

58. The Stolen Dissertation

I have long hesitated to describe this case because it hits rather too close to home for my liking. Writing an original and worthwhile dissertation has been the bane of my life for the more than sixteen years of my graduate student life. I did manage to finish the dissertation of my first Ph.D. in criminal justice, but that was I think, now in retrospect a little easier than the one I am trying to do now in philosophy, or “mindfulness” as some of the younger students call it.

My problem is one that all Ph.D. students face. To put it simply it is that what the faculty asks of its students is unrealistic and essentially an impossible task to demand that anyone undertake. It is expected that all dissertations make a contribution to knowledge, add new findings to the accumulation of knowledge in their chosen field. Just pause for a moment and think about this. First of all, how is one to comprehend or even grasp what has gone before? The answer to this, the professor will say, is that this is why all dissertations must include a section at the beginning of their dissertation, a “literature review” that recounts everything that has been published before on the particular topic one has chosen for one’s dissertation. Perhaps you can now also see why I have had trouble writing my dissertations, especially my current one in which I have been unable to even write a one page outline of my topic. The reason being, of course, that I cannot find a topic that does not repeat what has gone before. How can I possibly grasp everything that has gone before on my topic if I cannot find a new topic in the voluminous literature in the field that is in itself an impossible task, to say the least. These days there is more than just a bible or two to read and digest. You see what I mean? How can I do a literature review on my topic if I do not know what I am looking for? Do you see the impossible whirlpool that paralyzes the mind of any serious student?

There is much more I could say about this because, as you can see, I have given much thought to this problem. However this case is not about me, but about the foibles and vicissitudes that

arise from this universal problem of academic life. That is, the problem of knowledge. Or, to put it another way, the twisted relationship between the old and the new.

I have never fully revealed to Colmes my thoughts on this matter. He enjoys making fun of me as a permanent student, the “never ending” student as he likes to call me. And to this day I do not know what Colmes’s dissertation was about, what field he studied, or whether he ever wrote one (and, given his dyslexia, how could he?). His entire academic background is shrouded in mystery which, as I have already related, drives the VP for human resources crazy in her vain attempt to somehow defrock him.

And so, as I was most mornings sitting at my desk staring at a blank piece of paper, trying to come up with a dissertation topic, write a one page outline of what it would be about, I welcomed the bang on the wall of my office signaling that my mentor needed my presence. I arrived to find a student, about my age (an older or mature student—age also has a deep relation to dissertation writing), bright red angry cheeks, screeching in a way that was not appropriate for her age. Colmes sat at his desk, placidly munching a toasted scone, licking his lips, then sipping his cup of tea.

“Come! Hobson! Do join us!” he said, amused, crumbs of the scone falling down his carefully buttoned shirt and tie.

“The asshole stole my dissertation!” she screamed.

“And which asshole would that be?” asked Colmes, mockingly.

Her name was Shirley Anderson, and she sported a huge mop of red hair, a face freckled not unlike Little Orphan Annie, her green eyes were those of a demon, her slightly overweight body bristling with rage, one hand on her hip, the other waving what I guessed was her dissertation proposal. I carefully made my way around her to the overstuffed chair. I was a little taken aback by Colmes’s mockery. She was clearly in no state to suffer such unsympathetic Victorian masculinity. And in response she quite reasonably, I thought, tossed her dissertation proposal on to Colmes’s desk and it broke apart, the pages spreading all over, some on to Colmes’s lap.

“My dear young lady!” quipped Colmes, “my deepest apologies. But from what I understand of your case, your dissertation was not stolen.”

“And how would you know? Has the Dean already turned you against me? You men!” She now stood upright, head back, her chest and slightly protruding belly thrust forward, her entire body dressed in a tightly fitting black stretch top and tights running down her slender legs. She reminded me of a male ballet dancer. Except that she was certainly no male.

“Please take a seat,” said Colmes quietly, pointing to my wicker chair, “I apologize, and meant no offense.”

I was surprised that Colmes apologized. He rarely apologized for anything he said or did. The idea that he could be wrong rarely occurred to him. I stood up from my stuffed chair and extended my hand. I felt sorry for her. I completely understood what she was going through. “I’m William Hobson, Professor Colmes’s assistant,” I said calmly.

Colmes gave me a quick sideways look, a mixture of annoyance and approval. The student needed to be calmed down.

