

Authorship Norms: Credit and Roles

Let me start by saying, there is nothing normal about authorship norms.

As a journal editor, I regularly receive questions about authorship policies and practices, both in a general context and specific to the journal. The variety of questions and cases are mind-boggling. While there has been a lot of attention paid to the topic of authorship over the years, in both the scholarly literature and the more mainstream discourse in higher education, none of it seems to alleviate the confusion around this issue (my own included).

Some of the confusion may be due to the growing complexity of roles, the various factors and interpersonal dynamics that surface in collaborative ventures and the diversity of the standards and practices in different fields and across disciplines.

There are two aspects to this topic that are worth discussion. This month's editorial is a look at what warrants authorship, including the various roles and customs. May's editorial will be an examination of the practices across different disciplines, what they signify and implications for cross-disciplinary research and publication.

So, why does this issue of authorship even matter? With a climate of open access and collaboration, does credit really matter? After all, academic scholars and researchers have an intrinsic mission to be leaders in education, further knowledge, and contribute to innovation and practice. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. Academic success is built on reputation and reputation is built on publication. So in spite of all the altruistic motives, the system for reward and advancement is built on what is essentially a competitive model: "At the Washington Conference on Ethics, Edward Huth, editor of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, emphasized that authorship is the currency of academic medicine."¹ Throughout the years and through the disciplines, this statement has been appropriated to fit other contexts, but the message is the same: in academia, authorship matters. Decisions about tenure, promotion, funding, and other professional opportunities are predicated on the reputation of a scholar or researcher.

So, Who's an Author Anyway?

As I have said before, librarianship is, by its nature, very collaborative and many innovations are driven by the organization at large. Much of the published literature is derived from practical applications or organization-wide efforts. Many individuals in multiple units within an organization (or even across organizations) may have contributed to the service, tool, program, or other creative professional effort—which may be the crux of published research. The collaborative nature of librarianship is further complicated by the likelihood that organizationally driven projects fall under work-for-hire, even in institutions that cede the ownership to the faculty member or researcher. Untangling credit and "ownership" for such projects, and the publications associated with them is convoluted.

Even before starting to write a paper on the project, there are already questions about roles:

- Should those who participated in the project be given co-authorship credit?
- What about the person who writes the code for the project? What about the person who wrote the grant to fund the project? Or other supporting roles?

Whichever role someone played with the implementation of a project, should they be an author, even if they don't write a word for the article? What is the reverse situa-

tion occurs and someone on the project does not want to publish on the project at all? Do they have some influence to stop the publication?

Should anyone involved in the project be invited to co-author and participate in the writing process? Or is it okay if a few enterprising individuals take the ball and run with it?

With a nod to a similar example that is present in some science disciplines: it may not be uncommon for graduate students who publish to put their advisor on the article as a co-author or to put the name of the lab manager on the paper even if neither worked on that specific project or wrote any part of the paper. This and other disciplinary models will be discussed in the May editorial but it serves here to demonstrate how different roles in a research project are acknowledged with authorship credit.

Using data as an example, even with the acknowledgement that data are not copyrightable, the owner or the collector of the data is usually cited or acknowledged. In some cases, the owner controls access to the data and, in that case, may negotiate certain credits. I know of one researcher in a social science discipline who had an appealing dataset that could be widely used by other researchers to extend scholarship in that area. He would not allow anyone to use his dataset if they did not give him full authorship credit. Some may consider this ethically questionable (and it certainly flies in the face of open access values) but it proves the old adage that possession is 9/10 of the law.

These different roles on the actual research or operational project may follow-through to similar roles when it comes time to write up the research. For example, the individual analyzing the data may write up the methods and/or analysis section. When thinking about authoring a paper, the different roles also come into play. What about the individual who does the literature review? Or even just the citations or bibliography?

It may seem pedantic to address the details of roles and their attendant expectations related to authorship and credit. However, it is upon these details that projects may succeed or fail—and, perhaps more significantly, that collaborations may be sustained or cease. There are examples of authors or researchers having a “falling out” all over academe and industry, at all levels from founding CEOs to long-time research partners to college students doing group work. Taking a moment to surface the expectations of each participant, clarify their role in the project and agree on the goals of the research is an effort worth making.

There are best practices and guidelines from various authorities on authorship and contributor roles. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has a very clear expectation of the author roles which has been somewhat controversial:

- “Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
- Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
- Final approval of the version to be published; AND
- Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.”²

COPE, the Committee on Publication Ethics, published a discussion document on “What Constitutes Authorship?”³ that examines the definitions of authors across several disciplines and specifically assesses the criteria adopted by ICMJE. The COPE document dissects the roles listed above in addition to critiquing them for specific cases. I, too, would argue that the ICMJE criteria are fairly myopic and may raise issues of power differentials and idiosyncrasies of institutional or disciplinary culture. As restrictive as these criteria are, however, it defines the different roles (although not all of them) that may come into play; as such, I would suggest that considering *any* of the activities listed above might earn authorship credit rather than requiring all of them.

