



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS

CLOSEOUT MEMORANDUM

Case Number: A09050042

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We received an allegation that a postdoctoral researcher¹ had falsified and fabricated results in a multi-author published article² acknowledging NSF support.³ We determined the initial allegation had sufficient substance to warrant referral of an inquiry to the awardee institution.⁴ The institution's inquiry panel recommended a full investigation and we concurred that a detailed investigation was warranted.

The institution conducted its investigation under its policy which it had not updated since the early 1990s. The institution's investigation committee consolidated the numerous sub-allegations into three primary allegations and employed a rigorous statistical approach to assess the reported data and analysis for 1) fabrication of ratios from preexisting physical measurements; 2) cherry-picking a sample of individuals to favor the hypothesis, and 3) fabrication of summary data to favor the hypothesis. Much of the analysis focused on the probability of randomness in the data selection by the postdoc.

The committee concluded by clear and convincing evidence and the deciding official concurred that the postdoc had committed intentional fabrication of data. The institution initiated the retraction of the publication, an action to which all authors but one⁵ agreed.

We reviewed the institution report and placed the events and evidence provided within the context of the NSF-funded project. The funded proposal had a cross-disciplinary primary focus involving a novel implementation of data collection technique in a field study rather than a controlled lab setting. The proposal described a particular analytical use for the resulting data with some specificity (*i.e.*, combination with another data set) but the major goal of the study as awarded was the new application of the data collection method. The final report for the award reinforced the importance of the data collections and described a preliminary analysis combining the two data sets. At the time the award expired, the alleged misconduct does not appear to have occurred, but it involved continued analysis of the combined data sets, including the NSF-funded data set.

A proposal submitted by the institution shortly after the expiration of the award but before the

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3 [REDACTED]
4 [REDACTED]

⁵ The postdoc did agree to the retraction. One of the other authors could not be contacted to give his/her consent.



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final report described the same preliminary results and proposed the postdoc would conduct the studies ultimately described in the questioned publication. NSF declined to fund this proposal. As such, the alleged misconduct by the postdoc appears to have de minimis, if any, actionable nexus to NSF, rooted mostly in the subsequent use of data from an NSF-funded project.

The final determination by the institution is consistent with its policies and procedures. We note that the committee often pointed out a lack of data management throughout the research project as a significant contributing factor toward the complexity of the case. The data management concerns raised do not appear to involve the NSF-funded data set. We conclude that the institution's actions resulting in the retraction of the paper adequately protect the federal interest in this matter and do not require a recommendation for NSF action.

This case is closed with no further action taken.