She turned her freckled face towards me and said with a delightful smile, “pleased to meet you, and I’m Shirley Anderson. And I’m not happy right now.”

The room fell silent, and Shirley looked back at Colmes who coughed a little to clear his throat.

“Miss Anderson,” began Colmes.

“You can call me Shirley,” she answered, “and I’m very upset as you might have noticed.” She managed a faint smile, though I detected water in her eyes.

Colmes began to gather up the pages of her dissertation proposal. Shirley leaned across the desk to help. Their eyes met and I could have sworn there was a spark.

“What I was pointing out before, Shirley, was that technically speaking, I do not think that your dissertation was stolen, at least going by what the Dean told me.”

She was about to interrupt, I could see, but then fell back in the chair and waited for Colmes to finish.

“Rather, it was your idea that was stolen. I know that sounds a bit pedantic, but that is surely what you meant as well, is that not so?”

Shirley wriggled a little and then sat back in my wicker chair. “I suppose that’s right. But either way, it’s not allowed, is it? I mean. The Dean or someone, the chair of his dissertation committee should stop him, right? I mean, it’s clear that he stole

my idea, and you know it took me maybe a year to come up with it.”

Boy oh boy! Did I feel for her! I certainly understood where she was coming from. And I was about to say so, when there was a knock at the door and in burst another student with whom I was somewhat acquainted, having served with him as student representative at the school of criminal justice faculty meetings. I rose, and expected that Shirley would also, given that it was very likely that Colmes had invited the evil doer to join us.

“I’m Sullivan. Tom Sullivan. And I didn’t steal nothing,” he said, standing in the doorway.

Shirley remained seated, fiddling with her dissertation proposal, putting the pages in order.

“Of course not,” said Colmes slowly, looking him up and down. “Do come in and close the door.”

I stood and offered him my seat in the corner on the overstuffed chair. Of course, he was not going to let himself be put down there.

“I’ll stand if you don’t mind,” said Sullivan.

“Fuck you!” mumbled Shirley.

I was shocked, Colmes showed no emotion at all. “I have looked at both proposals,” he said, “and I have to say that they are remarkably similar.”

It was then that things took a most interesting turn, and I was surprised that I had not seen it coming. Time was to be the best advocate.

“I had this idea a long time before she did,” claimed Sullivan, “at least a year ago.”

“And I had mine longer ago than that. I can prove it. We were in that seminar a couple of years ago. I spoke up about my idea, even did a short presentation on the topic. And you were there, I remember it well,” countered Shirley.

I sat back in the overstuffed chair and sighed. I could not see how this could be resolved. How do you prove that one idea came before another? Worse, how can an idea be stolen? What exactly is an idea? Colmes looked across to me with a knowing glance.

“What is the idea, exactly,” asked Colmes directing his question to both students.

Sullivan stepped forward. “My dissertation is titled ‘The Fallacy of 500 Delinquents.’ ”

And Shirley quickly stated, "Mine is called '500 Delinquents revisited.' "

"The titles do seem similar," noted Colmes, clearly amused. And what will be the contents of these dissertations?"

Sullivan quickly answered, "I will reanalyze the Gluecks' data and show that their entire method of collection and analysis of the data was biased by certain preconceived, unstated assumptions about the causes of delinquency."

Colmes looked across to Shirley. "The same," she answered, though then she added, as if an afterthought, "but I will probably pay more attention to female delinquents."

I should inform my readers here of just who "the Gluecks" were. They were, I suppose you could say, the modern pioneers of juvenile delinquency research in the United States, if not the world. They left behind them an enormous database of information collected over a number of years between the 1940s through 1960s. A husband and wife team, they won awards and medals of honor all over academia (Harvard especially) for their research and writings. Taking them down convincingly would be a huge undertaking, guaranteeing whoever managed to do it, a prestigious career, one that would surpass the Gluecks. That a mere graduate student could do it was most unlikely. The ideas of these two students were just a little too grand, was my guess. But then, who am I to judge?

Yet this dissertation topic had a most attractive advantage: it avoided the costly and time consuming necessity of collecting the data. The Gluecks had already done it, and left it in pristine condition. Of course, it would have to be digitized. However, if I wanted to be a troublemaker, I could have argued that neither of these dissertation ideas were acceptable because of the very fact that the student was not challenged to construct their own measuring instruments, as they were taught in their statistics and methods classes. In a sense, one could even argue that, because they were not collecting their own data, that there would be nothing "original" in their dissertations, and therefore did not qualify as adding to the body of knowledge already established in this field. It was nothing new. The Gluecks had already done it.

