

On the Downsides of Scientific Leadership: 'Colleague Amnesia' and 'Motivated Forgetting' to Cite Generators of Ideas in Academia and What to Do about It

Julia M. Puaschunder

*Columbia University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 535 W 116th St #109, New York, NY 10027,
Julia.Puaschunder@columbia.edu, www.juliampuaschunder.com, http://blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/jmp2265*

ABSTRACT: The contemporary scientific discourse and academic promotion hierarchies incentivize leadership. Academic leadership is praised for innovation and groundbreaking insights that advance humankind. Rising stars and leaders-in-the-field in academia are those scientists that tell something new and add to the existing literature a novel finding. The obsession with scientific leadership has its clear merits in promoting innovation and prospering scientific advancements of humankind. This paper, however, debatably introduced the idea that an overall focus on scientific leadership may also crowd out honesty in scientific followership. Obsession with being the first to report fresh ideas may distract from accurate reporting of who initially generated ideas. Scientific innovation bias may lead to willingly neglecting to give proper account of and reference to colleagues' work. Especially when different disciplinary schools of understanding, language barriers or cultural silos on different continents exist, chances are opening for neglecting a fair reporting of who came up with an idea first. Scientists may use their language skills to soak up ideas in different parts of the world and get inspired by literature from one context, or other culture to transpose the knowledge and introduce it as something new in another research context, school or world without honest giving credit to the actual generator of the idea. This strategy is introduced in this paper as 'colleague amnesia.' Colleague amnesia occurs if the actual generator of an idea, effect or trend, who inspired subsequent research, is actively and deliberately 'forgotten' to be mentioned or not given fair credit in a reference, citation or acknowledgment in a first-introduction-of-idea publication. 'Colleague amnesia' can fuel into a more widespread 'motivated forgetting' culture when this behavior is backed by group norms and collective practices of certain scientific fields or research clans. If institutions are knowingly capitalizing on motivated forgetting as a market strategy and institutional designs tolerate and nurture this unethical and inefficient behavior, this turns into 'research capitalism.' Lastly, if institutional settings back the ideas reaper for the sake of protecting their community's overall reputation by the negative destruction of initial ideas generators in order to make victims disappear or weaken their claim of intellectual property, research capitalism turns into 'research fascism.' The negative implications of colleague amnesia, motivated forgetting, research capitalism and research fascism to the individual, the scientific collective, institutions but also the larger society are outlined in this paper. Unethical market distortions are not only seen as this kind of implicit light plagiarism. The false crediting of 'translators' as innovators and genius leaders-in-the-field breeds dishonesty in academia and discourages honest participants in academia. For the scientific community, colleague amnesia and motivated forgetting imply inefficient replication of ideas and waste of resources and time for discovery. Institutional settings perpetrating cheating individuals discredit all other honest merits and makes institutions vulnerable to being called out. The paper ends with a discussion of potential remedies for colleague amnesia, motivated forgetting, research capitalism and research fascism.

KEYWORDS: Cheating, Citation, Colleague Amnesia, Followership, Intercultural Dialogue, Interdisciplinary Research, Leadership, Leaders-in-the-field, Motivated Forgetting, Replication, Research Capitalism, Research Fascism, Scientific Ethics

Introduction

Citations are the measure of success in sciences. Research careers are evaluated on the impact a person has on the field with the optimum goal being to become an influential leader-in-the-field with a high citation score. Scientific advancement is based on the novelty of an idea and

its proof of fact in reality. Academics are trained to aim for intellectual leadership. Science leadership excellence is based on being the first to introduce an idea to colleagues, find an effect and its sophisticated proof in data as the ultimate sign of an innovative finding that has a groundbreaking impact on the scientific field and overall population in general. The focus on leadership in academia, however, comes with a price of incentivizing to pretend to be the first one to have had an idea.

This paper concerns different phenomena potentially stemming from the obsession with science leadership.

First, ‘colleague amnesia’ will be presented as strategic neglect to actually cite the source of an inspiring idea that has ignited a presented work that lacks to give an honest reference, credit or acknowledgment to the actual generator of intellectual eureka.

