



**HOKKAIDO**  
UNIVERSITY

# **Research Ethics**

## **Imaginary Cases**

# **Case 1: 'Research Methods'**



**Alice, a graduate student, is about to start her first fieldwork for research. She has meticulously consulted with her supervisor regarding the appropriateness of the purposes and methods of the research she shall soon begin. The supervisor told Alice that the type of research Alice was planning to conduct is normally accepted widely in her discipline and that she may commence research.**



**Just to be sure, Alice checked the ethical code of conduct of the academic journal to which she will submit a paper to be written based on the findings in her forthcoming research, as well as that of the academic society to which she belongs: At first, Alice was convinced that there were no ethical problems. She found no articles in those codes which her research might violate.**





**However, on a different day, when Alice was chatting with Tom, one of her colleagues, about her research plan, Tom, who works in a different discipline from Alice, told her, ‘It seems to me that your research plan is somewhat ethically problematic’. Tom seems to consider it particularly problematic that Alice will potentially get involved in her research collaborators’ political activities while she conducts research.**



**It is highly likely that Alice will participate in meetings, demonstrations, or lie-down protests with her research collaborators, the members of a local community in question, because Alice's research is aimed at, through participatory observation, analysing how her collaborators participate in the political process to realise a sustainable society.**



**In this situation, should Alice be forced, should she not be able to avoid participating in the political activities, to stay away from political argument and keeps her position neutral and impartial regarding the opinions of the members of a community and to only participate in those events, not as a stakeholder of the political issue, but as an objective researcher?**



**However, even after Alice explained her academic stance on research activities, Tom argues in a slightly critical manner that Alice's attitude is somewhat insincere to the stakeholders with whom Alice is going to work because it could be a life-or-death matter for some of them.**



**Tom also told Alice that what is most important in his discipline is to obtain a written consent from potential candidates of collaborators to participate in research and cooperate well before commencing research. The purpose of obtaining written consent, in which terms and conditions which researchers and collaborators abide by are explicitly specified, are not only to protect the rights of collaborators but also to protect researchers themselves should any problems occur.**



**It definitely seems reasonable that researchers and collaborators confirm, for example, a right to opt-out (terminating collaboration in research) whenever collaborators wish to do so. However, Alice is not entirely satisfied with Tom's stance that a written consent is sacrosanct—that it shall come first and foremost under any circumstance. Alice is much more concerned about whether or not this kind of formal contract could rather make potential collaborators shy away or their attitude toward cooperation for research hardened.**



**She is also concerned that it could potentially cause tension in the relationship between the collaborators and her. In Alice's discipline, to be recognised as a 'fellow' comes first and foremost; otherwise she might not obtain productive findings through research. Therefore, Alice considers that it is not the best option to obtain written consent from the beginning well before she starts research; she thinks it is more important to get familiar with them and gain trust from them before commencing research.**



**However, Tom claims that it is absolutely mandatory to obtain written consent well before commencing research. Contrary to Tom's claim, Alice considers it fundamental to build a mutual trust based on continuous, 'harmonious' or friendly relationship between her and the collaborators before/during/after conducting research to the degree without compromising her research integrity.**





**When Alice and Tom continued arguing, Bob, a senior PhD student came and told them; ‘Why not just following the ‘standard operational procedure’ which are widely accepted or commonly approved in each discipline?’ It is a reasonable claim, Alice thought. Indeed, her supervisor agreed to the appropriateness of her research methods and no articles of the ethical code of conduct relating to her discipline prohibit her research method. Nevertheless, Alice also thinks Tom’s argument is understandable.**



# What should Alice do?



眞嶋俊造、奥田太郎、河野哲也(共編)『人文・社会科学のための研究倫理ガイドブック』(慶應義塾大学出版会、2015)、27-28ページ、「考えてみよう」の事例から一部改変、英訳。



