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Grantee Ethics

Science does not have, and hopefully will never need, a formalized code of ethics similar to those of medicine, law, or engineering. Tradition, common sense, and the ordinary ethics of decent regard for others have been sufficient guides in the handling of most problems. But with rapid changes in the role of science and the patterns of financial support, these traditional guides are no longer always sufficient. There is a class of situations in which ethical questions arise, even though there is no implication that the scientists involved are seeking to act unethically. Quite the contrary; many scientists are hunting for answers to such questions as these: In team research, who owns the data? In conflicts between the scientific traditions of free publication and the industrial customs of competition and secrecy, what are the governing principles? Under what circumstances should participation in a group project satisfy the research requirements for a graduate degree? What is an investigator to do when during the course of a subsidized study he uncovers an exciting new lead that looks more promising than the plans he described in applying for support? What is an adviser to do when an agency asks him to review a research proposal on which he has already made an adverse recommendation to another agency?

There is another class of situations in which the tactics employed in seeking funds seem—at least to some observers—to indicate some elasticity of conscience. Perhaps most common is the simultaneous application to two sources of funds for the same work. Occasionally an investigator divides a research project into somewhat artificial parts so that he can send separate applications to different agencies and still satisfy his conscience. Grantees sometimes deliberately slant a research project in an effort to make it appeal to a particular foundation or government agency. In these last two examples, the fault—if there is a fault—is not necessarily that of the grantee. The policies and preferences of agencies that support research sometimes invite slanting of a proposal or the division of a research whole into separate projects. Even so, such situations raise problems concerning the ethics of grant giving and grant receiving.

Once in a while an obvious breach of ethics occurs. Several years ago an applicant for a research grant listed himself as the principal investigator of a proposed study and, almost simultaneously, applied for a Fulbright award for a year abroad during the period his planned research was scheduled to run. In neither application did he mention the other. When asked what he planned to do if both awards were made, he replied that he would turn the research grant over to his assistant. No matter how competent the assistant, his plan seems questionable.

Foundation officials are aware of these problems. They know that clearly unethical behavior is the exception rather than the rule. They know, too, that they are not the proper persons to call such matters to public attention.

What should be done? Individual scientists already know that these problems exist. Perhaps more discussion—a symposium or the publication of expressions of different points of view—might help. On only one point do we feel assurance: if serious consideration of the ethics of scientists in these practical situations is warranted, responsibility for initiating that consideration rests with the scientists.—D. W.