How to Avoid Ethical Issues in Your Research

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Too many scientific reputations have been damaged by charges of unethical behavior. Although we all think of ourselves as applying the highest standards of ethics, avoiding ethical issues is not as easy as you might think. Here are some of the problems encountered by researchers and how to overcome them.

What is Ethical Behavior?

Defining ethical behavior is surprisingly difficult. Some things are obvious: don't fake research, don't take credit for another's work, disclose conflicts of interest. But the devil is in the details. For example, when publishing a research paper, what exactly constitutes a financial conflict of interest that must be reported? Owning a majority share of a company that benefits from your research? Certainly. Owning 5% of the company. Maybe. Owning a mutual fund that contains shares of the company? Probably not. Matters can get sticky. Read the guidelines of each journal for its specific policy, and report anything that might apply.

Checklists

Disclosure policies have become so complicated that it's best to go over a checklist of a publication's guidelines during the writing process, and refer to it periodically to make sure you are covering all bases. It's not fun to have a paper published and suddenly realize, Wait, I didn't disclose XYZ!

Avoid the Slippery Slope

There are many grey areas in ethical issues. Fabricating data is a black and white issue. But what about applying a two-sigma statistical screen to exclude outlying data points? Not a problem if you disclose the practice, and if the screen doesn't change your conclusions. Throwing out a piece of data that you know to be spurious because of a change in conditions? Usually justifiable. How about throwing out a troublesome data point that you suspect is spurious, because, basically, it just doesn't fit. Here we have entered the arena of cherry picking data points to produce the results you want.

And so it goes. There is a slippery slope in every category of unethical behavior that leads gradually to such no no's as self-citation, guest authorship, and plagiarism. The best remedy to avoid sliding down the slippery slope is to stay on the high ground of ethical behavior and take pride in doing so.

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