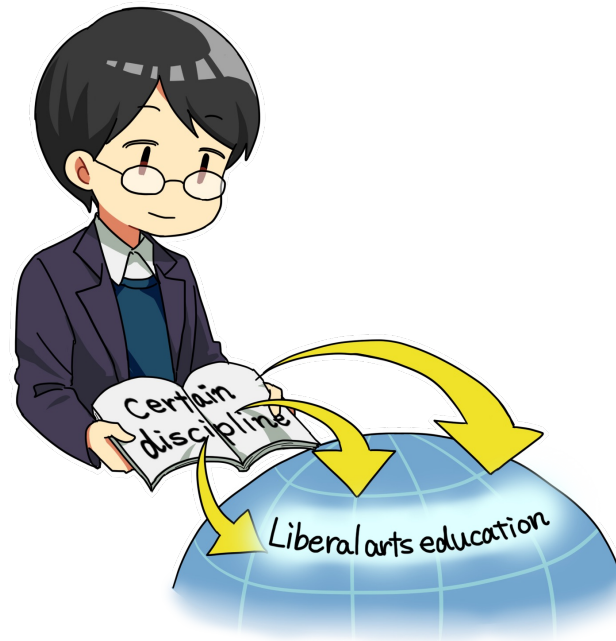
## **Case 2: ‘An ‘Old-Fashioned’ Mentor’**



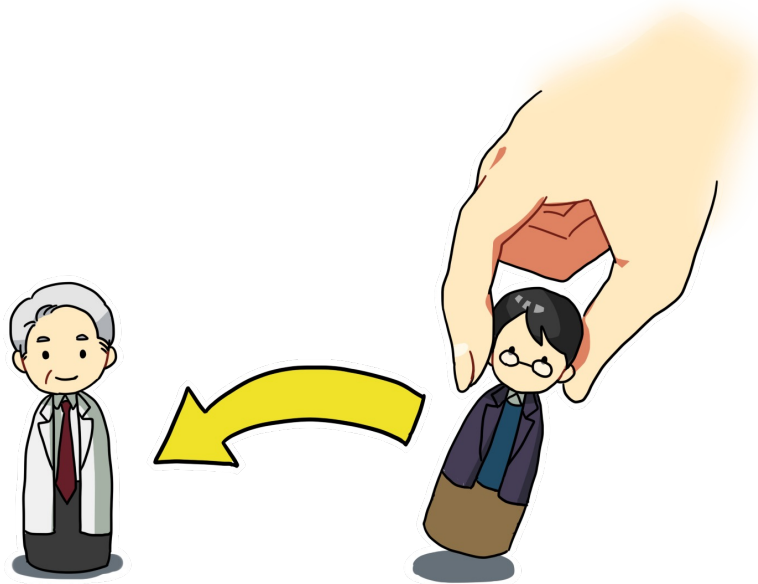
**Dr Jones is a promising young researcher who obtained his doctorate in a certain discipline.**



**His discipline is a newly emerging one, but is highly appreciated not only by academia but also by the government. It is expected to make fundamental contribution to liberal-arts education at higher education institutions.**



**From this academic year, Dr Jones started working as a three-year contract assistant professor at a middle-sized, respectable university. He was, in a sense, ‘invited’ to the department by Professor Smith, who is one of the most reputable, world-class figures in their discipline. Dr Jones respected Professor Smith not only as a senior academic but also greatly appreciated him as a mentor.**



**Dr Jones met him on several occasions such as international conferences, and his research theme drew Professor Smith's academic interest. Professor Smith is a professor who has made a lot of constructive comments on Dr Jones's papers. One day, when Professor Smith was appointed as a director of a newly-established research institute, he contacted Dr Jones, saying, 'why don't you come and work with me?' Dr Jones was excited to receive Professor Smith's 'invitation' and accepted an assistant professorship.**





**It was, or was supposed to be, a promising, new start for Dr Jones. However, He gradually began losing his confidence and trust in Professor Smith. For Dr Jones, it is reasonably understandable that Professor Smith asked him to attend his classes, for the purpose of ‘assessing the content of lectures’, according to Professor Smith. However, he is not satisfied with Professor Smith’s stance to ‘outsource’ all preparations for lectures and marking of term papers to him; ‘that is necessary training for becoming a full-fledged academic’, Professor Smith says.**



