

Fear of being exploited is stagnating our progress in science, say researchers

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Researchers in Laboratory. Credit: Rhoda Baer / National Cancer Institute

Science is a collaborative effort. What we know today would have never been, had it not been generations of scientists reusing and building on the work of their predecessors.

However, in [modern times](#), academia has become increasingly competitive and indeed rather hostile to the individual researchers. This is especially true for early-career researchers yet to secure tenure and build a name in their fields. Nowadays, scholars are left to compete with each other for citations of their published work, awards and funding.

So, understandably, many scientists have grown unwilling to cooperate and help their peers by sharing their work. They would "hide" their raw data, despite having taken years-long efforts to collect it. They would also conceal experiments that have failed or proved insignificant. All these practices would then result in different teams wasting precious time in running the same useless studies, rather than making further progress and contributing to the world's knowledge.

In the meantime, recent years have witnessed a growing global push for [open science](#): a movement standing for and celebrating an extensive set of good practices founded on transparency, collaboration and sharing.

This is why a German team of social psychologists from the LMU Munich and the University of Marburg ran a series of studies with scientists from across Europe and North America, in order to find what is driving researchers to withhold knowledge from their colleagues. Their results were recently published in the journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*.

"Knowledge hiding is problematic, not only for the private economy, but also in academia. One might say that knowledge hiding in the scientific domain is even more problematic because science should be all about acquiring, scrutinizing, and disseminating knowledge," explain the

authors of the study.

"If scientists were inclined to hide what they know from their peers, then accumulating [scientific knowledge](#) would be impossible and instead of maximizing the collective effort of discovering the truth, science would merely produce unconnected, insular, and probably non-replicable single effects."

According to their findings, a specific [personality trait](#) called "victim sensitivity" predicted knowledge hiding in science. Researchers with this personality trait are characterized by a latent fear of being exploited by others, and thus, are more suspicious about their colleagues.

The research team also tested whether reminding the participants about their identity as "researchers" might help or hinder collaboration. Their motivation to observe the impact of this approach is linked to prior studies, which showed that people are inclined to favor those belonging to their own group.

Surprisingly, though, when their sense of identity as "researchers" was activated, participants in one of the studies actually became more suspicious and ready to hide their knowledge. One explanation for this would be that being reminded of being a "researcher" activated an obstructive self-stereotype: a researcher is a highly ambitious person, but is cold, rather than caring and cooperative.

The good news, point out the authors of the study, is that—among the participants—the intention to hide knowledge was rather low.

However, the authors warn about a potential bias. It is likely that researchers who volunteered to take part in these studies were more cooperative to begin with. Additionally, it might be that in the context of self-reporting, the participants tried to present themselves as more

likable.

"We may need to change the stereotypical way we think about ourselves as researchers, in order to build trust and create a sharing environment among scientists," concludes the research team. "Identifying as a researcher should include being cooperative, other-oriented, and trustworthy: a [social identity](#) that stands for knowledge sharing—not knowledge hiding."

More information: Marlene Sophie Altenmüller et al, Among us: Fear of exploitation, suspiciousness, and social identity predict knowledge hiding among researchers, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.10011](#)

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