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COMPROMISED WORK × (/GOOD-BLOG)

August 27, 2021 (/good-blog/compromisedwork)

Good Work, Compromised Work, Bad Work... And Ego (/good-blog/compromisedwork)

Good Work (/good-blog/category/Good+Work)

by Howard Gardner

In late July, I received a message from the USIA. For a brief moment, I thought it might be from the United States Information Agency or Intelligence Agency, but it was actually from an organization that I had not heard of—The United Sigma Intelligence Association. USIA informed me that , along with linguist Noam Chomsky and mathematician-physicist Edward Witten, I was the winner of their annual prize. I don't consider myself to be modest but I was astounded—and humbled—to be grouped with two of the outstanding scholars of our time.

I googled the USIA. I learned little about the organization online but noted that it had many outstanding figures as advisers—including several whom I knew personally. I wrote back to the agency and asked whether there were any requirements in connection with the award. I immediately heard from the director, saying that there were no 'asks'—the organization hoped that my work would “inspire other talented people and help them further their love for humanity.” I notified a few organizations to which I belong that I had received this recognition and considered that the end of the matter.

In a few days I had occasion to write on several matters to my colleague and friend Steven Pinker (I entitled the e-mail “Sundry on Sunday.”) I noted that, along with entrepreneur Jeff Bezos and historian Yuval Harari, Steve had received the USIA award the previous year. He made light of this recognition and his role as an adviser, saying that he often agreed to lend his name to support organizations.

This past week—an unexpected twist. I had inferred that the USIA award went only to three persons each year. But two individuals whom I also knew were informed that they had also received the USIA award for this year. And undertaking more due diligence than I had, they had begun to wonder what was the USIA, where was it housed, how and by whom was it funded, and did it in fact issue the books, podcasts, and other forms of publicity that are mentioned on their website. And not quickly receiving satisfactory answers, my colleagues so far have not accepted this recognition.

As someone who has studied and written about work—and particularly ‘good work’—for many years, I am left with a conundrum:

Could this be good work—in which case, the organization indeed has undertaken legitimate activities, actually makes appropriate use of its advisers, and reaches young people whom they seek to inspire?

Could this be compromised work—in which case the organization may have good intentions, and hopes to achieve its goals, but has gotten off to a slow start and exaggerated its achievements thus far?

Or is this basically a scam (aka ‘bad work’)—an effort to bring attention to an organization which is not legitimate and which may exploit well-known names in ways that are not sanctioned, not legitimate?

From my grandson, I have subsequently learned the ‘sigma’ is often used online in a frivolous way—which did not give me confidence in this particular brand of sigma! Perhaps we are being stigmatized!

And I have to ask myself: Did my own ego prevent me from doing the due diligence that I should have done?

Updated October 2021

Writing in mid October 2021, after consulting with several individuals, I know a lot more about USIA. It is clear that this is not a genuine organization in the sense that American professionals assume. The leadership is new and is not aware of how USIA has operated in the past. There is no recognized process for adding advisers or choosing award winners. What astonishes me is that new award winners are regularly added as are new advisers—I suspect that, like me, these individuals were flattered to be informed of this award and did not bother to ask probing questions. At this point, USIA is best described as a reputational Ponzi scheme.

Reference

<https://www.amacad.org/publication/compromised-work>

December 15, 2020 (/good-blog/2020/12/15/on-bad-work-in-the-academy-recognizing-it-thwarting-it)

On “Bad Work” in the Academy:

Recognizing It, Thwarting it (/good-blog/2020/12/15/on-bad-work-in-the-academy-recognizing-it-thwarting-it)

Good Work (/good-blog/category/Good+Work)

by Howard Gardner

For many years, my colleagues and I have sought to identify the factors that increase the likelihood that good work will be carried out. We have considered a variety of factors, including the early formative influences, the contributions of models and mentors, one's colleagues on the job, the norms and examples celebrated at the workplace, and most recently, the ways in which good workers identify and then deal with dilemmas at work.