"The chairs of your respective dissertation committees are different, I take it?" asked Colmes.

Shirley quickly responded, "I have mine, Professor Antwhistle, and she is very much in approval of my topic."

Sullivan jiggled nervously from one leg to the other as though he were about to turn and leave. "I haven't formed mine just yet," he said sheepishly.

"Then I will recommend," announced Colmes in his Victorian morality mode, "to the Dean that both topics are acceptable, that there is little chance that they will be duplicate dissertations."

Both students remained silent. Shirley looked down, not entirely happy with this decision. Colmes noticed, and then added, "though I do think that both of you may find it useful to work together to set up the Glueck database for analysis."

"But, professor," began Shirley.

And Sullivan could not hold back a grin. "Sounds fair to me," he said.

Colmes continued. "I assure you both, by the time you have set up the database and put together your methods, literature review and hypotheses, they will be quite different in their outcomes. Don't you think Hobson?"

"Indeed I do," I nodded with feigned enthusiasm.

"Then I think we are finished here," said Colmes as he dismissed both students. "And Sullivan, see that you get your dissertation committee formed before I change my mind."

This might have been the end of it, except that an unusual event was soon to occur that would ruffle Colmes's satisfaction with having easily solved this small case. Frankly, I could not see why the Dean had referred the case to Colmes in the first place. Well, that's not entirely true. Colmes had over the years managed to convey to all at the university that his services were indispensable, so whenever any case arose that was even slightly disagreeable, administrators and some professors would refer the case to Colmes.

Believe it or not, I had managed to type out a few pages of what my dissertation would look like. Having done a Ph.D. in criminal justice, and completed my dissertation, I was naturally inclined towards something, shall we say, theoretical, in my second Ph.D. in philosophy. When I studied criminal justice, the world of social science, at that time, a theoretical dissertation, in

the criminal justice field, was beyond comprehension. The founders of the field of criminal justice generally were preoccupied with establishing criminal justice as a “science” which to them meant that every dissertation had to be empirical, that is you decided on a problem, you did a literature review of the topic, identified the gaps in the literature, formulated a theory, derived hypotheses to be tested, identified what data one would need to collect in order to test the hypotheses, adopt a measurement technique (that is, how and what data were to be collected) and that was it. Facts were established, your theory supported or not. This was all well and good, except there was one pesky thing that hovered over every such dissertation, which was that there was supreme disappointment, indeed, the likelihood that a committee would fail a dissertation, if the research did not produce positive results. This is why the demand for statisticians, as exemplified in the case of *The Student Body*, was enormous, and why the only obligatory courses in criminal justice, were statistics and methods. Coming up with a significance of .05 or less was the ultimate achievement.

Forgive me. I have rambled on again. But I needed to share my thoughts with you here because the event that would turn everything upside down, well I exaggerate a little, was in a way a product of what I have just described.

It concerned a now elderly student (Prudence Wright) who was in her late thirties when she enrolled in the criminal justice program, in 1965 about ten years before I enrolled in the same program. She zipped through all the course work and passed all the qualifying exams, and then formed a committee and wrote her dissertation. Except that she did not quite finish it, or at least as far as I know, she may have written it but did not submit it, though it remains unclear whether she defended it or not. Rather similar to what I did with my criminal justice dissertation. I wrote it, finished it, defended it, but did not get around to actually submitting it through the formal administrative channels, with the result that I had finished my Ph.D. but had not yet graduated. As you know, I did all this so that my official status was still a student, so my F Visa would remain valid in the US.

One might say that life intersected with Prudence, who had pursued a successful career becoming director of the New York State Criminal Justice Services, a most prestigious position, for

which in those days, a Ph.D. was not required, in fact might have been looked on as a liability. Toeing the line for the bureaucratic and political needs of the Governor of New York and other politicians, was all that was needed, and this was usually in the form of statistical reports that supported politicians' versions of the truth. Prudence was on the verge of retirement and now was moved to complete her Ph.D. by defending her dissertation that was completed some thirty years ago.