**The other day on the weekend, Dr Jones, was very disappointed when he got an e-mail from Professor Smith while marking reports on behalf of him, saying, ‘Thanks to you, Dr Jones, I had a nice weekend with my family’. ‘Marking reports was supposed to be YOUR work’, Dr Jones sighed.**



**There was another, more serious cause of concern for Dr Jones. Dr Jones takes part as a collaborator in a large scale research project led by Professor Smith, in which he is expected to take a role to verify the effectiveness of teaching which Dr Jones is currently providing to students at the liberal-arts education programme.**



**Dr Jones is sceptical of verifying it: however, Professor Smith wishes to obtain a set of concrete, numerical data to prove its effectiveness so that he could further promote his teaching method in other higher education institutions and beyond. At a meeting held last week, Professor Smith proposed to Dr Jones, ‘Why do not you ‘subliminally (secretly, without students’ noticing)’ incorporate such questions into assignments?’**



**It seemed highly problematic for Dr Jones to incorporate such questions into assignments because those assignments are part of grade evaluation and students cannot opt-out if they wish to obtain a grade and earn credits. However, taking his current position into account, Dr Jones also ponders whether or not he could not help accepting Professor Smith's suggestion.**

**What should Dr Jones do?**



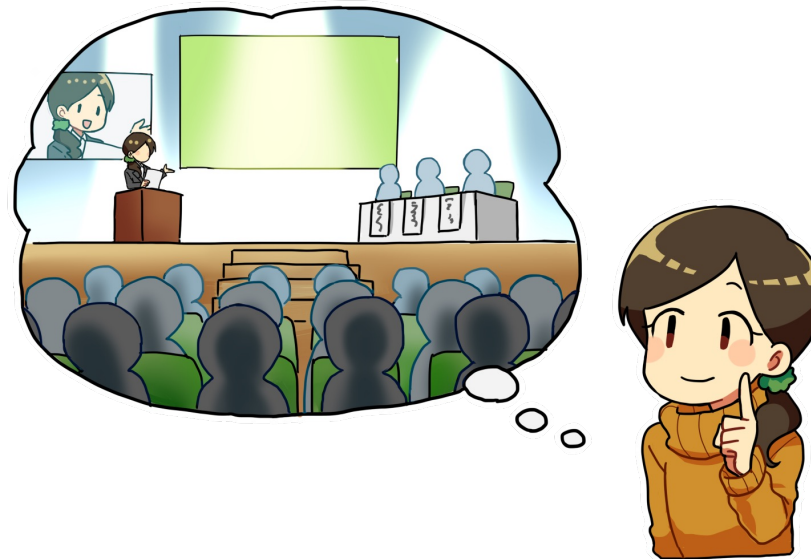
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# **Case 3: 'Career and Funding'**



**Kate, a graduate student, has been nominated as one of the panellists at a world-renowned, prestigious conference. This panel is the first step up the ladder of being recognised as a rising star in her discipline. Indeed, many eminent professors had an experience to take the rostrum at that conference. For Kate, this is the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enhance her own professional career and reputation and to be considered as a world-class talented young scholar.**