Occasionally, we have questioned informants about “compromised work” or “bad work”—but that kind of work has not been an explicit part of our research agenda. While lamenting situations and circumstances that interfere with the achievement and maintenance of good work, we have mostly “accentuated the positive.”

To be clear, this stance does not reflect any personal aversion to recognizing obstacles. In other strands of research, I have carefully considered factors that impede desirable outcomes. As one example: in studying leadership, I have underscored the point that many leaders focus excessively on convincing others to pursue a certain path, without devoting sufficient time to understanding the resistances to following that path. As another example: in analyzing what it takes to master a scholarly discipline, I have detailed the misconceptions of the “unschooled mind” that impede the understanding of important concepts and procedures.

In conjunction with my memoir that I recently published ([asynthesizingmind.com](https://www.asynthesizingmind.com) (<https://www.asynthesizingmind.com/>)), I've been reflecting on situations in my own life where I have become entangled with individuals who were clearly not good workers.

And, as a result of these entanglements, I carried out work that, in retrospect, I might have been better off spurning.

It's important to describe the kind of collaborative research that I undertake when I am not simply proceeding as a solitary scholar. Working at Project Zero, a part of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I need to secure funding for research, pay "overhead" to Project Zero and to the University, assemble teams to carry out the research, and upon completing the research, report results to the scholarly community as well as to the funders. Over five decades, I have applied for funds from hundreds of organizations and individuals, received scores of grants, and worked with over one hundred research associates and assistants. I feel positive about the overall accomplishment, but I focus here on things that went wrong.

I will not identify the person or the situation, but I trust that the "lessons" will nonetheless come through.

Here are four warning signs that I wish I had noted and heeded:

1. Funders who want to "buy" or "use" your name

When your work has achieved a certain amount of attention, people often come to you for advice. If you are a reasonable citizen, you give your best thoughts and then move on; or if you can't be helpful, you try to suggest alternative sources.

But I regret that I did not routinely also ask myself "Why has this person come to me, for what reasons, and what use will the person make of the aid that I provide?" And on occasion, I wish that I had actually posed those questions deliberately to myself and to the potential funder. Failure to do this can result in use of one's name and/or one's affiliation as an endorsement of an activity. This peril has been especially vivid when I have politely answered questions about whether one can diagnose intelligences by looking at fingerprints—so-called dermatoglyphics. Even when my answer is a decisive "No!", the fact that I have responded has been used as an endorsement. And so, I now routinely say

“Please do not state or imply any endorsement on my part”—and if the practice persists, I follow up with a message that the University does not look kindly on such deception.

2. Dirty money

Over the years, I have sought funds for many projects; much of the time these approaches are rejected, sometimes with reason, often with no response at all. Needless to say, I have been gratified when such support has been forthcoming—and even more, on those rare occasions when it has been volunteered. It’s a necessary part of my job but not an uplifting experience to walk around perennially with a teacup in hand and to see your folder of rejections grow ever thicker.

It’s important to stress that many generous people and philanthropies support research without a hidden agenda—or are at least open to various findings. Hallelujah! But it’s still prudent to step back and interrogate the reasons for offered support. How will the funder react to different outcomes? And—though it may be hard to ferret out—What are the sources of funds? Would we (or the institution where we work) be embarrassed, were the sources to be identified? The novelist Balzac famously quipped “Behind every great fortune, there is a crime.” Why is it less problematic nowadays to secure funds from the Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller, or Mellon Foundations? It’s because the original philanthropist has long since passed from the scene and in the meantime the fund-raising process has been professionalized.

3. Corrupt or immoral funders/colleagues

I don’t think it’s my job to hire an investigator to scrutinize the daily and nightly activities of individuals with whom I am in contact. (Being famously oblivious, I used to quip “individuals can be making love in my office, and I would not notice it.”) But this “separation of work and play” can go too far. If it’s evident to others that the person-in-question is behaving improperly, immorally, or even illegally, my personal obliviousness or naivete is not a sufficient excuse.