Second, ‘colleague amnesia’ turns to ‘motivated forgetting’ if an entire research community tolerates and practices ‘colleague amnesia’ as a common strategy and thereby implicitly sets social norms that procreate this kind of neglect of the true reporting of the actual source of creativity.

Third, ‘research capitalism’ is proposed as a term to describe if institutional settings back ‘colleague amnesia’ and ‘motivated forgetting’ with institutional competitive arrangements and day-to-day *modi operandi*. ‘Research capitalism’ neglects the idea of research ethics and creates an imperfect information market, in which those are incentivized and win, who turn an invention into an innovation that gets reception from and creates value in the market.

Fourth, ‘research capitalism’ turns into ‘research fascism’ if institutional settings back dishonesty and try to eradicate the victim, whose idea was reaped, in order to ‘bury’ the evidence for unethical behavior stemming from the institution.

Examples for all mentioned terms will be provided in the following paper. The article also covers the individual, economic and societal downsides of scientific leadership obsession in pressuring individuals to constantly strive for presenting novel ideas, which implicitly incentivizes colleague amnesia bleeding into motivated forgetting and erecting fundamentals for research capitalism that may turn into research fascism in its most destructive nature. Lastly, the article also provides preliminary remedies to cope with the lack of honesty and unfair overclaiming of credit as well as aims to provide advice on how to overcome institutional barriers to succeed as an honest academic who gives fair citation credit and remembers those who inspired.

Colleague amnesia

Scientists are trained to be creative and innovatively find research gaps to be filled with novel insights about the world that have a widespread impact. Research careers are built on being the first in the detection of new findings that inform the broad population. This focus on being the first generator of ideas in academia, however, comes with the price of ‘colleague amnesia.’

Colleague amnesia occurs if the actual generator of an idea, effect or trend, who inspired subsequent research, is actively and deliberately ‘forgotten’ to be mentioned or not given fair credit in a reference, citation or acknowledgment in a first-introduction-of-idea publication that clears a specific information market. Oftentimes colleague amnesia is hard to trace as casual and colloquial conversations take place about mutual topics of interest in academia, for instance, in meetings or at conferences. Scientists are also constantly encouraged to present ideas to colleagues anonymously, for instance, in blind peer reviews for promotions, hiring, publication and other merits, such as prizes, grants giving and/or donor funding. In these anonymous reviews, novel and preferably unpublished ideas get exposed to colleagues, who are familiar with the research field they review work for. All the mentioned circumstances and situations – informal exchange of ideas, official presentations and formally blind peer reviews

– are situations of vulnerability for the actual generator of an idea that his or her idea gets reaped without reference, credit or acknowledgment.

Disciplinary boundaries, language barriers and different schools of thought in academia potentially are moderating influence factors for colleague amnesia. Every discipline, for instance, has only a few key journals, in which information is considered so novel that the journals have a high impact factor. Researchers may end up in silos of only targeting and reading up on those leading journals, which allows to transpose ideas from other fields or journal silos oftentimes unnoticingly. Language barriers have also shown to distract information flow. In some fields different schools of thought have evolved concurrently – for instance, as in the case of behavioral economics there exist concurrent European and North American traditions. Within these two continents, scientists oftentimes work on similar ideas and are aware of similarly-minded scholars across the Atlantic but tend to ignore colleagues in fair and accurate citation credits. Multi-lingual research may have a competitive advantage in reading up on both sides and transposing ideas from one side to the other without giving proper credit to the generator of ideas.

All these conditions may lead to colleague amnesia in the active, deliberate and voluntary forgetting of giving fair credit to generators of ideas, inventors and innovators, which is debatably portrayed as a fraudulent subform of plagiarism, called implicit light plagiarism.

