
The Abused Foreign Postdoc: A Seamy Side of Science

Reprinted from *THE SCIENTIST* © 2(18):10, 3 October 1988.

Not long ago I received an anonymous letter from a foreign-born scientist who has been working in the United States as a postdoctoral fellow for the past two years. He claims to have worked very hard, night and day, and has, he says, performed to the standards of his fellow postdocs. But his situation was not good.

The professor in charge of the lab, he writes, abused his power and was dishonest. He is said to have routinely stolen ideas from the grant proposals of others and directed his group members to pursue those ideas immediately so he could claim priority. In addition, he prevented his postdocs from moving on to better jobs.

Of course, scientists can behave just as badly as people in any other occupation. In this case, I don't know whether my anonymous correspondent described the situation accurately or whether his outlook might have been colored by some unstated personal problem. I do know, however, that during my graduate studies, I myself ran into a few unscrupulous professors who exhibited similar behavior toward their charges. I realize that there are a few bad apples out there. The

mentoring process is a special relationship. When it works well, there is no substitute; but when it goes wrong, for whatever reason, it can go very wrong, as we all know.

For my correspondent, things apparently went very wrong indeed. He writes, "Recently, I applied for some positions in other fields with the intention of widening my career prospects. It so happened that potential employers contacted my professor by telephone. I came to know later that he told deliberate lies about me, that I was obligated to his lab, that I had visa problems, and other untruths. He spoiled my chances, and I have done no harm to him whatsoever."

More than merely state a complaint, the writer put a question to me which I should like to refer to the scientific community: "Why should potential employers of postdocs rely so excessively on personal recommendations—so much so that a candidate does not have the opportunity to speak for himself or herself and is thus in jeopardy of victimization by this type of sadistic behavior? Why can't the potential employers talk directly to the candidate, review his or her resume closely, ask the candidate to give a talk? Why is there so

much reliance on these personal recommendations, almost to the exclusion of other factors?" Why, indeed.

The foreign postdoc is in a particularly tenuous position to fight injustice of this kind. In many cases, a visa is contingent on employment, making it quite difficult to quit a bad situation without first finding another prospect, and if other prospects are blocked—well, one can understand the frustrations.

By all accounts, we will have even more foreign postdocs working in U.S. labs in the years to come. Are we doing enough to protect them from exploitation? Is there a tacit code of ethical behavior that applies to the treatment of postdocs by their professors, one that also takes into account the special circumstances of foreigners?

A first step toward a standard code is simply greater awareness of the vulnerable position of postdocs,

both U.S. and foreign. This means that potential employers should make an extra effort to investigate more candidates for postdoc positions thoroughly and directly. Clearly the professional societies of science, both national and international, should help ensure that foreign postdocs get due process.

The one story has a happy ending—at least in some respects. "I have found a good job in my home country," my correspondent writes. "I will not make much money, but I will struggle hard throughout my life for research. My country is not rich, but it has done much for the spirit of science...God willing, I will prove that I am not all that bad."

And he ends the letter with a poignant question we might all ponder: "Will the oppressors escape unpunished and be allowed to continue trampling upon toiling, innocent young minds? I ask you, is this a business or science?" ■