I wish that I had listened more carefully when family or friends said to me “Re X, have you noticed... What do you think of...?) And, if you cannot come up with satisfactory answers, that is a warning sign.

4. Liars

By nature and rearing, I am a trusting person and I like to give others the benefit of the doubt. And if encounters with strangers occur at a party or around the coffee machine, such trust seems to be the proper stance.

But if a person regularly makes claims that make you or others lift their eyebrows in disbelief, that’s clearly a warning sign. I’ve hired or collaborated with individuals who are habitual liars and I wish that I had called them on this trait immediately. In more than a few cases, I wish that I had gone back to the recommenders—though, admittedly, in a litigious society, such re-checking can be a risky process. But it makes a lot of sense to speak “off the record” to others who have previously had contact with the person-in-question and to let informants tell you—by what they say, what they don’t say, and how they say it— “what’s the story” with respect to the person-in-question.

As my wife and I have often said to one another, when we ask a knowledgeable individual about a person’s reliability, we pay scant attention to the substantive answer—we instead pay attention to the “latency”—how long does it take the informant to respond, and is the response marked by hesitations or “hedges”?

Lessons learned

I’ve reached the point in life where I will rarely be called on to practice such scrutinizing behaviors or to make such judgments of character. But I’m also at the point of life where I can and should provide advice to individuals a generation or two younger who may be dealing with comparable situations. I need to bear in mind that such “due

diligence” may be even more difficult to do in an era of social media and innumerable digitally available sources—where it is not easy to figure out what or whom to trust. But there is no alternative to trying hard!

It’s been said that “love is blind”—and perhaps, in affairs of the heart, that’s a good thing. But when it comes to work situations, it’s important to keep your eyes wide open and your ears attentive as well.

Concluding Note:

Alas, there are many other kinds of bad work in the academy (plagiarism, authoritarian treatment of doctoral students, fudging of data etc. blatant sexism,) but I have focused here only on the bad work that I have encountered in my own work life.

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December 16, 2011 (/good-blog/2011/12/16/a-case-of-bad-work)

A Case of Bad Work (/good-blog/2011/12/16/a-case-of-bad-work)

Good Work (/good-blog/category/Good+Work)

by Howard Gardner

Background: For fifteen years, my colleagues and I have studied GoodWork— work that is excellent, engaging, and carried out in an ethical, responsible way (see goodworkproject.org and goodworktoolkit.org). From time to time, I have written about Compromised Work—work that, while not strictly illegal, is carried out in an irresponsible, unethical way.

Recently, I've been the victim of fraud—an example that goes beyond Compromised Work and is best described as a scam, a swindle, a prototypical example of Bad Work. In what follows I report the facts of the matter, as best I have been able to ascertain them, and then draw a few conclusions. By doing so, I hope to spark discussions of how best to reduce the incidence of blatantly Bad Work.

The Case: On October 31st 2010, I received an email from a person in Mexico City, expressing regret that my plane had been cancelled and that, therefore, I had been unable, at the last moment, to attend a conference at which I was the featured speaker. Though my memory is far from perfect, this note did not ring any bells. Consulting my records, I confirmed that indeed I had not accepted any invitation to any conference at that time. Further correspondence with my informant indicated that a Dr. Dzib had said that my plane was cancelled and had then read aloud an entire paper that purported to be from me. I was angered to learn of this “whole cloth deception” but did not think that there was much if anything that I could do.

Then, at the beginning of December, I received in the mail a book length publication from Mexico, entitled APRENDIZAJES Y DESARROLLO EN CONTEXTOS EDUCATIVOS, compiled by Joaquín Hernández González, Gilda Rocha Romero, José Pérez Torres, Nicolás Tlalpachícatl Cruz, and María Imelda González Mecalco, dated October 2010, and published by Universidad Pedagógica Nacional—complete with the customary notice “all rights to reproduce prohibited.” The lead essay in the book contains my “Conferencia Magistral”. There is no copyright on the essay; but there is an acknowledgement of thanks to Dr. Alma Dzib and a reference to Dr. Dzib Goodin. The essay is mostly my words, though there is inserted material devoted explicitly to the conference. With the mailed book came an unsigned piece of paper from the Rector, expressing regret at the cancellation of my flight. According to the publication, the Rector is Sylvia Ortega Salazar. That piece of paper is reproduced directly here.