Dissenting Authors

It also sometimes occurs that co-researchers or co-authors have a disagreement about the treatment of their study and the conclusions. This can lead to a number of questions, not the least of which is how the project moves forward. If a consensus cannot be reached, there are a number of resolutions that may occur:

- each author may publish on the project separately (which may introduce contradictory perspectives, undermining the research and potentially, the reputations of the researchers)
- the authors may agree to publish separately in certain venues that do not overlap and thus, avoid the conflict above
- one author may cede the privilege to publish to the other
- both may agree that neither will publish

I have seen each of these scenarios play out. The decision about who will author is at the discretion of the authors. The journal and the editor are not in the role of arbiter. The journal editor is a steward of the journal and maintains the professional and ethical standards of the journal. While maintaining academic integrity is a priority, interpersonal dynamics between authors should be handled between the authors. The journal may take action when authorship is in question as most journals require the submitting authors to indicate that the submission is their own work. COPE also provides assistance and best practices to journal editors: in this case, they advise: "Having a clear journal policy that can be called upon, and requiring free-text statements of contribution (rather than check-boxes), can help to dissuade individuals from claiming unfair authorship."⁴ To this end, *C&RL* has created a LibGuide for authors and reviewers in effort to provide transparency and insight into the process and standards.

Questionable Practices

The interesting point about practices is that what some disciplines may consider a "norm, others may frown on." Ghost authorship⁵, similar to ghostwriting in novels or (auto)biographies, is the case wherein one of the individuals authoring the article is intentionally left off. The most common occurrence of this tends to be when an individual has the knowledge/expertise and has done the research but may not communicate their findings effectively and seeks someone to translate their research into writing. This may also occur for purposes of increasing the perceived role of the other authors or obscuring some of the motivation behind the publication (Monsanto).

Gift or honorary authorship is the opposite situation. It may be as straightforward as wanting to memorialize or acknowledge someone's larger contributions. It is also, unfortunately, not uncommon for this practice to serve as a way to help an individual who may not have as much scholarly activity to achieve tenure.

A recent paper presented at a conference on authorship reported the results of a study that collected the responses of publishers to a manufactured query from a fictional researcher desperate for publications in a bid for tenure. The fictional researcher's email asked to be added to any manuscript that they were considering for publication. While the majority declined, "Nineteen publishers and 3 stand-alone journals agreed to add a coauthor name to an article they received without any specific contribution."⁶

A recent example, reported in *Nature*, also exposed a practice of parents putting their children's names on articles in an effort to make them more competitive in college admissions.⁷ These cases underscore the conflict inherent in academic research—that the incentives may undermine the integrity of the process.

Interestingly, while questions of authorship are often concerned with someone getting credit as an author and whether it is deserved or not, the opposite situation may also be a concern. There are situations where someone's name appears on a paper who

may not have acceded to it.⁸ It is entirely possible that such a situation might occur in an effort to give credit for significant assistance. It could also just be an oversight. From a more mercenary point of view, it could be an effort to build one's own reputation by capitalizing on someone else's who is more established in the field.

Alternatives to Authorship

There may be alternatives to authorship that should also be considered. Acknowledgements and attributions are a possibility should the co-author's contribution be consistent with that level of engagement. However, this assumes that the individual has no concerns about the publication of the paper and the way the project was presented.

It is encouraged to be consistent about citing collectors or "owners" of datasets used, crediting individuals who worked on a project or service or acknowledging experts who may have provided advice or assistance that doesn't rise to the level of authorship.

My experience as an editor has been that, in some cases, one of the authors or participants of an article may be unable to be contacted, either by their co-authors or by the journal staff requesting an authorship agreement. When this occurs, we have been asked if the co-author who is unable to be reached also has to provide an author agreement. The answer is Yes, each author must agree to the publication in the journal. In rare circumstances (which include death and the desire to memorialize an individual's contribution), the agreement may be waived. Nevertheless, it is important to have the author acknowledgement and publication agreement. While authors only give limited rights to their article to *College & Research Libraries*, other publications may not allow published authors to retain copyright. In which case, author should be thoughtful about the agreements they sign while editors and publishers should be responsive to the disciplines and fields they serve.

Notes

1. Berk, Robert N. "Irresponsible coauthorship." *American Journal of Roentgenology* 152, no. 4 (1989): 719–720.

2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. "Defining the role of authors and contributors," (2014), available online at <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html> [accessed 6 February 2018].

3. Committee on Publication Ethics. "What Constitutes Authorship?" (COPE Council, 2014), available online at http://publicationethics.org/files/Authorship_DiscussionDocument.pdf [accessed 6 February 2018].

4. Committee on Publication Ethics. "What Constitutes Authorship?" (COPE Council, 2014), available online at http://publicationethics.org/files/Authorship_DiscussionDocument.pdf [accessed 6 February 2018].

5. Shaw, David, and Bernice Elger. "The ghost collaborator." *Accountability in Research* 24, no. 1 (2017): 43–51.

6. Else, Holly. "Predatory journals offer 'authorship for sale.'" *Times Higher Education*, September 21, 2017, available online at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/predatory-journals-offer-authorship-sale> [accessed 6 February 2018].

7. Zastrow, Mark. "Kid co-authors in South Korea spur government probe." *Nature*, February 2, 2018, available online at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-01512-5> [accessed 6 February 2018].

8. Janssens, Cecile. "Let's Clarify Authorship on Scientific Papers." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 11, 2014, available online at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Lets-Clarify-Authorship-on/148287> [accessed 6 February 2018].