Gone co-Author

A Case Study in Research Ethics

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Research today often involves collaboration, as evidenced by the long lists of co-authors given on numerous articles. There are subtle rules on the ordering of co-authors depending on the discipline, but this is not what this case study is about. Rather, the case study considers the case of collaborators who were initially involved in a project, but have gone due to various reasons, including those gone for good through death. Where do you draw the ethical line of not including an erstwhile collaborator in a resulting paper? Can you possibly get away with not including a co-author posthumously – as they are not there to defend themselves? Or do you include them pointlessly for fear of such an accusation?

Dr. Wilson is putting the finishing touches to his latest paper and has been pondering for days whether or not to include his former student, Tim Sacks, as a co-author. At the beginning, Tim worked energetically and enthusiastically on the project. He would follow-up on the leads, carry out experiments, share his insights, summarize his finding and present them to Dr. Wilson in a neat and thought-provoking way. But now Tim has graduated and has since established himself in another non-academic position in the banking industry. Papers do not seem to matter much to his career, whereas Dr. Wilson is still under the spell of "publish or perish", the much dreaded curse that sends shivering to many young researchers in academia and give them sleepless nights.

As Dr. Wilson was going through the folder of notes and ideas left by Tim, one draft in particular caught his attention. He then made many unsuccessful attempts to rekindle Tim's interest in the matter. At long last, Dr. Wilson decided to bite the bullet, roll up his sleeves and get things done without further involvement from Tim. Now, although the motivation and genesis came about because of some earlier notes of Tim, the end result is radically different from what Tim left. Still, Dr. Wilson has decided to entreat Tim one more time even though Tim failed to respond to his initial appeals when he started working on the paper. He has sent the finished manuscript to Tim a week ago, perhaps longer. Since then, when Dr. Wilson hears the beep of every e-mail landing in his inbox, he thinks it might finally be Tim. But no comment so far.

What a contrast between the responsive Tim that was working under Dr. Wilson and the now uninterested Tim.

Dr. Wilson is having a hard time with the contrast because of the high impression and esteem he had for Tim. But he must make an ethical decision: enlist or delist Tim Sacks as a co-author in his paper, a paper that came about because of Tim.