

Me, Myron Prinstein, and I: A Troubling Case of Confused Academic Identity

Mitchell J. Prinstein

*Department of Psychology
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Imagine you received a manuscript to review, written by . . . you! This article describes the perplexing, then somewhat chilling account of an apparent academic identity theft in which someone was submitting manuscripts for publication ostensibly written by a fictitious author whose name was remarkably similar to my own. Through this story, it becomes clear that the field of academia may be especially vulnerable to several types of fraudulent acts. These events have implications for the manner in which we verify authorship on journal articles, our hiring practices, and our reliance on unverified e-mail correspondence. Academics would be well advised to heed the lessons garnered from this peculiar experience.

Keywords: identity theft, authorship, ethics, professional behavior, academia

Note: This is a true story.

Some minor details have been omitted or modified to protect the privacy of all involved.

The Prinsteins are few in number. As I have been told, the name “Prinstein” was created at Ellis Island just before the start of the 20th century. Most of the Prinsteins originated in Eastern Europe and now live in North America, and perhaps due to the rarity of the name, many of us have become friends on Facebook in recent years in an effort to understand our genealogical connection.

The name Mitchell, and its derivatives, also are quite rare. According to the Social Security Administration (2011), the name Mitchell never has ranked above number 71 in popularity over the past century, and “Mitch” never has ranked above 425.

As one might imagine, therefore, I was taken by complete surprise to receive a manuscript review request several months ago with the corresponding author listed as “Mitch M. Prinstein.” According to the cover page of this manuscript, Mitch Prinstein had a M.D. degree and was affiliated with a Very Prestigious University (“VeryPrestigious U”).

My initial, albeit brief, reaction included enthusiasm and intrigue. Had I stumbled upon a distant relative? Might there be another clinical scientist within the field who shares a name so similar to my own? Would my CV magically double in size by someone else publishing manuscripts for me? Odd, however, was that the name was listed inconsistently; just a few lines

below on the title page was the author's contact information. Here the name was listed as "Myron M. Prinstein." A VeryPrestigious U street address (i.e., Room 305 on <Street> Ave) and an e-mail address, using a Yahoo e-mail account, also was listed. The paper listed a total of five authors, and the acknowledgments section indicated that the research had been funded by a grant from a well-known private foundation, awarded to Mitch Prinstein.

The events that followed over the next several weeks shocked me tremendously, not only because I was in the midst of a disturbing series of events but also because these events revealed several alarming weaknesses within the academic system that leave us all vulnerable. Now, months later, I have decided to share this story with the academic community with hopes that these events may inspire change in our publication process, our approach to trainees, and our professional correspondence.

What does one do after receiving an unfamiliar paper with his or her own name on it? First, I read the paper. It was a reasonably well-written empirical manuscript that was broadly but not precisely related to my own area of research interest. Within the manuscript, I noticed that two other "in press" papers coauthored by "Prinstein" were cited to support study hypotheses and theories. Both of these papers listed the name of an individual I later learned was a postbaccalaureate research assistant not named Prinstein (referred to here as "PostBac").

One of these papers was listed as "Prinstein, M., & PostBac (in press)" in a leading clinical psychology journal for which I, coincidentally, was serving as an Associate Editor. A second paper with PostBac, Prinstein, and a third author was cited as "in press" within the text; however, the reference section listed the paper as recently submitted to a third journal.

At best, this paper contained a few obvious errors. In addition to the inconsistent use of the name Mitch M. Prinstein (or Myron M. Prinstein) was the listing of a submitted article as "in press." Either this paper was sloppy or, more disturbing, I was in the midst of a case of identity theft.

Now with some concern and skepticism, I called a close colleague at VeryPrestigious U who is an active investigator in a similar area of inquiry.

"Have you ever heard of another Mitch Prinstein who works there with you at VeryPrestigious U? Perhaps Myron Prinstein? He's an MD; must be a psychiatrist?"

My colleague laughed that he most certainly would have noticed and mentioned to me immediately had he met a second person with such a similar name. While we talked on the phone, he checked the VeryPrestigious U directory. No listing for anyone named Prinstein was retrieved.

