

Interviews

Participants: Melanie Chang, post-doc
Larry Johnston, professor
Tom Plough, post-doc
Richard Estaben, post-doc

(Melanie Chang is a new post-doc in Professor Johnston's laboratory. Larry and Melanie have decided that she will work on a project begun four years earlier by Tom Plough. Tom published one paper in a relatively obscure journal and then picked up an entirely different project based on his thesis work. His subsequent research was very successful and he is now in the process of interviewing for a junior faculty position. The first scene takes place on Monday afternoon in Professor Johnston's office.)

Larry: Melanie, I think you have to try the experiment again. I don't understand why it's not working. Tom describes the procedure very clearly in his paper. Have you asked him for help?

Melanie: No, he's been away on interviews for the past two weeks. When I discussed the project with him before he left, he just said I should be very careful during the extraction process.

Larry: Well, talk to him as soon as he gets back. I'm sure he'll be able to help you. You can't really move forward until you repeat his experiment.

Melanie: Larry, I know I've asked you this before, but I'm still not clear on the answer. Do you know why Tom dropped this *idk* project after he published the paper? Why didn't he follow up on the results himself?

Larry: Well, you know how imaginative he is. He came to me and said he had a new idea based on some problem he'd encountered in his thesis project. He asked if he could spend a little time working on it before he continued on the *idk* gene. I told him to go ahead, and then the results were so exciting that he never looked back. In January, when I told him I was thinking of having you continue the *idk* work, he said he thought it was a good idea. He did say, though, that several aspects of the project had been very difficult technically, and that you might have some problems at first.

Melanie: Well, he was certainly right about that. I'll catch him as soon as he gets back. Maybe he can spend an hour or two with me in the lab.

(Late in the afternoon on Wednesday . . .)

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Melanie: Hi, Tom. I've been trying to call you. Do you have a few minutes to talk? You know I've decided to look for the cofactors that might explain your results with the *idk* gene in chickens. The problem is, I can't repeat your experiment. I'd like to go over the procedure with you; maybe you can tell me what I'm doing wrong.

Tom: I'd be happy to talk about it Melanie, but right now I have an appointment with Peter Yales across the street. Why don't you call me at home tomorrow.

Melanie: OK, I'll call you. I really need to meet with you as soon as possible.

(10 a.m. on Thursday . . . Melanie dials the telephone in her lab.)

Melanie: Hi, Janet. May I speak with Tom, please? (She pauses a minute.) That's strange, he told me yesterday that I should call him this morning. Did this trip to Michigan come up suddenly? (She pauses again.) Well, I guess he must have forgotten. Will you ask him to call me as soon as he gets home?

(Five days later, Melanie is standing in the lab shaking her head when her friend Richard Estaben walks by.)

Melanie: Richard, do you have time for a cup of coffee? I need your advice.

Richard: Sure, just let me return these samples to the cold room.

(Ten minutes later at a table in the cafeteria.)

Melanie: Richard, what would you do if you suspected that someone had faked the data on a paper?

Richard: I guess it would depend on the situation. Why?

Melanie: Well, as you know, I've been trying to repeat Tom Plough's work on the *idk* gene so I can start looking for a co-factor. I just can't make it work. I've tried asking Tom for help, but he keeps avoiding me.

Richard: You know how busy he is with interviews. Maybe it's just your imagination.

Melanie: I thought so too at first, but when he got back from Michigan and I still didn't see him in the lab I began to wonder. I called him at home and he said he'd had a bad cold. I tried to make a joke about his avoiding me and he got very defensive. He suggested that the *idk* project might be too difficult for me.

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Richard: Strange. I've never heard Tom say a negative word to anyone.

Melanie: I know it's not like him--he was one of the first people I met when I came here and he was extremely helpful about showing me around the lab. The only explanation I can think of is that he's hiding something. I know I'm repeating his procedures exactly. The results just aren't there. I've begun to wonder if he fudged the data.

Richard: I can't believe that's true. Why don't I come by the lab tonight and we'll go through your notebooks.

(Sometime after midnight, Melanie and Richard are hunched over the lab bench in Melanie's lab.)

Richard: I don't know what to say, Melanie. Tom's procedure makes perfect sense when I read it, but your results are clearly different.

Melanie: Thanks for going through it with me. Now I have to decide what to do. I guess I'll try to talk to Tom once more. I still hope I'm wrong. I know that everything he's done since the *idk* project has been above reproach. It's been repeated in at least four labs by people who've used his ideas as a starting point for new projects. I heard today he has three job offers. If I go to Larry with this and I'm right, it could mean the end of his career.

Richard: Tom's been my friend for three years. I don't know what to advise you. I suppose you could tell Larry that you'd rather work on something else and just drop the whole thing. Maybe it is a technical problem and we're just missing something obvious.

Consider:

- A. Would you advise Melanie to confront Tom or proceed directly to Professor Johnston?
- B. Does Richard Estaben (friend of both Melanie and Tom) have any responsibility to act on the information he has?