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# Ivory towers shaken as professors are accused of faking research

by Ron Grossman  
Chicago Tribune

This is a tale of two professors. It is a cautionary tale, for in the heady days before their respective pedestals in the ivory tower crumbled, their careers were on superstar trajectory.

The University of Texas recently lured the more junior of the two, Karen Ruggiero, away from Harvard, part of the bait being \$100,000 to set up her own psychology lab. The other, Michael Bellesiles, won the coveted Bancroft Prize, the most prestigious honor in the field of American history. His employer, Emory University, was anticipating a bidding war to keep him on its Atlanta campus.

Both belonged to a rare professorial species, scholars whose work promised relevance beyond the groves of academe.

For those committed to making America a more just society, Ruggiero's research seemed to solve a thorny puzzle: Why, when women and minorities are asked if they've been discriminated against, do they consistently answer "yes" in numbers that fall far short of the victimization level claimed by their advocates?

Such underreporting, Ruggiero's research seemed to say, reflects the fact that what she called lower status groups, i.e. women and minorities, tend to blame themselves for failure, not to attribute it to discrimination, as people of higher status do.

Bellesiles, meanwhile, offered an ingenious new argument for proponents of gun control. While Charlton Heston and the National Rifle Association say guns are like apple pie and mother, so linked to our past that restricting the right to own them would be a violation of the American experience, Bellesiles countered with data purporting to show that America's love affair with guns is an acquired taste: gun ownership was rare in the age of the Founding Fathers, he claimed. Even before his award-winning book "Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun

Culture" was published in 2000, he was widely hailed by newspapers and magazines here and abroad.

Now, Ruggiero and Bellesiles each stand accused of faking their research.

On the scale of professorial failings, publishing fraudulent data is a far more deadly sin than plagiarism, the charge recently brought against the popular historian Stephen Ambrose. Accusations of plagiarism can be parried by contritely admitting you inadvertently forgot to put quotation marks around someone else's words or to footnote your indebtedness to other scholars.

But making up data is absolutely unforgivable. That is especially so in the social sciences, where professors are painfully aware of being considered not quite real scientists by colleagues in physics, chemistry and the other so-called hard sciences.

The two cases come at a particularly sensitive moment in the development of the social sciences. Increasingly, psychologists and others are being asked to render professional opinions on a range of social issues, from school shootings to the effects of watching violent television shows. Public confidence in their expertise depends upon the assumption that it is founded on honesty and the relentless pursuit of accuracy.

Chris Pascal, director of the U.S. Office of Research Integrity, which is mandated to see that the government gets honest work for its research dollars, says his department is concerned enough about the problem of faked data that it recently commissioned the first large-scale study of the issue. Pascal's office receives about 200 allegations of fraud yearly, finding culpability in about 20 to 30 cases. But he thinks the actual incidence of cheating is much larger. As part of the forthcoming study, academics will be surveyed and, under cloak of anonymity, asked if they, or professors they know, have ever cheated in their research.

"Ruggiero was an up-and-coming star," he said. "Why do some professors cheat? Maybe they think: 'I'm too smart.

I don't need to collect data.'"

If so, Ruggiero won't be subjected to the same temptation any time soon. The 33-year-old native of Canada has acknowledged the sin of scientific misconduct in letters to the scholarly journals that published her work, and resigned her position at the University of Texas. In late November, Ruggiero, whose research was supported by government grants, entered into an agreement with Pascal's office that bars her from working on federally funded projects for five years.

"It's hard to imagine another university hiring her," said Michael Domjan, the department chair to whom she confessed. "She was highly remorseful, very disturbed by the sequence of events."

Bellesiles' career is on life support. Though he has maintained his innocence, Emory has given him notice that it's time for show and tell. Dean Robert Paul put it in writing, saying that "because of the seriousness of the allegations" the university expects Bellesiles to prepare "a detailed, point-by-point response to these allegations."

Bellesiles chose to present his defense in the next issue of the William and Mary Quarterly, a prestigious scholarly journal scheduled to go into the mail in about a week. Upon getting their copy, Emory officials say, the university will decide what, if any, disciplinary action will be taken against the embattled professor.

Bellesiles' and Ruggiero's careers were each sent into tailspin by a failure to extend the most ordinary of academic courtesies. Scholarship functions on a collegial ethic. One researcher builds on the work of his or her predecessors, and to speed up the process, scholars are expected to freely share their data upon request. So a junior associate in Ruggiero's research projects, who followed her from Harvard to Texas, was shocked when she refused him that courtesy. Reportedly, the student, David Marx, complained to Harvard, where the two of them had done their work in 1999, and Harvard is said to have conducted an inquiry-though the university declines to discuss the matter.

Soon after that, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and its Office of Research Integrity, were alerted.

