

A scientific code of ethics would improve opportunity for women

SAMUEL GOROVITZ

That women face persistent discriminatory barriers as they pursue careers in science is conclusively documented, broadly lamented, and acknowledged even by powerful and influential perpetrators of such discrimination. The intellectual loss is incalculable when talented women leave academic science because of their refusal to sacrifice maternal aspirations to the rigid demands of the normal male-dominated pattern of career progression. A boundless loss to individuals, the educational environment, and science also results when talented women meet these traditional terms of career success, perhaps delaying or sacrificing family goals only to become bitter and resentful – and perhaps discouraging role models for younger women with great intellectual and pedagogical potential. Yet the problem persists. No one seems to know how to get past the lamentation to sustained and constructive remedies.

Part of the problem lies in patterns of mistreatment of graduate students that weigh especially hard on women. These patterns, too, are well described in the literature, but are not well enough known by those in a position to improve matters -- including the students themselves. Here, I propose steps that hold promise of partial improvement.

The unethical treatment of female graduate students (as of women faculty) is not always due to mean-spiritedness. It may be due to sexist attitudes or culpable insensitivity, but it also is compatible with goodwill. Part of the problem is the lack of clarity on all sides about what women have a right to expect in advising, material and other support, accommodation in scheduling to their special needs (given that their male partners so often shirk a proportionate share of child-rearing responsibilities), support as they enter the job market, and in all the other ways -- large and small -- that influence the development of a career.

Despite the diversity of viewpoints within clinical medicine, and although most physicians are not members, the American Medical Association's Code of Ethics states standards that are widely accepted as binding on all practitioners. (One example is the prohibition against abandoning a patient, instead of making arrangements for transfer to another provider of care.) The scientific community would be well-served by the development of a comparably comprehensive Code of Ethics for Scientific Research and Education. Such worthy efforts as *On Being A Scientist* (National Academy Press) go part way toward this objective, but leave far too many issues unaddressed.

Each scientific specialty could also develop such a code, specific to its substantive domain. Among the issues covered should be the design and content of training programs, all aspects of the way students and apprentice scientists should be mentored, the sharing of credit for creative work, and more. These codes should then be so broadly disseminated and discussed that no member of the scientific community can reasonably claim to be unaware of them. If students and faculty have common exposure to a statement of what their mutual expectations should be, and if that statement bears the endorsement of the scientific community, it becomes easier for those of genuinely good will to act in support of the values they affirm. It also becomes much harder for the rest to continue to act with impunity in ways that are destructive of the career development of those under their influence.

For example, if a student knows that she has a right to prompt, substantive, and candid commentary on the quality of the work she submits to a faculty

member, it becomes easier for her to ask, when submitting that work, what she can reasonably expect in response, and when. This may seem a small illustration, but it is often in the handling of just such issues that oppression or nurturing reside.

Merely catalyzing conversation about such matters within a department or laboratory that has no tradition of collectively reflecting on them may reduce offences. This can work by restraining the behavior of those who might otherwise be more comfortably inclined to take liberties or to be complacent about familiar but corrosive old habits, by emboldening senior researchers to take more responsibility for correcting errant behavior, and by empowering students, post-doctoral fellows, and even faculty members with more specific knowledge of how they ought to be treated.

A publicly affirmed commitment to comprehensively detailed and explicit standards of conduct in research and in the teaching of students can inform all the participants in a research program of the boundaries between vigorous pursuit of research activity and unethical actions that are corrosive of the nurturing of future researchers. Each professional association ought to develop a comprehensive statement of this kind; their representatives collectively ought to begin development of an overall statement that will place the scientific community clearly on record as opposing -- in instrumentally specific ways -- all patterns of discrimination and all other phenomena that disadvantage talented and aspiring scientists, whoever they may be.

Samuel Gorovitz

Philosophy and Public Administration
Syracuse University, HL 541
Syracuse, NY 13244
USA