Support for those affected by scientific misconduct is crucial

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By Marret K. Noordewier

Cases of scientific misconduct can have a massive impact on scholars (especially junior scholars), and repercussions may last years. They need support, writes Marret K. Noordewier.

In past years, there has been a growing interest in responsible research practices. Initiatives related to open, reproducible and team science have gained momentum and many positive changes are taking place. Pre-registration is becoming the norm, data and materials are shared more often, and various parties aim to promote an open and constructive scientific culture. These changes increase the quality and verifiability of our research. What these changes cannot do, however, is eradicate scientific fraud. They may prevent some types of questionable research practices, but it is an uncomfortable reality that scientific fraud will also take place in the future. This prospect makes it important to focus not only on preventive measures, but also on the aftermath of scientific misconduct. Here, I focus on a topic that I feel has been neglected to date: how the scientific community can support those who are directly affected by scientific misconduct.

It was more than a decade ago that my PhD and postdoctoral advisor was caught committing scientific fraud[1]. His misconduct involved the fabrication of data that he shared with numerous collaborators, including me. Multiple investigations confirmed that he was the sole person responsible, and he was rightfully fired. Many of his collaborators were left to deal with the consequences. For me, as for others, these consequences were intense. Years of work were wasted, multiple papers were retracted and I had to deal with massive media attention, with committees and prosecutors investigating the fraud, and with my own questions about what had happened. I decided to pursue a second PhD. Not because it was required, but to 'reboot' my career and find my place in academia again.

For years I thought that if enough time passed, I could leave this case behind. However, recently, I realized that it will not go away. To this day, the case and its consequences are part of conversations, questions, requests and any situation that involves sending my CV — to this day, it is a part of me. This long-lasting effect is also the reason for accepting the invitation to write this World View. I hope that sharing my view is useful to those in a position to support researchers who are affected by scientific misconduct.

Cases of scientific misconduct differ in many ways, but what they share is that the researchers affected by it — often junior scholars — need support. How? I think three elements are key.

First, ask the involved researchers what they need. No one can be prepared for the consequences of being affected by scientific misconduct. Access to resources can make all the difference for whether one can deal with this situation or not. What is needed will differ by case and person, but will probably centre around professional, organizational and social support. Those affected may need legal help, advice on how to deal with the media and psychological help with picking up the pieces. A university can provide access to such professional resources — both within and outside its own institution. Those affected also need time, space and guidance. A department chair can reorganize tasks and responsibilities, support a decision to be offline for some time or make connections to key figures who can help. And those affected most certainly need social support. Colleagues can connect and stay available, rather than turn away and distance themselves.

Second, acknowledge that the impact will most probably last for years. It is only after investigations are completed and papers are retracted that one is left to deal with the fallout and what is left of their career. Listing just a few examples cannot capture the true complexity of the situation, but obvious lasting effects include a damaged CV and the continuous need to explain the events and their consequences to colleagues and collaborators, conference attendees, funding institutions, grant reviewers, potential employers, students and so on. Rebuilding a career can also mean starting your research from scratch, reconsidering one's knowledge and building new research lines. Therefore, if we do not want researchers to be slowed down beyond the time they have already lost, there needs to be room for nonstandard decisions in (for example) grant applications, hiring decisions and promotion criteria. Recognize what people have accomplished and appreciate the work that is still valid, meaningful and useful. Help people to build on that. Provide time, mentorship and access to networks. Discuss ideas and start collaborations. Be flexible.

Third, ensure that the human side is always considered in institutional dynamics of dealing with scientific misconduct. Understandably, universities and research institutes focus on protocols, labour laws, communication strategies and reputation management. It is essential, however, that the interests of those who are affected are also part of such procedures. Make a clear distinction between actions that address the misconduct itself and actions that are focused on those affected. Delegate support to an independent or external party. Make sure researchers feel safe and free to share their concerns and needs.

Responsible research practices are not only about research, but also about researchers and the culture we work in. This includes the support of those who are affected by scientific misconduct. Such support is essential not only for them, but also for signalling to everybody else who lives in the aftermath of misconduct that we care. This can provide space to pose questions, share concerns, rebuild trust, and openly and continuously discuss how we want science to be.

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Competing interests

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