The Student Performance committee first considered Prudence's request and took the easy way out. It would be surely ridiculous to accept a dissertation for defense that was written thirty years ago. If it were accepted it would be a patent admission that the field of criminal justice had made no progress in those thirty years! However, the rules required that the case be forwarded to the full faculty for its consideration. And it was there that the impossible situation arose to which Colmes would be called to resolve.

The chair of the student performance committee presented the case, which took only a few minutes. The chair of the faculty was about to put the case to a vote when Professor Theodore Garcia, (Ted the Red, you may remember him from a previous case or two), who had remained silent throughout the deliberations, in his deep gravelly voice, called for a point of order.

"Before we vote, should we not give the student an opportunity to make her case? I mean due process, after all," he said.

"She had her say when she met with the Dean and he rejected it and sent her case to us for confirm," replied the chair of the student performance committee.

"What about due process?" asked Ted, a lawyer after all. "Has anybody read the dissertation? Does a copy of it exist? And if so who has it? And does the original dissertation committee exist? Should it not be, with regard to academic freedom, the dissertation committee that makes this decision? Is there any law or regulation that says she cannot defend a thirty year old dissertation?"

The chair of the faculty gave a resigned sigh. "According to the Dean's administrative assistant, there is no record of her dissertation committee, but there is a record that she passed all

other requirements with distinction. I would have to go back and look in my own files to be sure, but I think I remember being on her committee. It was probably the first dissertation committee I served on.”

“Then do we have a copy of the dissertation?” persisted Ted.

“I do,” responded one of the graduate student representatives, a heavy-set, woman in her mid-thirties, an NYPD cop who had taken advantage of the program that took in a select number of NYPD cops to do their master’s degree. A deal made between the Dean of some thirty years ago and someone in the then Governor’s office.

The entire faculty looked at her in amazement. The chair looked at her grimly.

“You’re sure of that? I mean, how would such an old dissertation draft, in fact come to think of it any dissertation be in the hands of students?”

The faculty stirred, the scraping of shoes on the wooden floor filled the small meeting room.

“By Prudence Wright, is that the one?” replied the student rep.

“Yes, you mean there are others?” asked the chair.

“Sure. Is there something wrong with that?” she retorted defensively, “I mean, I’m only a masters student, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, I guess not. So where can we get this dissertation?” asked the chair feeling a little foolish.

“You mean,” put in Ted, “that you guys do not have a copy of the dissertation, and you made your decision based simply on the fact that it was written thirty years ago?”

This was Ted’s usual manner with his colleagues. Because none of them were lawyers, he considered himself to be surrounded by know-nothings, people who had no idea how the real world worked.

“I guess not,” answered the chair, slightly embarrassed.

“Well, we’re not,” asserted the chair of the student performance committee. “It was written thirty years ago, was not defended, so why do we need to look at it? The statute of limitations is eight years, if I am not correct. And that’s a rule of the university, not confined to this school.”

Silence again, then another scuffling of shoes on the floor.

“That may or may not be the case,” answered Ted, sitting up straight his tall body rising above everyone else, even sitting at a conference table. “She has a right to be heard, to make her case.”

“But she’s no longer a student,” argued one of the faculty.

“Actually, technically, she is,” responded the chair. “It seems that the university has allowed her all these years to enroll as a dissertation student. She paid her fees every year, so therefore technically maintained student status.”

“Then we owe it to her as a faculty to at least read the dissertation before making such an arbitrary decision. Statute of limitations be damned,” pronounced Ted, now a lawyer speaking for the defense.

“But she doesn’t have a dissertation committee,” complained another faculty member.

“Is that her fault or ours as a school for being negligent?” insisted Ted.

The chair sighed again. “Well, I suppose we should also recognize her service to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, and recent years as its director. She makes us look pretty good,” said the chair seriously, but then immediately regretted it.

Several faculty spoke out, each annoyed and resentful. Their complaint was of course, that what she did in her work as a bureaucrat had little to do with academic achievement. The school of Criminal Justice achieved its top ratings not by what its Ph.D. graduates did in the workplace, unless they were in academia of course, but by the number of publications its academic faculty produced every year. The school of Criminal Justice was an academic school, not a training school.

Ted spoke up. “I move that the student be invited to meet with faculty of her choice to form a new dissertation committee and, should the committee approve the dissertation, to arrange for its defense.”

The student representative seconded the motion and it passed with no objections, and with one abstention. The one abstention was normal being that it was from the one faculty known as the “great abstainer” who always abstained and had never been known to vote for or against a motion.

