

Both whistleblowers and the scientists they accuse deserve protection

Sven Hendrix¹ and Lex M. Bouter^{2,3}

¹ Biomedical Research Institute, Hasselt University, Hasselt, Belgium

² Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, VU University Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

³ Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



... a nice summer evening with my family



Hello, Dr. Hendrix,

Is it true that you falsified data in
your 1998 publication?



3 years later

University of Manchester pronounces husband and wife
innocent of misconduct and rejects 'malicious' allegations.

2011



Psychological effects of allegations

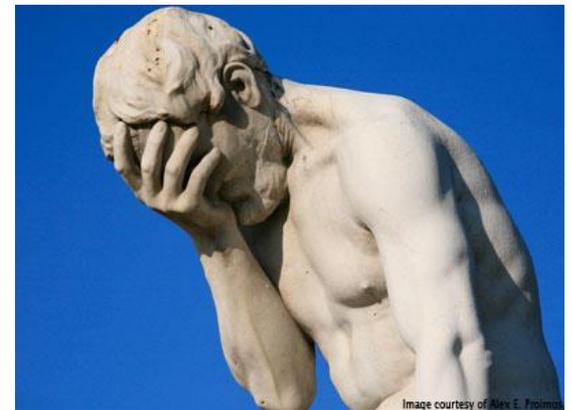
All co-authors will be severely distressed

“Oh my god, my reputation is ruined”

“I will lose my PhD title”

“I will never again find a job”

“I will never again get funding”



SHAME and FEAR

Social effects of false allegations

Journalists may call

- every co-author
- your colleagues or
- any person above you in the hierarchy

To get quotes for a wild story journalists may

- make provocative statements or
- lie about the state of the investigation



Headline:

“Researchers can not exclude fraud in their institution!”

Social effects of allegations

Scientists get defensive

even when they are innocent!



smartsciencecareer

What to do when you are falsely accused of scientific fraud?

October 15, 2014 8:11 pm / 11 Comments / sven

One of the most distressing experiences for a scientist are false allegations of scientific fraud. As a result of technological progress it is easy to screen publications and PhD theses for plagiarism, photo manipulation and statistical abnormalities. A disadvantage is that false accusations are distributed quickly all over the world and 'haters', 'trolls' and 'stalkers' can stay anonymous while damaging the career of a scientist. What to do if you are falsely accused?



9

Tweet

18

Like

0

8+1

33

Share

Join the smartsciencecareer community!

Email Address

Join

Please follow



Most Shared Posts

Why professors do not train you for the non-academic job market – and how to handle it!

www.smartsciencecareer.com

Typology of whistleblowers



1. Honestly concerned PhD students/colleagues
2. Angry (ex-) colleagues
3. Machiavellists
4. Crazy people

Typology of whistleblowers



Honestly concerned PhD students or colleagues

- honestly believe that there is scientific fraud
- want that science stays clean of bad practices

- deserve to be protected without reservation
- case has to be investigated

Typology of whistleblowers



Angry (ex-) colleagues

- intentionally want to damage the career of a scientist
 - primary motivation is rage or revenge
 - are convinced that they have been treated badly (true or not)
 - may be honestly convinced that there has been fraud
-
- deserve to be protected + case has to be investigated
 - must be instructed to behave in a fair way.

Typology of whistleblowers



Machiavellists

- have a political motivation to ruin the reputation of a scientists (for example during elections of dean, rector etc.)
- allegations may be true and/or political tactic
- small justified allegations may be exaggerated ('vendetta style')
- intentional abuse of whistleblower status!
- scientific misconduct! → should be punished but difficult to prove

Machiavellists still can make true allegations!



Typology of whistleblowers

Crazy people (trolls, haters, stalkers, psychopaths ...)

- attack publications based on 'suspicious' findings
- characteristic behaviors are
 - stalking behavior
 - personal insults
 - multiple offensive emails to broad audience including
 - journal editors
 - colleagues
 - the press and/or
 - politicians
- abuse the status of the whistleblower - intentional or unintentional
- scientific misconduct! → must be punished

Crazy people still can make true allegations!

Is the commission trustworthy?



What is the motivation of the members?

What is the institutional history of fraud investigations?

Did/Does the institution just cover its assets?

Is a competitor/personal enemy on the board?

Will they protect or **burn** us?

Trust and control

Trust without control → scientific misconduct ↑

Control without trust → paranoia ↑ = hiding + covering up

What we need to build:

Trustworthy independent institutions (national and international)

where whistleblowers and the accused scientists can get advice and counselling

* especially in cases when the home institution is unprofessional, unfair, or tends to sacrifice the scientists to cover their assets.

- Lex Bouter & Sven Hendrix, *Accountability in Research* 2017, in press
- www.smartsciencecareer.com

Retraction note in FASEB J on Meier et al, FASEB J., 2003

“The editors of The FASEB Journal received a **letter from the dean** of the Charite – Universitätsmedizin Berlin stating:

“In the year 2009 a series of reproaches in regard to scientific misconduct against Dr. Nicolai Savaskan reached the faculty of the Charite – Universitätsmedizin Berlin. (...) A well-recognized and top-class fact finding commission concluded that the **publication contains gross flaws**. A key figure (Figure 14) and the conclusions drawn from it could not be underlined with the corresponding primary data.

Therefore, the faculty has requested the senior author Dr. Nicolai Savaskan to retract the publication.”

→ Paper was retracted by FASEB J w/o prior notice to authors although an erratum was already accepted!

→ After law case: retraction was taken back and erratum was published