



Academic bullies leave no trace

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Summary

Bullying in academic science is a growing concern. It may vary in severity from insults, snubs, or invasions of privacy to violations of intellectual property and unfair crediting of authors. In extreme cases it may even include coercing lab workers to sign away rights to authorship or even intellectual property. Cumbersome institutional protocols and fears of reprisal may discourage targets of bullying from reporting such incidents; lab workers in the US on visas may feel especially vulnerable. Possible strategies to combat bullying include detailed examination of relevant documentation for signs of coercion or inaccuracy and specific training on reporting for those at risk of abuse.

Author's Biosketch

Morteza Mahmoudi is an Assistant Professor at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School (mahmoudilab.bwh.harvard.edu). He has authored >180 papers (>16 100 citations) and holds >10 issued/pending US and International patents. He received several trainings in nanotechnology, nanomedicine, magnetic materials, cell biology, and cardiac nanotechnology from University College Dublin (Ireland), École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (Switzerland), the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, and Stanford School of Medicine. He is among 2018 highly cited researchers in 2018 as reported by Clarivate Analytics. His specific research interest is in nanomedicine and regenerative medicine for the development of new nano-based platforms for prevention/treatment of life-threatening conditions such as cardiomyopathy, cancer, and neurodegenerative diseases. Aside from scientific research, Dr. Mahmoudi is also very active in drawing the attention of the scientific community in the rising issue of academic bullying. In addition, he is also working on identifying the reasons behind the enormous disparity between the numbers of major prize winners between the sexes (which currently stands at more than an order of magnitude in favor of male nominees) and seek to draw the attention of award agencies, researchers, entrepreneurs, and media to reexamine the historical imbalances between the sexes in winning major scientific awards.



Academic bullying has recently received greater attention from stakeholders and decision-makers in the scientific community through news coverage,¹ actions taken against culpable lab leaders,² and serious corrective measures taken by large institutions.¹ Though some reports claim higher rates of bullying in academic compared to non-academic settings,³ one suspects there would have been an even larger gap between these two settings if all incidents were reported.¹

Possible reasons for unreported incidents of bullying include, but are not limited to, (i) lack of robust and easy-to-access institutional protocols for reporting incidence, (ii) feelings of insecurity among lab members about their positions and dependence on monthly paychecks, (iii) fear of being fired, (iv) fear of being treated unfairly, and (v) concerns over receiving substandard recommendations for future jobs. These issues are much more threatening for international students/scholars, who are in the US on visas and therefore feel more pressure than domestic lab workers.⁴

To date, reported incidents of academic bullying have consisted mainly of insults, snubs and/or invasions of

privacy by lab leaders.¹ However, higher-level and more serious types of bullying include violations of intellectual property and unfair crediting of authors in scientific publications.⁴

These kinds of abusive behaviors cause serious and long-lasting effects on both the academic and personal lives of targets and their families. It is therefore pressing that academic institutions and funding agencies offer clear, fair, and accessible protocols for students/scholars to report abusive behaviors of any kind, as free as possible of concerns about recrimination.⁴ Ideally, institutions could play a key role in reducing academic bullying by designing fair and thorough reporting systems and minimizing the possibility of reprisal.^{4,5} It should be noted that though well-intentioned institutions may believe their investigations of bullying to be fair and unbiased, their corrective actions against bullies may be insufficient, for several reasons. A central issue is concern of possible damage to the reputation of the institution. Another important issue is that, compared with bullies in other types of workplaces, bullies in academia are likely to be intelligent enough to leave minimal evidence of their inappropriate actions; e.g.,



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they may use phone or individual meetings rather than emails or public/group meetings to attempt to exercise power over a bullying target. In order to improperly take control of intellectual property or inappropriately alter author positioning, academic bullies may force their targets to sign falsified consent forms stating that they made no contribution or have no rights to publications/patents that actually arose from their own work.

One way for institutions and other stakeholders to combat bullying would be to create strategic plans to identify and eliminate these more-sophisticated forms of false documentation. One strategy might be to create a team of multidisciplinary expert investigators (including lawyers and psychologists) to examine all such documentation for signs of coercion or inaccuracy. In addition, specific trainings should be offered to those at risk of abuse (e.g., students and postdocs) on how report bullying, even when confronted with intelligent bullies who attempt to leave no trace.

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Ethical statement

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Competing interests

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