Dr. Marc Hauser was a professor in the psychology department at Harvard University. His research centered on understanding the processes and consequences of cognitive evolution, involving human subjects and vertebrate animals (primates). He was prominent in his field, having published approximately 200 articles in refereed scientific journals and six books, and had received numerous federal research grants. He was seen by some as a “rising star”, and he frequently appeared on radio and television.

In 2007, while Hauser was out of the country, Harvard University officials took from Hauser’s lab computer hard drives and videorecordings of experiments. This seizure of data was initiated by a complaint filed by members of Hauser’s lab; the complaint identified experimental problems, including lack of data to support published findings.

In one experiment, a lab member reported how Hauser’s coding of monkeys’ reactions in an experiment differed significantly from that of two research assistants; Hauser’s coding led to findings that the experiment was a success whereas the research assistants’ coding indicated that the experiment failed. When a graduate student suggested to Hauser that a third person code the videorecordings, Hauser resisted and got upset; he argued that there were no inconsistencies in the coding or analysis, that the data did not need coding by another person, and that the results should be reported using his analysis. When a graduate student and one of the research assistants independently reviewed and coded the videorecording of the monkeys’ reactions in the experiment, their results showed that the experiment had failed. Then they reviewed Hauser’s coding of the experiment. Hauser’s coding did not correspond to what happened on the recordings; for example, he coded that a monkey turned its head when on the videorecording it had not moved. When other lab members heard about the problems with the experiment, they shared similar experiences where they believed that Hauser recorded false data and then insisted they report them. The lab members then formally reported their concerns to Harvard University’s ombudsperson and to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The allegations initiated a university investigation of Hauser’s work going back as far as 2002 that lasted three years and involved the sequestration of data. In the last year of the investigation Harvard put Hauser on a year-long leave of absence.

In August 2010, Harvard reported to the faculty that the investigation panel had found Hauser “solely responsible for eight instances of scientific misconduct,” involving problematic data acquisition, analysis, retention, and reporting. Three of the instances occurred in published documents, where original data were missing; the remainder were either corrected before publication or the results remained unpublished. Hauser retracted one of the published papers without providing any reason; he repeated experiments for the other two papers, obtaining the same results as published. At this time Hauser publicly acknowledged making “significant mistakes.”

Further, the report stated that the U.S. attorney’s office for the District of Massachusetts, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Research Integrity, (ORI) and the Office of the Inspector General for the National Science Foundation had initiated inquiries, the latter two because some of the research involved federal grant funds.

In August 2011, Hauser resigned from Harvard. In September 2012, ORI published the findings of its investigation. The report identified six cases where Hauser committed misconduct (fabrication or falsification) in research funded by DHHS, including:

- Falsifying coding of animals’ responses,
- Falsely describing methodology used to code experimental results, and
• Fabricating half of the data in a bar graph.

The report did not identify whether the fabrication and falsification were intentional. In response to the findings, the report stated that Hauser did not admit or deny committing misconduct but did accept that ORI found evidence of misconduct. In a written statement to the media, Hauser wrote, “I let important details get away from my control, and as head of the lab, I take responsibility for all errors made within the lab, whether or not I was directly involved.” Some commentators interpret his statement as implying that the blame lies on others in the lab; others view Hauser’s admission of inattention to details resulting in the misconduct as contradicting his research assistants’ complaints of his intentional data fabrication and falsification.

Hauser entered into a voluntary agreement with ORI for three years that if he applies for Public Health Service (PHS) funding he will be supervised and his employing institution will have to certify the integrity of his data, and he cannot serve in an advisory capacity to PHS.

Sources:
Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Secretary, Findings of Research Misconduct, Case Summary, Marc Hauser (http://ori.hhs.gov/content/case-summary-hauser-marc).

Questions for Discussion:
1. What data management issues does this case raise?
2. Does Hauser replicating some results vindicate him? If not, what might?
3. If you were a research assistant in Hauser’s lab, how might you have handled situations about publishing problematic data?
4. What issues does this case raise for people who report misconduct (whistleblowers)?
5. What are some of the mentoring issues raised by this case?
6. Why didn’t the peer review system identify the problematic data?
7. What are some of the consequences of Hauser’s behavior? For members of the lab? For co-authors? For Harvard University?
8. What are some lessons learned from this case?

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