Motivated forgetting

Colleague amnesia turns into ‘motivated forgetting’ if an entire research community of a scientific field tolerates and practices the active, deliberate and voluntary forgetting of giving proper credit to initial idea generators, for instance across disciplinary, language or continental barriers. If cooperation in citations is only a prerogative of the in-group, which practices cooperation among valued members and neglects any citation of outside outgroups collectively as a *modus operandi*, motivated forgetting turns into overall market dynamics. The collective character of motivated forgetting leverages the problem of colleague amnesia based on group norms that breed misbehavior. Game-theoretically not participating in motivated forgetting is then a short-term drawback for those who do not comply and report external inspirational idea sources correctly and thereby become seen as not so creative and innovative in comparison to colleagues who practice motivated forgetting. In the long run, however, reputation risks incur as if being caught as a colleague suffering from colleague amnesia will discredit every other honest accomplishment of him or her. In that sense, colleague amnesia is also a short-term strategy that crowds out diversification potential, as people who develop a reputation to reap the ideas of others and present them as their own, will likely get ghosted and not be invited and not be promoted in honest research circles any longer after a while. If motivated forgetting is the norm, researchers suffering from colleague amnesia may still get ahead in their careers but the community that practices motivated forgetting actually breeds a social norm of silo thinking, in which papers are biased with circular community citation. The hierarchical motivated forgetting ladder researchers climb metaphorically may lean against a building built on one-dimensional fundamentals that are at risk of collapsing in call-out scandals. Motivated forgetting silo communities may bring along other socio-psychological drawbacks and destructive traits that are co-morbidities of cheating and unethical conduct.

Leadership has a specific role in multiplying behavior and by engaging in motivated forgetting, leaders cultivate dishonest citation neglect to a multiplying extent. Learning-by-the-example-of-leaders becomes destructive, unhealthy and unsustainable if leaders practice colleague amnesia and thereby set a negative example for the upcoming generation that multiplies and trickles down in the community. Leaders, therefore, appear to have a heightened responsibility to reflect on their own collective amnesia for their function as role models.

Vivid examples of moderator variables influencing motivated forgetting include disciplinary silos, language and continental distances that may cause entire ‘species’ of research clans or domains of research fields to neglect to give a fair and accurate reference, credit or acknowledgment to other ‘species’ or domains that initially inspired research. For instance, macroeconomists may potentially be aware of microeconomic foundations that inspire aggregate work but may be incentivized to forget citing the source of inspiration as for disciplinary divides and researchers tending to not read up on the other side of the economics micro-macro coin.

Historic examples of Nobel laureates in exile reaping ideas in their mother tongue heritage language and republishing them without giving proper credit to the initial author exist. Colleague amnesia bleeding into motivated forgetting may also entail continental barriers. In the field of behavioral economics, two schools of thought exist in Europe and North America. While both fields often discuss similar phenomena, evidence shows that citation hesitancy occurs on both sides. There seems to be a closeness bias and a neglect of physically distanced colleagues, who may yet be close-minded.

Hierarchical ghostwriter pressures are a constant and long-standing problem in academia. But also the gender divide and gender dynamics being skewed towards females having contributed to work that was more successful on the market if the male published it exist for a long time. And reviewers accepting review appointments for the sake of reaping ideas to then slow down applicants in never responding with a review or discrediting the applicant to stop or halt the publication while trying to publish the idea themselves appears – very unfortunately – to be a research strategy.

The digital age is assumed to have exacerbated the problem of motivated forgetting as knowledge is widely accessible online to inspire everyone with access to the internet as the costs and barriers for communication have decreased dramatically in the last century. Novel Artificial Intelligence and Open-Source innovations, such as ChatGPT and plagiarism software advancements, may hopefully curb the problems of colleague amnesia and motivated forgetting in the future.

Research capitalism

Colleague amnesia and motivated forgetting turn into ‘research capitalism’ when institutional settings are enabling colleague amnesia and support motivated forgetting as a competitive strategy by – for instance – erecting institutional settings to transfer ideas. Institutions thereby reap novel ideas and turn inventions into innovations on their soil. The term ‘research capitalism’ is thereby used to indicate the feature of capitalism to be oftentimes short-term oriented and in its pure neoclassical understanding to neglect the idea of ethics. Examples may include institutional support for inviting job market candidates without proper intent to hire like-minded scholars to entertain the faculty with fresh ideas despite knowing that the faculty is prone to get inspired but then forgets to cite their job market candidate muses’ idea generation.