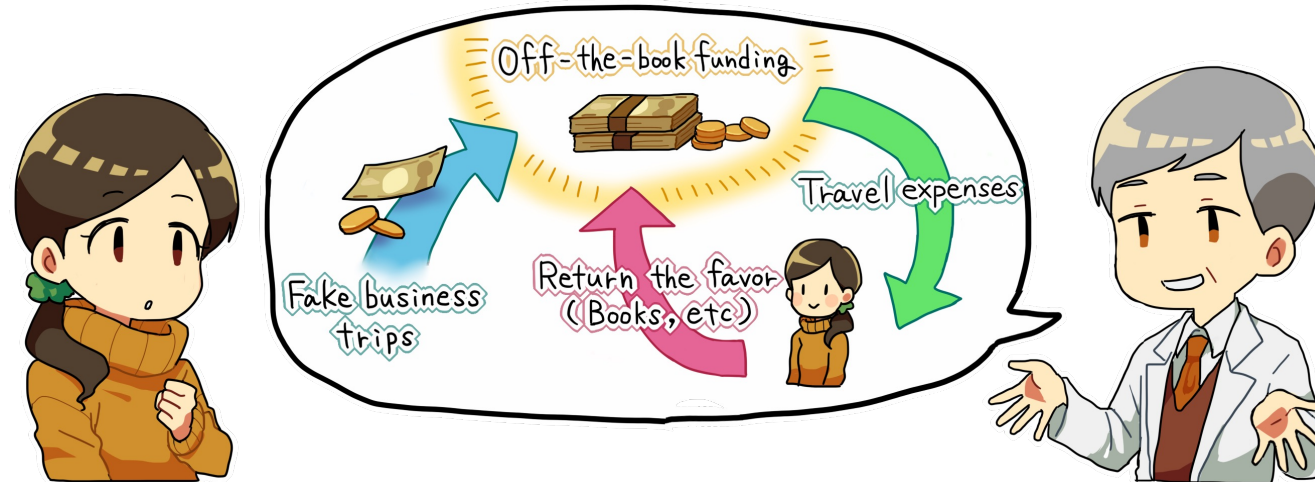
**However, Kate has a couple of problems. Although the conference has a regulation that the speech should be based on an ‘unpublished and original’ paper, she has none like that. It might be possible to rush and make up one based on her previous projects, but she has already published those papers. Kate has no time to worry because her paper submission is due in 3 days and there is absolutely no possibility that the deadline can be extended.**



**Moreover, Kate has another problem. The conference is to be held overseas and participation costs hundreds of dollars. Furthermore, the airfare of the international flights are extortionately-expensive for a graduate student on a scholarship. She has been granted one and only one research funding: however, the use of the funding is strictly limited; travel expenses to participate in the conference are excluded from the purposes of use. The theme of the funding also has nothing to do with that of the paper which she is to read at the conference.**



**Kate attempted, but failed to contact her supervisor because he is currently on a sabbatical leave for a remote island which is not covered by any radio waves. So Kate consulted about her situation with Professor Light, who belongs to the laboratory next to hers. Professor Light made a proposal: Kate may participate in the conference by using an off-the-book fund secretly pooled from the travel expenses, which were in fact reimbursed for Professor Light's fake business trips. He also suggested that Kate pay in kind such as books for her travel expenses.**



**It seems to Kate that this deal is technically feasible, and potentially the only option for which she could take for the sake of attending the conference.**

**What should Kate do?**



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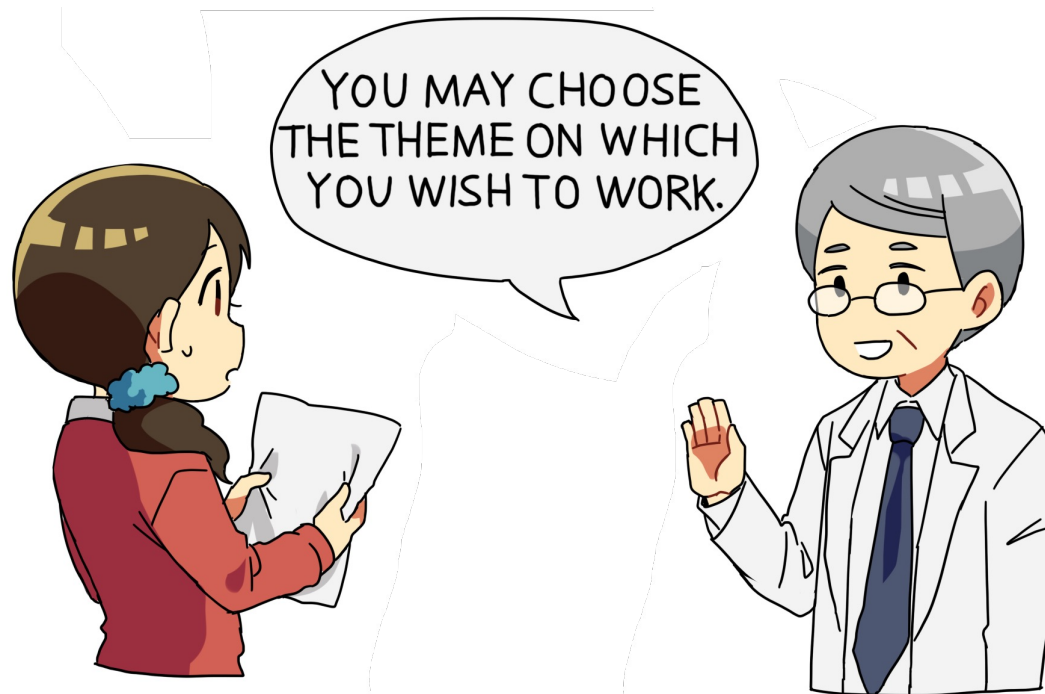
# **Case 4: ‘Good Mentee, Bad Mentor?’**



