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Learning from misconduct

There are some obvious and not-so-obvious career lessons to be learned from the misconduct case of Jan Hendrik Schön. The physicist was fired from Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey, after an investigation determined that many of his publications on superconductivity in carbon 'buckyballs' contained fabricated data.

The obvious lesson is that misconduct does not pay. Before he was caught, Schön had achieved fame for publishing a flurry of high-profile papers that eventually proved too good to be true. But the revelations of fraud have ruined a once-promising career. The process by which he was found out shows how science — albeit sometimes slowly and clumsily — inevitably ferrets out such fraud. Suspicions arose when several scientists failed to duplicate his results, prompting a closer look at his data, and ultimately revealing that plots and graphs from different experiments were identical, even down to the noise.

The less obvious lesson is that preventing and policing misconduct is the responsibility of everyone in the scientific community. The immediate aftermath of the Schön affair resulted in the predictable blame game. Now that the dust has started to settle, the community can take the next step to prevent future incidents.

During a conference on research integrity at the Institute of Medicine in Washington last month, Steven Teitelbaum, president of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, said that mentors should be the first to take that step. Teaching research integrity should be an integral part of a mentoring relationship. And monitoring their charges' data is even more important. Because although misconduct can ruin the perpetrator's career, it can also taint the reputation of their mentor.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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