The matter appeared to have been resolved and the chair moved to close the meeting. He called for a motion, and just as

he was about to call for a vote to pronounce the meeting over, the Dean's assistant slipped in the door, whispered in his ear, and dropped a thin folder on the table. The Chair's cheeks went a little red. He opened the folder and stared at it.

"Well?" said Ted, rising as though the meeting had ended, "I have a class to teach."

The chair looked up and said, looking at Ted. "I think you better stay. It seems that Prudence defended her dissertation thirty years ago. She just did not get around to submitting the final forms to the administration, or submitting the required copy of the dissertation formatted according to the university's strict rules."

"Did she claim she had a Ph.D. When she applied for the prestigious position at the Division of Criminal Justice Services?" asked one of the new assistant professors, trying to make a contribution.

"I can answer that," said the NYPD student. "She definitely did not. The story among the students is that she would not have got the job if she had a Ph.D. Would have been overqualified."

This small bomb caused a rippled of talk and consternation among the faculty.

"Then it seems that this is simply a small formality, and we have wasted all this time over a simple rule violation?" asked the chair of the student performance committee.

"I do not see that this changes anything," said the chair of the faculty. "She can't be granted a Ph.D. based on a thirty year old dissertation, defended or not. The research will be thirty years out of date. Every dissertation must make a new contribution to the field. To accept this dissertation would be to admit that the field has made zero progress in thirty years."

"Might be close to the truth," muttered Ted, now the cynical lawyer.

"Do we know what the title of the dissertation was?" asked someone.

The chair looked in the folder that the Dean's assistant had left him. "A Re-analysis of the Gluecks' study of 500 Delinquents."

I was surprised when Colmes actually came to the door of my office and knocked lightly as he entered. Strange. Usually, I

was beckoned by a shout of “Hobson!” or that knock on the wall that divided my office from his. This must be something special. And it was!

“We have a case that hits close to home,” said Colmes, “or at least close to your home.”

I looked up from the second page of my dissertation draft. “Really? You mean about Australia?” I asked thinking he meant that kind of home.

“Of course not. Your dissertation. Come to my office and I will fill you in. An impossible situation, a most attractive and enjoyable case, indeed. Though I can see no solution at the moment. Indeed I cannot.”

What I have described to you so far I have taken from my notes that I took when Colmes filled me in on the case. It was indeed a little too close to home. I had the sense to make sure that I had submitted my first dissertation on criminal justice before the eight year statute of limitations ran out, though I am not sure whether there was such a statute way back then.

“So what do you think, Hobson. Should they make her do her dissertation over again, same topic or new topic?” asked Colmes as he settled into his desk chair, I on my wicker chair.

“I don’t think that is quite the issue, is it?” I said coyly.

“My goodness, Hobson, you are sharp this morning. What are you getting at?” Colmes asked, as if he hadn’t a clue.

“It’s the topic, right? I mean, this would be the third Gluecks dissertation. There’s something fishy going on here.”

“Indeed, Hobson. Indeed!”

It was mid-morning and I heard the welcome sounds of the clinking of cups and saucers, and sure enough Rose the younger appeared, her hair tied up in a bun, knitting needles stuck through it, eerily just like her mother. She placed the tray on the edge of Colmes’s desk and we each took our cups and plates, each plate with a scone broken open nicely, little pots of jam and clotted cream. Colmes reached out and grasped Rose’s hand as she was about to lift the teapot and pour the tea into our cups. “Rose, my dear, let me do it. You sit over there on the overstuffed chair.”

Colmes smiled, but it was a sad smile, and then I realized that it must be the anniversary of Rose the elder’s passing.

“Thank you Colmes,” Rose answered and sat herself down in the old chair, now starting to show its age. “I know,” she said,

“it’s two years to this day.”

“Indeed,” said Colmes, “indeed, she is missed so much. I have survived that terrible day only because of your continued presence, my dear.” He poured the tea in our cups and got up from his chair, I hate to say it, but he was showing his age. It was obviously an effort. But he managed it, even though his hand shook quite a bit as he poured the tea, then carried the tray to Rose in the corner, and placed it on the small side table that had been added some years ago for a chess board.

“And what case is about to be solved today?” she asked brightly, putting down her tea cup and taking out her knitting.