University press publishers who promote blind review *Spiels* and accept in-house reviewers taking months for reviews of ideas that are close to theirs and finally blocking projects by either not responding at all or not providing any substantial feedback are another form of research capitalism if the university press tolerates this kind of unethical behavior. Research capitalism of university publishers occurs if the publishers do not question the credibility and integrity of dishonest reviewers if they misbehave, especially on a repetitive basis.

Research capitalism breeds competition within an institution if universities imply double research ethics standards for different schools despite knowing that the different schools thereby may flourish colleague amnesia. For instance, if the Internal Review Board (IRB) approval in one school (e.g., the business school of a university) usually flies through quickly

but takes months for approval of research endeavors in another school (e.g., the faculty of arts and sciences of the same university), ideas that would need proof in behavioral economics laboratory experiments can be quicker pursued in one school (in our example the business school) than the other (in our example the school of arts and sciences). Leaving room open for inspiration in one place and execution and marketability in another within the same institution, makes researchers prone to get inspired by inventions in one school (in our example the school of arts and sciences) and then drive in results as innovations meeting market relevance in demand quicker at their home school (in our example the business school).

Leadership obsession and the striving for being the first leader in innovative ideas may thereby breed a climate of hostile capitalism and dishonesty but also defection of trust and discouragement within one institution. Leaders-in-the-field that practice colleague amnesia in this way may not be based on their ingenious minds but rather reflect unethical cheating backed by institutional research capitalism support.

Research fascism

‘Research capitalism’ turns to ‘research fascism’ in its most destructive form when institutional settings are aware of and tolerate colleague amnesia and motivated forgetting behavior coupled with manipulation and hostile behavior to discredit the generator of an idea. Research fascism occurs if institutions tolerate this kind of implicit light plagiarism and implicitly support perpetrators in enabling to transfer ideas and discrediting of initial ideas generators to ‘bury’ the victim as evidence to uphold the reputation of the institution.

Examples may include universities backing professors who are called out for reaping ideas constantly while discrediting victims who are whistleblowers. Universities may also practice research fascism if entertaining the *Spiel* of inviting foreign scholars from abroad of particularly vulnerable populations. If the institutional settings are such that foreigners from vulnerable populations are forced to present all their ideas on a constant basis *in lieu* of visa sponsoring on a repetitive basis, especially when these foreigners are under pressure to return to unstable countries in crises if not producing and offering ideas repetitively, universities become guilty of research fascism.

Why care?

What are the downsides of colleague amnesia? First, the problem of vulnerability exists if being caught reaping the ideas of others and pretending to have forgotten who came up with them. Colleagues will notice a pattern and the most important capital in academia – reputation – will take a toll. It simply will discredit everything else and all the honest accomplishments a researcher genuinely came up him- or herself if being caught and called out for colleague amnesia.

Second, colleague amnesia turning into motivated forgetting of entire fields and research communities breeds the likelihood of inefficient repetition, which wastes money, time and resources. The obsession to become leaders thereby has a shadow of the negative externalities to burn resources that repeat what has been done and known before. There is, though, the argument that repetition to report and embrace a larger or different audience would – overall – be beneficial, despite being dishonest and fraudulent implicit light plagiarism. At the same time, noticing this pattern of dishonesty in academia may discourage noble hearts and people of integrity from choosing science as a career and ending up in academia. Giving false credit to someone who was not the initial generator of an idea may also hold the downside that the description in the literature will be less based on a personal eureka moment and therefore may lack some creative insights on how one came up with them and what is the actual rationale behind the stolen idea.

Third, when colleague amnesia and motivated forgetting culminate in research capitalism, institutions or publishing regimes back misbehaving for the sake of a short-term gain that leaves the institution vulnerable. If research capitalism is called out, it potentially leads to a full-blast scandal that causes more damage than an institution upholding scientific values and disciplining its members for wrongdoing.