Thanks to sleuth work by Kirsten Adam, Yael Karakowsky, and Charles Lang, I've been able to ascertain the following additional bits of information. This conference was advertised for several weeks on the Internet. The organizer at the conference

(presumably Dr. Dzib) reported that I had sent the presentation the day before, thinking ahead of the worst case scenario—a cancelled flight. She went on to read the paper as if I had written it in the first person. She apologized that she could not add the remarks about American education that I might have included. She indicated that she is at the Harvard Medical School, that she and I are friends (I have never met her, to my knowledge, and she is certainly not a friend or colleague), and that she and I are both members of Mensa International (an organization that I know nothing about and certainly don't belong to). And she includes a reference to my parents' departure from Nazi Germany which is completely wrong and gratuitously hurtful. In other words, one complete falsehood after another.

For further information, see http://www.upn.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=865:howard-gardner-en-la-upn&catid=50:actividades-academicas and <http://www.webmii.es/Result.aspx/Alma/Dzib> http://www.upn.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=865&Itemid=610

Implications:

This episode is an unambiguous instance of bad work. As far as I am able to ascertain, there was nothing that I ever did or said that indicated or implied that I would attend such an event or prepare a paper for a volume—particularly a volume that had clearly been planned and prepared well before the Conference took place. Nor do I ever give permission to reproduce my work without retaining the copyright. Any statement or implication that I had anything to do with this event has no basis in fact.

The episode raises a number of questions:

I. What was the motivation for the fraud? We have no direct information on this. I suspect that a person or persons wanted to have a conference and used my name and interests as a pretext for setting up the conference, securing an audience, and issuing a publication that purportedly grew out of the conference.

2. Who was involved in the fraud? It is completely unclear whether the fraud was the creation of one or a small group of persons, or a much larger undertaking, involving many people, including the editors, the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, and/or other parties.

3. Who are the victims of the fraud? Clearly, those who attended the conference, expecting to hear me speak, were deceived. They may well have invested time and money to come to the Conference and they are owed an apology by the organizers, if not reimbursement for any expenses that they incurred. Also, any readers of the book who believe that I spoke there and prepared a paper for the conference were also victims. Since I was misrepresented, I (and my reputation) are victims as well. So are those who believe in honoring international copyright regulations.

4. Why bring attention to this shameful event? This is not the first time that my name has been exploited, and I have also been the victim of other frauds and swindles. In general, rightly or wrongly, I have kept quiet about these events. In cases where I know the deceivers personally, I have registered protests which may or may not have had any impact.

In this case, however, the fraud is of such a scale, and so blatant, with so many victims, that it seems wrong simply to be silent about it. Indeed, when people remain silent about circumstances where they have been deceived, they often, if inadvertently, encourage the deceiver to initiate yet another deception, perhaps even one on a broader scale. By bringing attention to this event, I hope both to embarrass the perpetrators of the fraud and to reduce the chances that they can repeat the deception again, on other unwitting victims.

As pointed out by Katie Davis, this fraud underscores the powers of the internet. The internet makes it possible to advertise the conference and circulate the proceedings to a very wide audience. But the Internet also makes it possible to track down the perpetrators of a fraud and at least call attention to their misdeeds.

The case raises the broader question of how to deal with instances of compromised work, or of blatantly bad work. I've given my own views, and I'd be very pleased to hear views from others.

There is one other moral to this episode.. If you learn that I am coming to a conference, or that I have failed to show up at a conference, it is best if you confirm that report. The same thing ought to apply when you consider attending any event of whose existence you are uncertain.

The health of a society depends upon trust. When trust is diminished or absent, life becomes difficult. Alas, the executors of this bad work have torn apart the fabric of scholarly trust, and for that they deserve condemnation.



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