Although Platt did not actually obtain the data presented in the paper, her contribution to the experimental set-up appears to be significant. Furthermore, merely performing the experiments does not guarantee authorship. For example, technicians are commonly excluded from publications because they fail to provide an intellectual contribution. Conversely, collaborators should not be automatically excluded because they didn't perform the experiments. Laboratory heads (i.e., research advisers) rarely do bench work, and yet they are often listed as authors.

It is important to look at Gleeson's second argument. If Platt had presented enough information at scientific meetings for Gleeson's laboratory to plan and perform the experiments, then her assistance was more of a convenience than a necessity. In this case, Gleeson's argument may be valid. However, if his lab's plan was to answer a certain question, and if they lacked a specific technique for doing so, Platt's contribution was crucial to their success, and she should have been given more credit.

Gleeson's final argument is completely invalid. It is improper to include a lab member who didn't contribute to a project, or to exclude one who did, on the basis of enhancing someone's career.

Question 8

A failure to communicate led to this problem. Jones needs to be more open and honest with her students. Her failure to take a stand prior to Platt's trip to England and her refusal to support Platt's pursuit of authorship may suggest that she should not be an academic research adviser. Not all good scientists are good mentors. Greater communication also should have existed between Jones and McClair. Faculty members should not purposely contradict each other. Furthermore, all three professors involved had a power advantage over Platt. It is difficult for a student to ignore the instructions of faculty members. However, when they are giving opposing directions the situation becomes impossible. Platt has obvious reasons for wanting to keep all three people content: Jones is her adviser, McClair is on her committee, and she will have to depend on Gleeson while in England.

Although she is in a difficult situation , Platt failed to demand that her role be defined prior to leaving. Because of this failure, Platt is not blameless.