**Sofia, a graduate student, is currently working on her dissertation. She has one serious concern: she is not entirely confident that her supervisor Professor Walker has provided appropriate supervision for her work.**



**At the first stage when Sofia decided the theme of her dissertation, Professor Walker had provided no serious advice but only said; ‘You may choose the theme on which you wish to work’.**





**Her first tutorial with Professor Walker finished in just 5 minutes. Sofia is a diligent student: she has published several papers in peer-reviewed reputable journals. When Sofia sent the manuscripts and revised versions of her papers to Professor Walker, he provided little advice and few comments upon her works.**



**At the moment Sofia, is at the final stage to finish her dissertation: she is convinced that 85% of the manuscript has been written up. However, the tutorials are very short and only happen once in a couple of months. Furthermore, Professor Walker's advice and comments are as few as ever.**



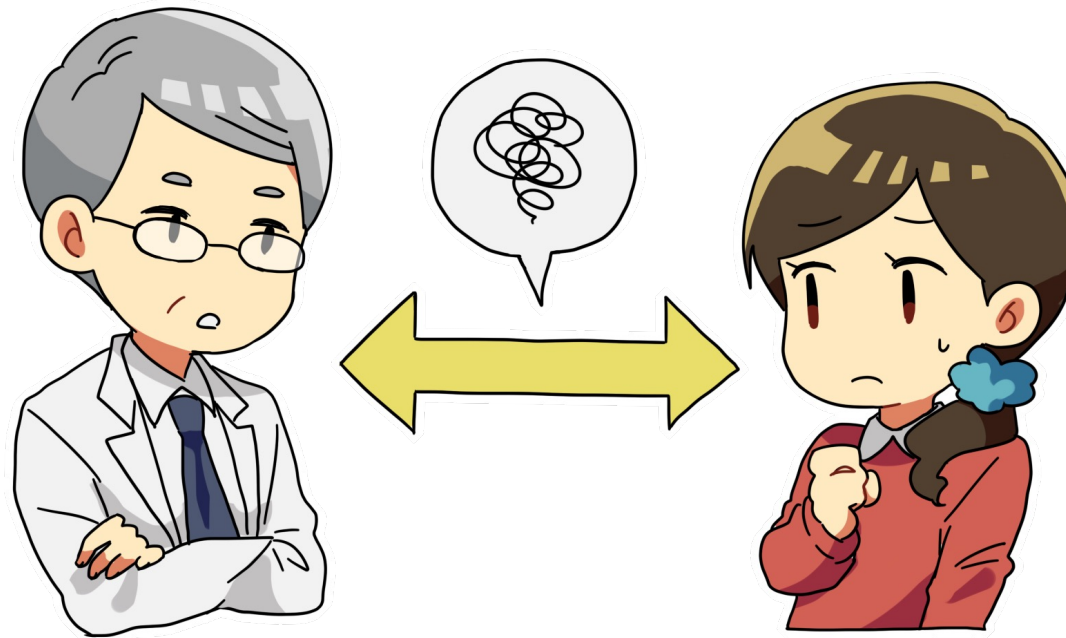
**Sofia feels that it is getting difficult to pick up her pace to finish her dissertation. She sometimes feels that she is wrapping herself up in suspicion that Professor Walker does not read her manuscript seriously, because most of his advice and comments either miss the point or are extremely superficial. On one occasion, Professor Walker made just one comment: he suggested using of a semi-colon in a short pass.**