“It’s the case of a stolen dissertation, and it looks as though it may have been stolen at least twice,” said Colmes. “But I will spare you the details because the case is really about the impossible deliberations of the various criminal justice faculty, indeed, the very foundations that justify the existence of a university.”

Of that, I was in full agreement. And I do admit that at times, I regretted that I had spent so much time dithering about in academia, on a kind of treadmill, gaining knowledge, imparting it to other students, but for what end? Worse, in my most cynical moments, were we students getting our moneys’ worth?

Colmes put down his tea cup and looked at his watch. “They will be here any minute,” he said, looking to each of us in turn.

Rose took the hint and quickly finished off her last mouthful of scone with jam and cream, gathered up our cups and returned them to the tray.

“Stay if you wish,” said Colmes, looking at her, with a most wistful look, touching her arm lightly as she reached for the tray. Looking back on our many years together, I think that this was probably the most loving moment that Colmes had revealed. It made me sad, feeling that time had passed us by way too quickly. And maybe it was this feeling that caused me to write up all these cases. His wisdom and insightfulness will be there for posterity. Perhaps forgotten, but always there to be remembered, if you see what I mean.

At that moment, there was a slight scuffle at the door and a loud knock.

“Enter!” called Colmes, then quickly turned to me, “Hobson would you be so kind as to bring some chairs from the kitchen?”

We will need three more.”

“Three? It’s going to be kind of crowded,” I complained.

“Yes, but I don’t want them to feel too comfortable,” answered Colmes as two angry students marched in, the Gluecks students as we had started to call them, Shirley Anderson and Tom Sullivan.

“I thought all this was over with,” screeched the red headed Shirley. In another world I might have been attracted to her. But she was such a heavy looking woman, though not so big and not fat either. Her presence just made you feel like she was pushing you, weighing in on you. Maybe that’s what it was. She worked out at the gym every day.

“Right!” complained Sullivan. “What’s this all about?”

I returned with two chairs but they appeared not to notice. I placed one in front of each of them, then returned to the kitchen for another and placed it beside the overstuffed chair. I was a little puzzled but dared not raise it with Colmes. This seemed to be too many chairs. There were to be the three students, so who else?

A gentle knock came at the open door and in came the mature student, Prudence Wright, confident, quite tall and slender, could have been a basketball player when she was young. Confident, a heavily made up face, well powdered, and a faint odor of lavender. She squinted a little, enough to suggest that she was wearing either ill- fitting contact lenses, or that she had some kind of eye condition.

“Ah!” said Colmes, “Thank you for coming at such short notice. May I introduce you to Shirley Anderson and Tom Sullivan, I think it would be fair to say that they are admirers of your work.”

Prudence nodded at the two students, then looked at me. “I don’t know what this is all about. I thought we were meeting about the university processing my application to be awarded my Ph. D. Based on my dissertation that was passed with distinction and defended successfully.”

“That is partly correct,” answered Colmes. “By the way, please meet William Hobson here, who is my assistant, and these two students are Shirley Anderson and Tom Sullivan who are in the midst of writing their dissertations which happen to be on the very same, or should I say similar topic as was yours.”

“Really?” asked Prudence, surprised, “I didn’t think anyone

but me was at all interested in the Gluecks, that they were, by academic standards, stale meat.”

“Not at all,” responded Colmes, “and by the way, have you brought a copy of your dissertation, as I requested?”

“I have. But I don’t think it was necessary. Years and years ago I donated a copy of it to the school of criminal justice library. At the time no-one seemed the slightest bit interested,” answered Prudence.

From an expensive looking polished leather satchel, Prudence retrieved a thick, bound book, “letter size” as they say in America, typed, double-spaced as required upon submission, along with many other strict formatting requirements, margin widths, page numbering, front matter and the rest. She offered it to Colmes, but before he could take it, Sullivan snatched it away and immediately leafed through it. He then passed it to Shirley who did the same.

“Looks the same as the one in the library,” observed Shirley. I have a copy of it.”

Likewise,” said Sullivan.

“Then how do your dissertations differ from mine? And why are they letting you do this?” asked Prudence adopting her bureaucratic manner honed as a thirty year New York State bureaucrat..

“Why? What does it matter to you?” asked Sullivan, defensively.

“Because I had the devil of a time getting my dissertation approved way back then. The eggheads claimed that my dissertation was not adding anything new to the field because I was simply using already collected data, and it was the view then that for a piece of research to be new, one had to collect one’s own data.”

