

# Is Fraud Really Gone?

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The article “Highs and Lows on the Fraud Frontier” by Daniel S. Greenberg (*Observer* Vol. 20, No. 9) poses the question “Whatever happened to scientific fraud?” It’s a worthy topic of discussion if ever there was one, and APS is to be lauded for raising the issue. Greenberg reaches the conclusion that, although there are concerns regarding conflicts of interest and authorship in commercial ventures, the incidence of scientific misconduct in general is nonetheless “minuscule.” But by the end of his article, I was left wondering whether Greenberg’s page was an attempt at “reverse psychology.” Let me explain, using a few quotations from Greenberg himself. He states that “the miscreant seeking glory or advancement via fakery or plagiarism faces considerable peril.” What peril? The miscreant who uses fakery or plagiarism stands little chance of being detected and greatly improves his or her odds of getting the much-longed-for research grant or that elusive assistant professorship, both in chronically short supply. The lack of either can mean the end of someone’s career, and for people of poor character in a time of shortage, the reward far outweighs the risk.

Greenberg notes that “to reap the rewards of scientific crime, the culprit must put the loot on public display (i.e., publish it) with name and address, thus inviting others concerned with the topic to look it over carefully.” This gave me a good laugh. Since when is anyone’s work ever looked over carefully? Even reviewers of math papers don’t check all the equations, and I’ve had peer reviews consisting of a single paragraph, no doubt written in a half-hour flat. And how many colleges actually investigate the CVs of job candidates, with 300 people seeking a single job? Greenberg also notes that “scientific wrongdoers must beware of whistle-blowing lab mates alerted by, and maybe envious of, improbable success.” True. But with the segmentation of work among the authors of today’s multi-authored papers, there is little inspection of a co-author’s work. Such inspection would be openly resented. And “improbable success” is what individuals are lauded for.

Finally, Greenberg cites “official government figures” that suggest a “miniscule” incidence of fraud. Alas, if only all scofflaws were caught and duly prosecuted. But any experienced police sergeant will tell you that, in general, nine out of 10 confirmed frauds never become public knowledge, due largely to the embarrassment of the victims. In that vein, I am reminded of a case that occurred when I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto. A young researcher was hired as an assistant professor. She rapidly gained a grant, started an active laboratory, and published many papers. Her rise was meteoric and she became a star with many smiling supporters. A few years later, a form letter written by the graduate coordinator appeared in each department mailbox (including my own), describing the professor’s agreement to resign after an unnamed member of her own laboratory exposed her for creating false information on “no fewer than” three grant applications. No financial or legal penalties were ever mentioned and the story appeared in no newspapers or scientific journals. The faculty members who had praised her pretended to have never known her. And you can bet that the unnamed lab member, whom I probably never met, was left high and dry as a reward for his or her honesty.

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