**Many times, Sofia considered the change of supervisor; however, Professor Walker is the only faculty staff who is familiar with her area of research at her university. Professor Walker is a world-renowned scholar in her discipline: he has been granted numerous large research funds and published a number of books and papers. Furthermore, Professor Walker's professional reputation from his colleagues is extremely high; he is the president of an international academic society as well as a fellow of the national academy.**



**Sofia is very concerned that she will get involved in trouble and difficulties while pursuing her professional career in the future if she puts Professor Walker in a bad mood.**



# What should Sofia do?



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# **Case 5: ‘Media-savvy Intellectual?’**





**Dr Taylor has been working on an extremely minor research theme for a long time and steadfastly obtained major findings. One day, Dr Taylor had an interview with a reporter on his research theme, and it was covered in an article of a local newspaper. The article acted as a trigger to draw huge public attention to Dr Taylor. He gradually received media exposure and became an A-list celebrity.**



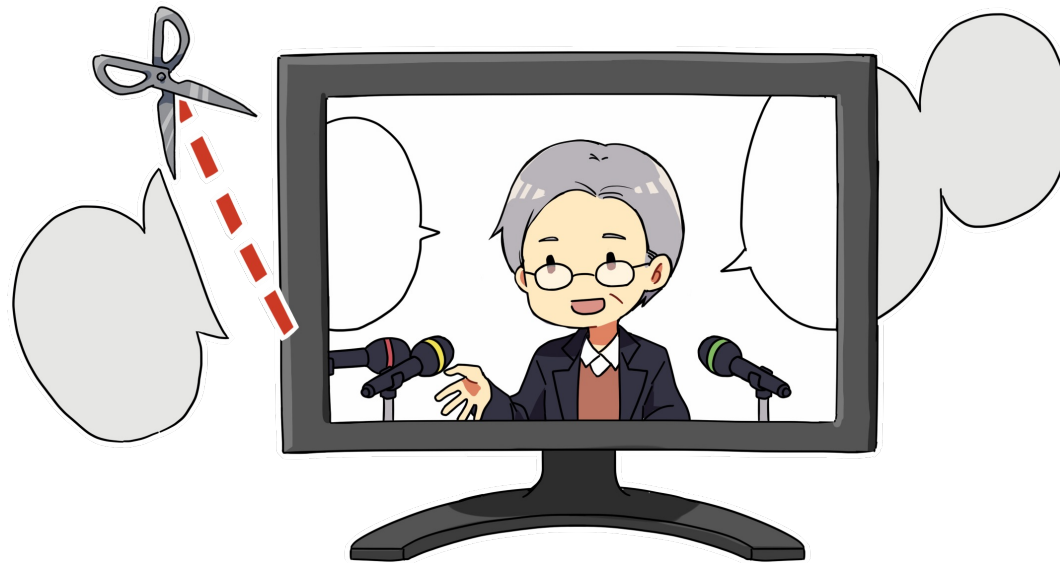
**Generally speaking, research in humanities and social sciences are, in comparison to research in the natural sciences, often considered to be of little use to society; it is not industry-ready, practical, or useful. Above all, Dr Taylor's research area is regarded as one which provides no practical utility. However, this was the first occasion that Dr Taylor's work was highly appreciated by society: people eventually understood that Dr Taylor's research had a huge potential to make an enormous breakthrough on many social problems if and when it succeeded.**