My colleague gave me the number of the Human Resources department at VeryPrestigious U. As I soon learned, VeryPrestigious U keeps detailed payroll and employment records that span decades. After a brief search of these records, I was told that there was no record of anyone named Prinstein ever having been employed or paid by VeryPrestigious U or its affiliates. Apparently, VeryPrestigious U strongly protects its brand, and when learning that the VeryPrestigious U affiliation was used improperly, the legal department quickly became involved. Hours later, I received confirmation that there were no records of anyone named Prinstein; however, the legal department would not likely pursue this issue further given that nothing yet had been published. I was asked to remain in contact if I learned that any of the manuscripts listed as references within the paper had gone to print.

I began a flurry of calls and Web searches, all with similar results. The private foundation listed within the manuscript had no record of any award ever having been made to anyone with the last name of Prinstein. The Editor of the leading clinical psychology journal reported that no

one else with the last name of Prinstein ever had submitted an article for review to the journal, and no paper with either PostBac or Prinstein as an author currently was in press.

Academia is a unique industry. Our currency is our ideas—our intellectual contributions. Our careers are based on the dissemination of these ideas to one another in academia and, we hope, eventually to others outside of academia who may benefit from what we have learned. For better or worse, this dissemination is inextricably linked to the reputation of individual investigators. It should not be the case that the reputation of an author can bring more attention to scientific findings, but unfortunately it sometimes does. Thus, many in academia work hard to develop and maintain a reputation that will help promote wide dissemination of their scientific contributions. Accordingly, tenure and promotion decisions often involve not only the quality of a candidate's work but also the candidate's reputation and standing within the field.

For many reasons, I may have chosen to discontinue my involvement in this peculiar manuscript review at this stage. I could have offered substantive comments regarding the content of the manuscript and shared my discoveries regarding Myron M. Prinstein (or Mitch M. Prinstein) with the journal editor through private correspondence. Alternatively, I could have alerted the Editor (and the Editor of the third journal to which a manuscript was purportedly submitted) about my concerns and extricated myself from the review process altogether given my conflict of interest (i.e., that my discoveries may have compromised my objectivity as an evaluator of the science).

However, I did not know whether the use of the name Mitch Prinstein may have extended beyond the three manuscripts that I was aware of. Could more papers with this name be under review, or in press? I wondered, if such papers did exist, would the difference between Mitch M. Prinstein and my own full name, Mitchell J. Prinstein, offer a sufficient distinction such that colleagues in the field would not mistake the work of another for my own? Certainly, many in the field with far more common names contend with mistaken identity issues all the time. The presence of an investigator with a similar name in the field was certainly not in itself a reason for me to persist with my investigation of this issue.

Did I have an ethical duty to report these discrepancies to anyone other than the three journal editors? If each editor also suspected impropriety, each of the three manuscripts likely would eventually be rejected for publication in these outlets. Would the papers then be submitted elsewhere? Would other editors be aware of the inconsistencies reported in the manuscript? As a journal editor myself, I confess that I rarely, if ever, have checked with a funding source to confirm the recipients of a reported grant award, nor have I contacted an editor of a different journal to ensure that a paper listed as "in press" indeed was accepted at the indicated journal. For that matter, other than the receipt of a copyright form with signatures on it that purportedly come from each of the manuscript's coauthors, I have not confirmed that each author existed and that each signature came from a different hand.

After much deliberation, and with great hesitation, I ultimately decided to proceed investigating the mystery of Myron M. Prinstein. I decided to do so to pursue two goals. First, before contacting either of the two remaining editors, I wanted to at least try to find a reasonable explanation for the inconsistent information I had received. Second, if someone had engaged in malfeasance, and this person was a trainee as I suspected, then there was an opportunity for a "teaching moment" from the trainees' current supervisor.

My next action was to approach Myron Prinstein himself at the yahoo.com e-mail address listed on the manuscript.

I sent the following e-mail. It was not wholly truthful but adhered to the privacy that is required in the peer review process.

Hi,

I recently became aware of your work, and was very interested in learning more about you given that we share the same name! Looking forward to hearing from you.

Thanks,

— Mitch

I also did a Google search for each of the other four authors. Each was listed on the manuscript with a specific institutional affiliation. I could find no information that any of the other authors existed.

One name did appear on Google, however. It was the name of the PostBac, who appeared as the first author on the manuscript that I was asked to review. The PostBac was listed as a research assistant in the lab of senior clinical investigator (“Senior Investigator”) at Another Very Prestigious University (“AVPU”). I called the number listed for PostBac and left a message with a coworker indicating that I had learned that PostBac was doing work with someone named Mitch M. Prinstein or Myron M. Prinstein, and I was trying to get in touch with the other Dr. Prinstein.

