



Professional ethics in academia: defining the categories of behavior spectrum in matters of unethical conduct

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The problems of bullying and other unethical behavior in Science are known to most researchers. Victims are most often young investigators and trainees. Defining the categories of human behavior spectrum in academia in matters of unethical conduct may help facilitate change.



Category A: Engages in criminal/ illegal offense

Category B: Engages in unethical behavior (intellectual theft, abuse, scientific misconduct). Both initiators and facilitators belong to the same category. Variation in magnitude.

Category C: Is not directly involved in the offense but knows of it well. However, not only looks the other way but engages in active collaboration and continues to receive favors from those involved. May even help those in category B during an investigation or aid their retaliatory efforts.

Category D: Is not directly involved in the offense. Tries his/ her best to stay away from the situation. No significant moral dilemma even if the offense is reprehensible. May try to stop collaborating with those involved in the offense but also tries to minimize contact with those wronged. Maintains neutrality.

Category E: Has a moral dilemma whether to help the wronged or not (or challenge the offender if personally wronged) but decides against. Lacks willingness, courage and know-how. Perceived potential loss to self through retaliation is much greater than the ethical conscience to speak up.

Category F: Has severe moral dilemma, advises the wronged with noble intentions and provides moral support, but is not willing to speak up. Perceived potential loss to self through retaliation is still greater than the ethical conscience to speak up.

Category G: Is willing and courageous, but lacks the know-how to help the wronged against the offender (or to challenge the offender if personally wronged). May act in haste.

Category H: Is willing, courageous and possesses the know-how to help the wronged against the offender (or to challenge the offender if personally wronged).

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Academic professional ethics needs to be a part of scientific curriculum regardless of discipline. Students need to be taught to recognize the different categories throughout their academic careers and to aspire to belong to category H.

The color spectrum (red to green) position of the leadership determines that of the institution/ organization, given the direct influence of leadership on the proportion of each category. It is nearly impossible for an organization to be ethical with an unethical leadership.

Bystanders far outnumber the oppressors and victims in most situations of abuse/ intellectual theft/ scientific misconduct in academia. The lack of bystander guilt from inaction enables unethical behavior and leadership. The above categorization of behavior spectrum would hopefully impress upon bystanders, their critical role in ensuring justness within an institution.

The problem of unethical behavior in academia cannot be solved unless there is a widespread acceptance of its presence, and a willingness to confront it. Policies preventing institutions from conducting sham investigations need to be implemented by regulatory bodies (Nik-Zainal and Barroso 2019).

Perhaps Science needs a #MeToo movement.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Reference

Nik-Zainal, S., and I. Barroso. 2019. Bullying investigations need a code of conduct. *Nature* 565: 429. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-00228-4>.

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