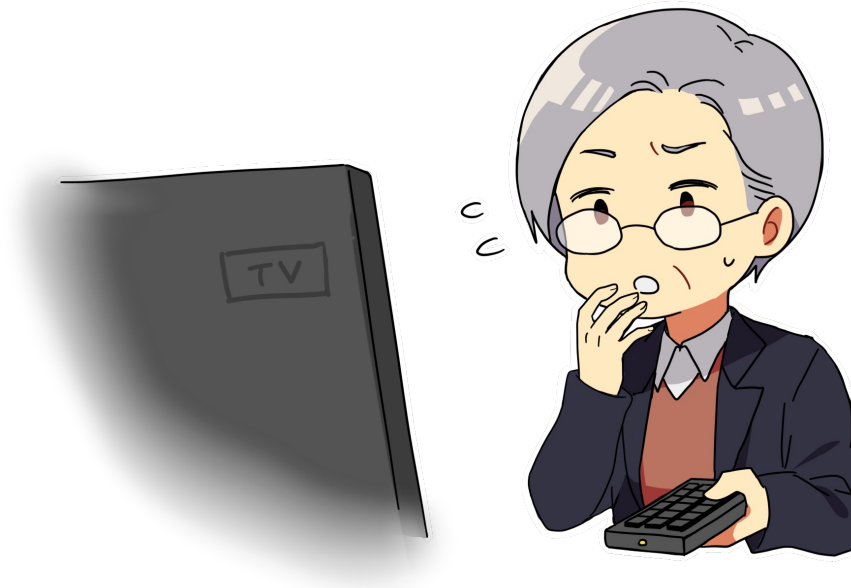
**Dr Taylor is a very modest person, a stereotypical researcher who prefers reading and writing at his office to receiving media exposure. Indeed he is a media-shy person. However, Dr Taylor reluctantly received interviews and media coverage because he held a strong belief that his media exposure drew public attention, not only to his little known research area, but also to its social significance. Dr Taylor's colleagues see his media activities very favourably.**



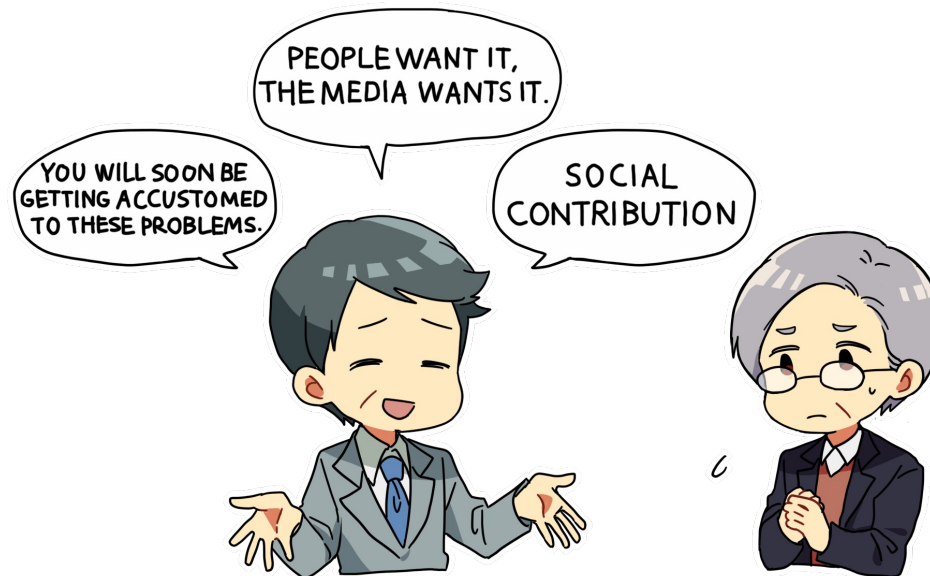
**Gradually but surely, Dr Taylor noticed more frequently that more statements being credited to him were not actually those which he made. As a celebrity, on many occasions, Dr Taylor was asked to give comments on a wide variety of issues from politics to earthquakes to sports, which are not his expertise at all.**



**Although when making comments Dr Taylor put a disclaimer---‘it is my personal opinion because I am not an expert on that matter...’, this part was always cut out from the coverage and his comments sounded as if those were made by an expert.**



**After having those experiences many times, Dr Taylor became fed up with media exposure. So Dr Taylor consulted with a colleague of his, who also received media exposure. The colleague told him, ‘What you have done with media is a very important social contribution. People want it, the media wants it. We have a lot of small misunderstandings everyday: but no one cares. Get over it. You will soon be getting accustomed to these problems’.**