I was very surprised to receive an e-mail message rather quickly from “Mitch Prinstein” at the yahoo.com account. It read:

Dear Mitch,

I am a <VeryPrestigious U> affiliated psychiatrist. I have done very little research, but have a large amount of clinical experience. Recently, I have been interested in getting involved in [*research area deleted for privacy*]. The other authors on the paper are primarily clinical people. The student authors did most of the data analysis.

Yes, I see that this might be a problem. A student of mine actually worked on this paper with another student (who I don’t know very well, but was helpful and wrote part of the manuscript). The student said you called the office today. Would it be helpful if I published this paper with my full name? We have different initials, but I see this is definitely a concern.

I hope we may be able to resolve this. I guess it’s a small world. I am including [the Journal Editor] on this e-mail so he is aware of this—my impression was that this journal was blinded to reviews?

Mitch Prinstein

The e-mail inherently suggested that PostBac and Mitch/Myron Prinstein (MMP) must have spoken quite recently because information conveyed in my e-mail and voice mail messages were both contained in this response. In addition, information specifically regarding the manuscript was discussed in this e-mail, despite my deliberate attempts not to mention the manuscript explicitly in my correspondence.

Things progressed rather quickly at this point. First, I called the inhabitants of Room 305 in the building on Street Drive. The administrative assistant who answered the phone indicated that no one named Prinstein, Mitch, or Myron had ever been seen, received messages, or mail at that address. The State Board of Medicine and Board of Professional Regulation indicated that no one with the last name of Prinstein ever has registered for or renewed a license to practice medicine or psychology.

Seemingly within seconds after finishing these calls, my phone rang. My caller ID indicated the call was the fourth in a rapid series of missed calls from AVPU. I answered, and it was PostBac.

PostBac initially presented as calm and composed on the phone, although there was some urgency to discuss the issue at hand. I explained that as the only author on the paper who could be verified and contacted, it would be great to get some help on clarifying several of the discrepancies. I mentioned that these types of discrepancies on a submitted manuscript were taken very seriously. I also explained that I certainly was curious about who MMP was, which was why I was following up on this. PostBac calmly explained that the first meeting with MMP was while PostBac was a student at VeryPrestigious U. PostBac said that they had just finished speaking with MMP on the phone minutes earlier and that MMP was upset that he was being bothered by me. I asked for some clarification regarding the discrepancies in MMP's record (i.e., he is a practicing psychiatrist but has no license). PostBac became agitated, then insisted that they had no information about MMP. I asked whether I could speak with MMP directly. After a pause, I was given a phone number. I also asked whether there was anyone else who could verify MMP's identity.

"Is there anyone else who has been in contact with this other Mitch Prinstein?"

Response: I don't know of anyone.

". . . anyone who has taken a class with him?"

Response: I don't know.

". . . Can you please give me the name of the class you took with him at VeryPrestigious U?"

Response: I didn't take a class with him. I met him in the hallway outside of a class.

". . . Is there anyone who has ever had a meeting with him just before or after yours that you know must know who he is?"

Response: No.

". . . Really, no third person ever has seen him?"

Response: Sure, in Grand Rounds

"Oh! Was he the speaker?"

Response: No.

After the call ended, I tried the number PostBac said I could use to reach MMP. No one named Prinstein lived there.

Several hours later, the Editor contacted MMP at the yahoo.com e-mail address. In this correspondence, the Editor explained that the journal did not have a blind review policy. The Editor had consulted with the journal publisher and had conducted an independent search, verifying each of the discrepancies I had noted. The Editor asked MMP to provide some documentation/verification of his credentials. MMP responded by e-mail, addressed to me:

To be honest, I really don't see the problem here. In actuality, I am confused why you are involved.

I have taught as Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry Adjunct Faculty for 20 years. I am a private practice psychotherapist and psychiatrist. I do have an adjunct position which allows me to publish, write, and include the affiliation on my CV. If you would like, I am happy to obtain a letter from <VeryPrestigious U> that can back this up. My focus over the past 50 years though has been on a private practice. I have gone through this before, actually, and I am sure I can get you something to verify this.