Jerry Suls, a professor of psychology at the University of Iowa and editor of the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, which published some of Ruggiero's research in October 2000, says her confession cleared up a mystery. Other psychologists had tried reproducing her experiments, a basic procedure in science where one investigator double-checks the work of another.

"Now they understand why they couldn't replicate her findings," says Suls, whose journal recently ran Ruggiero's retraction of her research.

In her scientific papers, Ruggiero claimed to have put a total of 600 test subjects through a series of experimental situations. For instance, a group of undergraduate women were given a supposed test of creativity and told they were being graded by male evaluators.

A hint was dropped that the evaluators might not be objective. Yet those women who got low grades were quicker to blame themselves than to attribute them to prejudice on the part of their judges.

Men, she claimed, do just the reverse: Enjoying the psychological protection of belonging to a high-status group, they were quick to ascribe their failures to discrimination.

"On the other hand, because the psychological consequences are so much more costly for low-status group members, they may not acknowledge discrimination even when it confronts them," Ruggiero wrote in "Less Pain and More to Gain: Why High-Status Group Members Blame Their Failure on Discrimination," a paper she published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and which she has now repudiated.

Bellesiles said he examined more than 10,000 court records from 40 counties spread across the United States. He said he had focused on criminal cases, looking to see how often guns were involved, and pored over probate records to see how frequently guns were part of someone's

estate.

"Contrary to the popular perception that imagines all settlers as hunters as well as farmers," he wrote in "Arming America," "the vast majority of those living in the British North American colonies had no use for firearms, which were costly, difficult to locate and maintain, and expensive to use."

Bellesiles first came under scrutiny from a non-academic quarter: the gun lobby and right-wingers. His findings were attacked in the National Review and other conservative publications, where he was accused of making up the data to fit an anti-gun bias.

Liberal publications were equally strong in praise of his book. Garry Wills, writing in the New York Times, said: "Bellesiles has dispersed the darkness that covered the gun's early history in America." The New York Review of Books gushed: "Bellesiles will have done us all a service if his book reduces the credibility of the fanatics who endow the Founding Fathers with posthumous membership in what has become a cult of the gun."

Eventually, both sides - Bellesiles and his detractors - asked Randolph Roth, an Ohio State University professor, to endorse their side of the argument. Roth's specialty is the history of Vermont, and Bellesiles said he had acquired part of his data by examining Vermont's probate records to see how frequently guns show up in inventories of estates.

"I offered Bellesiles to go to Vermont and check his data," said Roth, adding that he got a thanks-but-no-thanks response. His interest piqued, Roth decided to check those records anyway, and he compared what Bellesiles' book claimed was in those archives with what he himself found in the documents.

"I came to the conclusion," Roth said, "that the number and scope of his errors were extraordinary."

Bellesiles said that guns were present in only 14 percent of estates. Roth found them in 40 percent.

The Boston Globe checked out another

thesis advanced by Bellesiles, who says that not only were guns scarce in early America, many of those that did exist weren't serviceable. For instance, in Bellesiles' version of the story, a certain Vermont, Cotton Fletcher, had a "broken gun." But when a reporter looked at the records, that gentleman was only listed as having "a gun." There were other discrepancies of a similar kind.

James Lindgren, a Northwestern University law professor, was drawn to a note in Bellesiles' book reporting that he had used records from 19th century San Francisco. Thinking to have his own students analyze those documents, he asked Bellesiles where they were. Bellesiles said he found them in the archives of the San Francisco Superior Court.

"I called the San Francisco Superior Courthouse," Lindgren said, "and discovered that the complete runs of inventories he claims to have read there were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire."

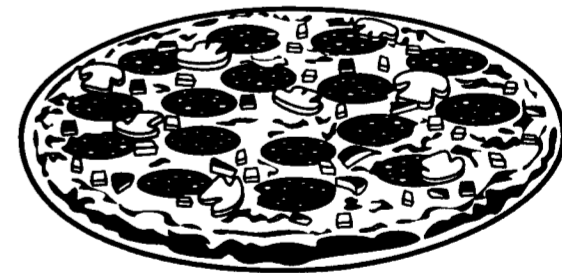
Confronted with the discrepancy, Bellesiles (who didn't respond to a request for an interview for this story) told supporters and critics that he must have seen those records someplace else, though he couldn't remember where.

Bellesiles e-mailed colleagues that he finally remembers drawing his data, not from records in San Francisco but from those in the entirely different county of Contra Costa, records housed in the Contra Costa County Historical Society. Kathleen Mero, a longtime archivist there, says she and other staff members are quite familiar with the controversy surrounding Bellesiles' book. She says she doesn't remember Bellesiles doing research at the group's storefront archives.

"If he had examined our records," Mero said, "he would have found guns all over the place."

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