“And did you find out anything new?” asked Colmes.

“Not really. Basically corroborated what the Gluecks did. Corroboration is just as important in science, especially social science, as it is to discover something new. At least that was my argument to the dissertation committee thirty years ago and they, after a few days, agreed to approve it.”

“Do you have proof of the approval?” persisted Colmes.

“Here is the memo from the Dean’s secretary at that time.”

Prudence handed a letter to Colmes who read it quickly and

handed it back. "This is an important document. I suggest that you make a couple of copies of it and submit it to the Dean," advised Colmes.

"I already did that, when I made my initial request," answered Prudence patiently.

"So what's all this to do with us?" asked Sullivan with a touch of belligerence.

"Yes, why are we here?" added Shirley.

"Do you both have copies of Prudence's dissertation, or have you consulted a copy of it directly?" asked Colmes.

"I don't have a copy, but I've of course read it in the school library. How else could I do a dissertation on it if I hadn't read it?" replied Sullivan.

"I have my own copy," said Shirley, now growing impatient.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door and Colmes called, "enter," then rose from his chair to welcome Professor Maxwell Dunstan the renowned campus statistician.

"Well now, Dunstan, it's so very good of you to come. May I introduce to you three devoted students, Shirley, Tom and Prudence."

The three students twisted around to see who it was. They all had heard of him, and Prudence thought that she had consulted him originally, but then it emerged that Dunstan was not then on the faculty.

Then Colmes did something that surprised me. He got up from his seat and insisted that Dunstan take his place, and walked around the desk to take up the spare seat.

Professor Dunstan sat back in Colmes's chair, delighted. "Now, how can I be of help?" he asked.

"Now that you have read the Prudence Wright dissertation, please tell us your opinion," requested Colmes.

"Well, for something written thirty years ago it's very solid. However it used the early version of analysis of variance to analyze the data, and the procedures of probability statistics have progress somewhat since that date."

"So had you been on Prudence's dissertation committee you would have passed the dissertation?" asked Colmes as though he were cross examining a witness.

"Certainly," said Dunstan with an air of impenetrable confidence.

“And what about now?” continued Colmes.

“Well, that’s a sticky question. But given all that’s riding on it, I would accept the dissertation, maybe with the provision that the student defend it again in front of a new committee. But I could be talked out of that.”

“So you’re saying that it is of sufficient quality to receive a passing grade?” pressed Colmes.

“Yes. But here is also another important reason why it should be officially passed,” said Dunstan.

“And what is that?” asked Colmes.

The three students sat mute, looking down, as though they were the objects of the discussion, which in fact they were.

“Given the two dissertations by Anderson and Sullivan respectively on the Gluecks that are now in process, it will be very important that they be able to show that their dissertations are clearly an improvement over a previously published, that is an approved dissertation, that of Prudence.”

“I take it,” said Colmes looking at Shirley and Sullivan, “that each of you is doing the usual literature review of any other studies that have been published on the Gluecks?”

Sullivan mumbled, “yes of course.” And Shirley nodded assent, then added, “and besides Prudence’s there are none others that have actually re-analyzed the Gluecks data.”

“Now wait a minute,” said Colmes. “Is it acceptable for dissertation students to actually replicate a previous study? This does not seem to add any new knowledge to the field.”

Professor Dunstan smiled, almost laughed. “A good point, but we have come a long way since thirty years ago when Prudence here, I’m sure, had a hard battle to get her dissertation, basically a replication of the Gluecks study, accepted as adding to the knowledge base.”

“You’re darned right about that!” exclaimed Prudence.

“These days,” added Dunstan, “we realize that replication of a study is just as important, maybe more important, than the original study. Because results are all the product of probability statistics, there is always the chance that the analysis was defective in some way or another.”

“But,” retorted Colmes, almost chuckling, “what of these two,” he gesticulated to Shirley and Sullivan, “they can’t be allowed to do the same thing, can they? I mean they may just as

well co-author the one dissertation and count it as two!”

Shirley and Sullivan stirred uncomfortably. But they were immediately saved by Dunstan. “The solution to that small difficulty is for each of you to use a different type of probability statistic. Prudence here, used what we would call today a primitive version of the probability statistic of analysis of variance, but it was the only one available at the time. I would suggest that Shirley use multiple linear regression analysis, and that Tom use either multiple logistic regression or multivariate analysis of variance, a more sophisticated version of the original. It will be most interesting to see how their results will compare.”