My address is wrong on that author page. That is the general department's contact information. At this point, it would be best to give you my contact information at home or at my practice.

As far as the in press article, that is a 100% mistake on my part. We do have an article submitted to another journal. I thought we had submitted to [Journal Name], but as it turns out, we had not sent it yet. I thought we had formally submitted. It is ready to be submitted, however. We do intend to do this in the next month, so if this article was accepted, I would make that change. I am very sorry about that.

My work was funded with a small research grant of \$10,000 from the [XXX] foundation. Who did you speak to at the foundation?

Best,
MMP

Then I received another e-mail.

hi Mitch

Please do not contact me anymore regarding this matter.

MMP

I had determined that my first goal was met. It seemed clear to me that there was no Mitch/Myron Prinstein, and I contacted the third editor to ensure that the other manuscript would not be published without at least some verification of the authors. As it turned out, that manuscript already had been rejected within the course of the normal peer review process.

To finish my role in this aggravating and confusing episode, I called PostBac's supervisor, "Senior Investigator." I explained that I had become aware of a paper listing Senior Investigator's PostBac with someone whose name was incredibly similar to my own. When I began looking into the matter, it started to seem that there may be no other Mitch Prinstein. In addition, several other details in the manuscript had been proven incorrect. I mentioned that the PostBac may be stuck in an uncomfortable position because they are the only verifiable person on the paper and they may be asked to help clarify the inconsistencies. I told the Senior Investigator that they may want to be aware of the situation so that they can help the PostBac clear up the matter, in whatever way is necessary.

Senior Investigator's reaction surprised me greatly. Senior Investigator stated that they were already aware of the situation before I called because PostBac had mentioned that a professor named Mitch Prinstein at UNC (i.e., me) had been "harassing <PostBac> all day." Senior Investigator then explained that PostBac was an extremely talented and trusted member of the lab who had graduated from VeryPrestigious U and received glowing recommendations from several preeminent investigators/colleagues from other universities. Senior Investigator stated that PostBac had an excellent publication record already and was a terrific assistant.

This was an unexpected response, but I certainly appreciated Senior Investigator's advocacy and support of their trainee. After a long pause and much confusion on my part, I explained the discrepancies I had discovered and asked what Senior Investigator thought of these issues.

Senior Investigator replied that they have been aware for some time that PostBac was working with Mitch Prinstein. Senior Investigator said that they believed that this paper was coming from the data set that PostBac worked on at PostBac's former research assistant job, which was with "Senior Investigator2."

Indeed, Senior Investigator2 was listed in the acknowledgments of the paper I was asked to review.

“Sure, Mitch Prinstein. What about him?” Senior Investigator said, kind of matter-of-factly. Finally, I asked whether Senior Investigator had ever met Mitch Prinstein.

Response: No.

“. . . Have you ever spoken with him on the phone?”

Response: No.

Somewhat indignantly, Senior Investigator told me that they were not sure their own name would come up in the Human Resources department of their own university and that the issue of licensure was surely a mistake. “After all, you’ve gotten several e-mails from him I hear, and apparently he is pretty upset. What more do you need?” Senior Investigator asked me.

I attempted to explain that a yahoo.com account was not regulated or verifiable. However, Senior Investigator explained that with an upcoming grant deadline, there was no more time to discuss the matter. Senior Investigator agreed to ask PostBac for Senior Investigator2’s e-mail address so they could independently verify that all had been working on this paper together (MMP, PostBac, and Senior Investigator2). The next day, I was copied on an e-mail from Senior Investigator addressed to Senior Investigator2@gmail.com.

Meanwhile, I had found a different e-mail address for Senior Investigator2, at a university account, and asked whether they knew anything about someone named Mitch or Myron Prinstein publishing off of Senior Investigator2’s data set. Within minutes, I received a reply indicating that Senior Investigator2 had no knowledge of anyone named Prinstein.

I forwarded the note to Senior Investigator, who called me soon after with PostBac also on the line. We made no progress. Finally, PostBac mentioned that they would be meeting with MMP later that day. Senior Investigator suggested that we set up a conference call.

“The two Mitch Prinsteins will speak to each other and this all will finally be cleared up,” Senior Investigator said.

“I would love to speak with the other Mitch Prinstein,” I said.

We arranged the conference call for later that day. I called in. Senior Investigator called in. We waited.