# What should Dr Taylor do?



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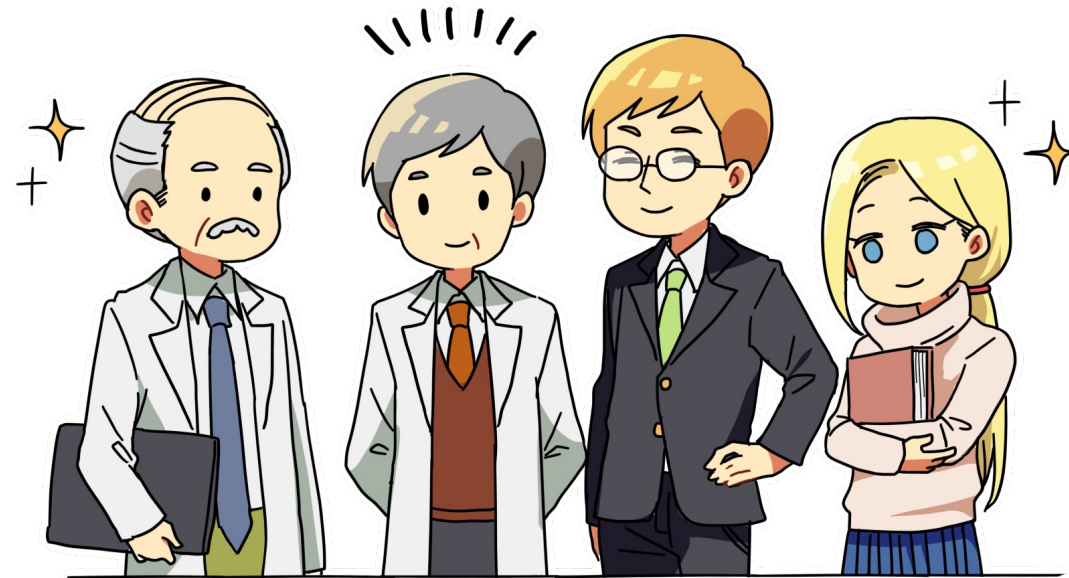


# **Case 6 : ‘Troublesome Boss ’**



**Dr Lee started his career as a research fellow at the globally renowned research institute.**

**Dr Lee's boss, Professor Smith, is a world-famous researcher. He has obtained largescale research grants, and leads several large-scale research projects.**



**Indeed, Professor Smith's research capabilities are extraordinary; he works day and night, and has achieved many significant results. Dr Lee respects Professor Smith from the bottom of his heart. However, Dr Lee has only one concern about Professor Smith.**



**Professor Smith is the kind of person who wants to manage and check every little detail of all administrative work by himself, even though he not only has much more important things to attend to, but is also actually quite bad at such work. As a consequence, Professor Smith was unable to manage all of his workload and has made mistakes several times in the past.**



**One day, while surfing the net on his down time, Dr Lee found an anonymous chatroom post with a serious allegation against Professor Smith which claimed that he has been misusing his research grants.**

**The allegation was given in great detail: Anyone in the same discipline would certainly expect that the “whistleblower” was a member of the same research project.**



**Needless to say, however, Professor Smith is not the kind of person who would intentionally, or even inadvertently commit research misconduct. He is incredibly hard on both himself and those who study under him. He also conducts research in accordance with a strict code of research integrity. Furthermore, those who have studied under Professor Smith before, many of whom used to work for him, learned a lot of valuable things from their mentor. Indeed, they are now world-leading researchers as well as exquisite teachers.**



**However, Professor Smith is not very good at administrative paperwork. He has no idea how to write the documents needed to use his research grants or the contracts with the suppliers of research apparatuses. It is therefore highly likely Professor Smith unwittingly committed improper account processing of the grants.**



**Dr Lee has become distressed about this situation.**

**If Professor Smith's improper account processing is true and its degree and extent are so huge, the projects will forcibly be terminated and Professor Smith might be disciplined, fired from the institution, or expelled from academia. If this occurs, the advancement of the research field driven forward by Professor Smith will seriously be slowed down, or even possibly take a step backwards.**





**There is no problem at all with the research Professor Smith leads and conducts itself. The problem is, however, the use of the grants could be controversial. If their use is not corrected, this could be a big scandal, if not only because the research projects are so big that a huge amount of tax money is spent on them.**

**What should Dr Lee do in this situation? What action could ethically be permissible or required? If you were in Dr Lee's position, what would you do?**



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