By this time I was nodding off in my corner on the overstuffed chair. It all seemed to me like a kind of fraud. I might be old fashioned, but I could not see any creativity in these dissertation proposals. They were basically copying someone else and each other. They each complained that their own dissertations or dissertation ideas if one could call them that, were stolen, but ironically, I think they were both stealing those of the Gluecks of the 1960s, as did Prudence in the 1980s.

I can see the scientific argument for the importance of replication. But that should be after one has done a dissertation that contains something new. Maybe I’m old fashioned. Maybe I’m asking too much. Maybe this is why I spend years trying to come up with a dissertation idea.

It is probably unnecessary to relate the final outcome of this unmemorable meeting of minds. Colmes of course had set all this up in advance. He had Dunstan in his pocket, so he simply went directly to the Dean of the School of Criminal Justice and explained that Professor Dunstan had agreed to chair both dissertations of Sullivan and Anderson respectively, that each would be contributing innovative and unique methods of reanalyzing the Gluecks data. And that the mature dissertation of Prudence Wright was in fact defended originally and successfully, so all it required was for her to submit a properly formatted copy of the dissertation to the administration along with the official forms signed by the Dean. The case was never returned to the faculty and no one asked what became of Prudence and her dissertation.

I admit that I am a bit of a touchy person. Colmes has

managed to knock a lot of that out of me, but I still on occasion tend to take offence if I think I have been slighted in some way. And yesterday, at that unmemorable meeting I did take just the slightest of offence, when Colmes introduced everyone to Dunstan, except me. I know that I had met him once or twice before, but given Colmes's commitment to Victorian manners, he should none the less have introduced me.

The fact is that I think Colmes is losing his edge just a little. I do not know what is wrong with him, but he has not been quite up to it in recent days. He was very slow to get up from his desk chair yesterday, and seemed to be puffing and out of breath by the time he walked around to the other side of the desk and sat on the vacant chair.

I got up from the three page rough draft of my dissertation concept, and decided to have it out with him. No, I don't mean that, I mean ask him if he's okay. I knocked on our office wall and heard a muffled answer of "come Hobson." I entered and made directly for my wicker chair.

"So all ended up well after yesterday," Colmes said well satisfied, though lacking that usual excessive pride over his own achievement. "I spoke with the Dean and he was most pleased to have it all fixed, and the prospect of three more dissertations coming out of his top rated graduate program.

"He said it was *his* program? I asked with a little petulance.

"Now, now, Hobson. Don't be such a moralist," Colmes said with a frown.

"Purist, more like," I retorted. "There wasn't a trace of creativity or a chance of anything new in any of those dissertations finished or unfinished."

"Really, Hobson. Have I not taught you anything?" said Colmes frowning again.

"You have taught me much, especially the demand to maintain the highest of standards," which you obviously have not applied to your other students.

"Are you accusing me of double standards?" ask Colmes, raising his graying eyebrows, a slight sparkle in his glance.

"I am!" I announced as though from a pulpit.

"Then I am most flattered, since that is the very basis on which the entire academic establishment rests," he said now eyeing me with a kind of superior amusement.

“Are you OK?” I asked, suddenly remembering why I came to see him.

“Indeed I am, Hobson. Are you?”

Colmes started to breathe quickly as though out of breath.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I’m confused.”

There, I had bared my throat and waited for the final blow.

Colmes appeared not to notice. “These three cases,” he said, “simply reveal the double standards and, when applied in practice among weak humans, the unavoidable duplicity built into academic life...”

I blinked and for a moment thought I was going to break down into tears. And then he continued, a furrow in his brow.

“The fact is, Hobson, that in academia, there is a fine line between sharing and stealing. If you do not believe me, read the history of the discovery of the DNA sequence.”

“So the dissertations. Nothing was stolen, everything was shared?”

“Exactly, and the magician disguised as a statistician waved his magic wand and presto! Each dissertation was different. Problem solved. The next day is a new day.”

Colmes said this in his typical enthusiastic way. This was the old Colmes I knew. And suddenly I felt much better and got up to leave.

“I’m okay,” I called with a smile.

“Me too, Hobson!”

And I went back to my dissertation draft.