MMP did not call in.

Neither did PostBac.

“Well, I am sure he is too upset about this whole thing to speak to any of us at this point,” Senior Investigator said. “I don’t blame him. It is very insulting!” they went on.

I decided that there was nothing more I could do, and perhaps already had done too much. The journal articles were no longer under consideration. I had notified PostBac’s supervisor (i.e., Senior Investigator), and it now was out of my hands. I expected not to hear anything about this again.

Two weeks passed.

Suddenly, I received an e-mail from Senior Investigator with a request to chat by phone. Senior Investigator explained the events of the prior two weeks.

By chance, Senior Investigator had been speaking with a colleague from another university whom they believed had provided one of the recommendations that led them to hire PostBac.

“Thanks for sending me <PostBac>. They’re great!” Senior Investigator told the colleague.

The colleague told Senior Investigator that they actually had never written such a recommendation. Senior Investigator realized that the recommendation came from a gmail.com account. In

fact, all of PostBac's letters of recommendation had come from Internet-based accounts. Senior Investigator began an independent investigation.

Findings revealed that PostBac never attended VeryPrestigious U. Several of the publications listed on PostBac's CV were existing publications, but PostBac actually was not an author. Rather, PostBac added their name to an existing authorship list. PostBac also had a history of felony arrests and a number of outstanding warrants. Senior Investigator alleged that PostBac had been laundering money from Senior Investigator's lab and running a separate fraudulent practice using the lab resources. Senior Investigator released PostBac from their position and was following up with the police.

Several months later, PostBac was rumored to be working as a research assistant at another lab. It is widely believed that this person has worked in at least four research labs in as many years and is currently engaged in the process of applying to graduate school in clinical psychology. It is truly not an exaggeration to say that this person may be your staff member or graduate applicant right now. Would you know? Are you sure?

I have had several months to remember this long and complicated episode that I never would have expected could happen to me. After all, as I joked with colleagues while it all was unfolding, "I don't know why my name was involved. All of my experience suggests that putting the name Mitch Prinstein on a manuscript submission is a surefire way to get it rejected!"

More seriously, I have thought about PostBac and sincerely hoped that this troubled young person is OK. The manuscript was not bad for an undergraduate-level trainee. There may be a talented scientist in this person, and I hope that they get whatever assistance they need to become a productive member of society.

I share this very personal story not to reflect on how it may affect me, or PostBac, however. Rather, I think there are some serious lessons in this episode for academia. I can think of at least four that are worth brief mention.

First, as each editor involved in this story told me at the time, it is frightening to consider how many published articles could be circulating our field with the names of authors who indeed were not involved in the scientific process, or perhaps do not even exist. Frankly, our current policies for verifying the identity of authors are woefully inadequate. If we are to learn from this story, we will need to create a better system to verify authorship, particularly as we have become perhaps overreliant on electronic means of communication.

Second, I have thought about the motive that may have led to these behaviors. My guess is that PostBac wants to apply to graduate school in clinical psychology. The admissions rate for clinical psychology Ph.D. programs (i.e., 1–10%) makes clinical psychology the most competitive higher education program in any field or discipline. Although thankfully most all applicants would not engage in fraudulent behaviors to strengthen their application, are we sending the right messages about the types of credentials that are most important to be evaluated favorably by the admissions committee? Personally, I do not find undergraduate students' publications to be a measure of the student's ability; it more often reflects the senior author's generosity. Perhaps students need a clearer message about how to get into graduate school. Amassing publication credits (either earned or forged) is not as important as some students may think.

Third, in today's electronic age, with multiple e-mail account services easily accessible to all, how do you know that you are e-mailing who you think you are e-mailing? Although our @university.edu accounts do not provide impenetrable protection, nonuniversity accounts provide no

protection. The opportunities for misuse of e-mail accounts and the potential damage that can be done must be recognized and protected against.

Last, have we become complacent when evaluating credentials? I confess that I never have looked on PsycINFO to verify that publications listed on a CV truly exist. I rarely have called references or contacted them using known e-mail addresses to verify their endorsement of a candidate. And when hiring a project staff member through informal channels (i.e., not through a standardized application process), I have never asked for an official transcript. I have not done any of these things.

Have you?

REFERENCE

Social Security Administration. (2011). *Popular baby names*. Retrieved from <http://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/>