Fourth, when research capitalism turns against the victim, whose idea was stolen, in research fascism, institutions or publishing regimes back unfair and hostile behavior against the initial generator of an idea in order to protect the reputation of the entire community and institutional brand. The victims of such behavior may not only take a toll on their careers but also socio-psychological damage and emotional collaterals are likely to occur. Drop-outs of honest academics may be the consequence, which discredits science per se by diluting noble values and turning its remaining members into dishonest cheating experts.

What to do about it?

Colleague amnesia appears to be a common phenomenon. First, capturing the behavior and introducing the idea of colleague amnesia as a silent form of light plagiarism will help growing awareness and foster confidence to monitor and call out suspicious behavior. Second, a registry of suspected colleague amnesia could help curb the behavior with transparency and fear of reputation drawbacks. Third, with the advent of AI-generated bots, for instance ChatGPT, the time has come to filter out colleague amnesia strategically as a state-of-the-art in academia. For instance, journals and publishers could require credibility checks and accuracy in citation behavior prior to the publication of novel material. If this requirement would become the norm, researchers would be incentivized to give fair credit to – at least – the already published ideas.

Motivated forgetting should also be tackled by setting positive social norms that condemn colleague amnesia as a silent form of light plagiarism. If entire research groups, disciplinary fields and scientific schools practice fair citing ethics and condemn motivated forgetting in writing and actions, this would certainly breed positive norms that hinder colleague amnesia. Tackling leaders' behavior who leading-by-example offers the possibility to solicit a trickle-down effect of the positive anti-forgetting norms. Like the Keynesian multiplier multiplying funding from the top that trickles down in the entire economy, leaders-in-the-field should breed positive examples by giving fair and accurate credit. Leaders should also remind colleague amnesia is cheating that will discredit everything else that is genuinely in a young upcoming scholar if being found cheating in reaping others' ideas without proper citation credit.

Ethics of inclusion in the age of social justice could also be used to draw attention to the problem and solicit fair credit giving. Attention should be given to young upcoming scholars, who may be discouraged from staying in academia if being cheated and bamboozled by fraudulent researchers above them in the hierarchy. Especially vulnerable populations of foreign researchers from crisis-struck communities that are held under repetitive visa renewal scrutiny terms should have means to report cheating and unethical ideas reaping. Anonymous channels to contact senior leadership but also awareness-building for leaders that the support of colleague amnesia by institutional protection can lead to scandals are essential ways to combat the problem on an institutional level.

Lastly, institutional fascism could also be combated by raising awareness of the problem among guilds and professional associations. For instance, international associations but also national academies of sciences, as well as professional ombudswomen and ombudsmen, may help in creating awareness of the problem. Sunlight remains the best disinfectant and so may online transparency about fraudulent institutions that back the silent light plagiarism of colleague amnesia deliberately and repetitively as a competitive market advantage that, though, is cheating and market-distorting.

Flagging reviewers who accept review appointments for the sake of reaping ideas to then slow down applicants in never responding with a review or discrediting the applicant to stop or halt the publication while trying to publish the idea themselves could be combated with tracking reviewers and taking them out of the reviewer pool if repetitive uncollegial behavior occurs.

Trademarks and patents are used in capitalism to protect intellectual property, concepts that have encroached certain competitive fields in which the stakes are high as well in academia. For instance, trademarks and patents to protect intellectual property oftentimes before it becomes marketable are common in medicine, physics and technology. Further development of similar concepts for other fields could curb inappropriate ideas reaping. Social sciences have copyright claims as an alternative to protect intellectual property. Arts use certified letters sent to oneself to protect ideas – such as theater playwriting and movie scripts – with an external certified timestamp are additional checks and easy implementable remedies to protect intellectual property. In print patterns of designers, however, the protection of ingenious ideas gets very hard, almost impossible – a fact that calls for improvement cross-disciplinary.

Discussion

Future research avenues should build on the emerging literature on the downsides of pure leadership focus. Studies could first address the problem qualitatively. Case studies and vivid examples may serve as the first recognition of the effect. In a subsequent study, colleague amnesia may be quantified in terms of its losses to the individual, academic integrity and scientific advancement for society. From an awareness of the problem in society naturally follow the remedies and opportunities to rise to a higher ground through the darkness of motivated looking away and brain-fogging in the literature what others have known before.