



## Ask the Ethicist

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### Retraction Infraction?

Dear Jordan:

I read in the press recently that a chemistry professor at Columbia was retracting several papers, which were mainly the work of a former graduate student. The former student claimed the work was valid and vehemently opposed the retraction. Nevertheless, apparently, the various journals involved, including the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, were going ahead with the retractions.

It seems to me that the former student's reputation was being damaged without an impartial evaluation of the situation. Is this fair? How would the APS journals handle a similar situation?

*Curious in Cleveland*

#### Jordan Moiers replies:

Dear Curious,

The case you describe involves associate professor Dalibor Sames of Columbia University's chemistry department and his former graduate student Bengü Sezen. Columbia is currently conducting a review to determine if, as Sames asserts, Sezen fabricated data or spiked reactants in a series of experiments on the manipulation of carbon-hydrogen bonds. Sames, Columbia University, and the editors of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* and *Organic Letters* (also an ACS publication) are withholding comment until the completion of the inquiry.

Setting aside the issue of Sezen's misconduct, which will be settled one way or the other through the Columbia investigation, the handling of the affair raises some serious ethical issues. Sames is the corresponding author on the retracted papers and his lab's principal investigator, and yet was apparently less than fully informed about Sezen's work until recently. Although not all authors are accountable for all portions of a given paper, Sames had the added burden of being Sezen's advisor. When it comes to graduate school, advisors and supervisors are responsible for guiding young researchers' scientific development and integrity. Nobody is perfect, but the retraction of four papers suggests a serious and chronic problem in Sames's lab that an involved coauthor and PI should have been aware of.

While Sezen shared in the credit for publishing the papers, which were based on research she conducted, Sames's unilateral retraction denied her the opportunity to weigh in on the retraction. In articles published in *Science* and the ACS publication *Chemical & Engineering News*, Sezen claims that she was not informed of the retractions that Sames requested of the ACS, and strongly protested when she eventually learned of them. ACS editors aren't talking in advance of Columbia's investigation, so we can't know their reasoning for accepting the contested retractions at the moment.

According to APS Editor-in-Chief Martin Blume, a case like this at the *Physical Review* might be handled quite differently. "Retraction is a very significant step," he says, "which implies that misconduct has occurred. An accusation by one author, no matter how senior, against another is not proof of misconduct, and everyone is entitled to respond to an accusation." Absent an independent investigation conducted according to institutional or funding-agency guidelines, APS would not print a retraction of the paper, Blume said. But APS could print an erratum by the disaffected authors, or an editorial note, stating their desire to remove their names from the paper.

Sames's retractions seem to have explicitly violated Columbia's published professional ethics guidelines, which state that a researcher must have the opportunity to review and rebut all allegations of misconduct, as well as the chance to appeal any formal misconduct findings, prior to the notification of funding research agencies, journals, and societies of fraudulent work.

Regardless of the outcome of Columbia's investigation, the affair's inevitable damage has already been aggravated by the premature retractions. It has directed a spotlight of suspicion on Sezen at a critical time in her career, leading to an indefinite delay in her postdoc appointment at Stanford. If a survey of blogs hosted by chemistry grad students is any indication, Sames's reputation is suffering as well, both because of his affiliation with potentially fraudulent research and because of the distaste expressed by some for his apparent hostility toward a former student who was once a promising young member of his lab.

It is too soon to tell whether Columbia's chemistry department debacle will be added to the list of high profile scientific frauds. But whether Sezen is eventually cleared (perhaps leading to a retraction of the recent ACS journal retractions) or not, the ethically flawed handling of the case will likely leave a dark cloud over the people and institutions involved for some time.

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