

Review Article

Handle with care: authorship challenges and conflicts in research publication

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ABSTRACT

This review article explores how to determine correct authorship order, addresses disputes among co-authors over authorship credit, identifies misconduct, and offers recommendations to resolve such conflicts. An electronic literature search was conducted using keywords such as “authorship,” “authorship conflict,” “publication abuses” “co-authorship” and “co-authorship order,” among others. Over 100 free full-text articles published between 2010 and 2024 were reviewed. The review presents different perspectives of authorship disputes, how to decide the order of authorship, authorship abuse, and various types of scientific misconduct. Additionally, suggestions from various authorities on improving current authorship practices are included.

Keywords: Authorship, Authorship conflict, Co-authorship, Publication abuses

INTRODUCTION

Scientific paper publications are the best mode for sharing knowledge, new findings, and innovations, keeping other researchers informed. For researchers, having their names on scientific papers shows their innovation and originality, particularly for young scholars being an author of scientific papers is an achievement. It not only recognizes their hard work but helps them to build a strong academic profile, which is crucial for a successful career in academia and research. Unfortunately, this valuable opportunity for young researchers can sometimes be compromised by conflicts between co-authors.

This paper focused on the problems around authorship disputes among co-authors, issues among young authors over authorship credit, malpractices in publication by senior author's and recommendation to avoid such incidents which has been identified a major topic in research integrity discussions.

WORKING TOGETHER IN SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION

Working together is essential to successfully disseminating research. Teamwork fosters creativity, problem-solving, and, leading to more thorough and reliable findings. Over the last 20 years, there has been a steady increase in papers written by teams rather than individuals show that as more authors contribute the challenges also grow.¹ As a result, the traditional system of scientific authorship is struggling to keep up with the rise in multi-author studies. Challenges that emerge from collaboration might not be fully anticipated by authors, particularly those early in their careers. Establishing clear authorship conditions at the initial phase of a collaborative project can help prevent disputes or dissatisfaction from occurring later on.²

Despite the extensive literature on research collaborations, to the best of our knowledge, no study has thoroughly addressed this issue and additionally, no clear

explanations have been offered to understand the dynamics behind the disagreements among authors over shared publications.

Importance of authorship

Authorship is a way to recognize scientific innovation work and a method of developing new league of information and knowledge.³ Authorship comes with significant benefits and responsibilities as well. Authorship not only brings valuable recognition from peer and fields of academics and research experts. Moreover, a source of patents and honorarium grants for new research projects. Graduate and master research programs require compulsory periodical publication of one or more papers.

AUTHORSHIP DISPUTES

The criteria for authorship include contributions to the study's conception, design, data collection, analysis, drafting, revising, and final approval of the publication. Authorship disputes, which account for 2% to 11% of scientific disagreements, often arise due to the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of researchers, especially in multidisciplinary projects.⁴ These conflicts can sometimes lead to the delay or termination of the research project. The increasing prevalence of authorship disputes is reflected in the growing number of requests to add or remove names from manuscript, even after submission. While collaboration is common in research, it can be challenging, particularly in large or interdepartmental projects where multiple authorships are involved.

Authorship disputes can arise over various issues, including the order of authorship, the inclusion or exclusion of authors in the middle of the study and the total number of authors. Conversely, there are examples of refusing to be associated by fellow authors with a manuscript found misconduct such as plagiarism, is uncovered.

The order of authorship should be agreed upon by all co-authors before beginning the study, making it a collective decision and well role-defining with duration of content submission. In multicenter trials, research groups often include a large number of researchers either from same of different center. Therefore, the corresponding author is responsible for specifying and registering the group name and clearly identifying the members who are entitled to take credit and responsibility for the work as authors.

Types of authorship disputes

Authorship disputes arising from manipulation

The disagreement over scientific integrity, where one or more authors attempt to reshape the findings to align with a preferred narrative, affecting both the spirit of collaboration and the release of impartial, accurate data.

Scenario: Take an example of a multicenter paper about nurse's job satisfaction. However, as the paper nears publication, the principal author objects to the results from the one center because they are not inclined with the hypothesis of the principal investigator and do not match with other centers findings. The principal author insists on omitting these findings, or else try to block the publication. Instead of fostering collaboration, this situation can lead to the suppression of important scientific information due to the influence of a coauthor.

Conflict over revisions and the approval process

Refers to disagreements among co-authors about changes made to a manuscript during the revision phase. It may involve disputes over the content, direction or extent of revisions.

Scenario: A co-author does not agree with the correction, revision made by another(s) and attempts to delay the paper's publication or a co-author complaint of not being provided enough opportunities to give their inputs into the revision process. Let's take an extreme but not rare example where an author who disagrees with their co-author's views and direction of the manuscript. They refuse to consent to the submission unless all their suggestions are fully implemented, even if the other co-authors do not agree with these changes. This could result in the paper being stalled indefinitely or if it is submitted, it may lead to conflicts among the co-authors when the journal requests revisions.

I have experienced this in a paper written during the COVID-19 pandemic that never reached the journal despite being written thoroughly and moreover lost its relevance in today's scenarios.

Publication delay by authors: When one or more participating authors breakdown the pace of work and delay the project, not responding to communications, affect entire team

When the process of writing a paper drags on too long, communication among co-authors can completely break down, often due to clashes of differences of ideology, professional rivalries or even academic envy. This situation will stop any further progress of publication. Here the role of the corresponding author becomes more relevant as he/she has to make a common consensus among all co-authors and despite the following personnel differences the submission of the manuscript should meet.

Communication Breakdown intentionally/unintentionally

Scenario: The practice of submitting a paper by the corresponding author without taking other co-authors in confidence appears to be happening more frequently nowadays. It is a worrying trend and it is contrary to professional standards and against journal policy. Many of my colleague authors have been victims of such malpractice where the first author or corresponding did

not had words before uploading the manuscript to the journal. Sometimes such tactics are used to bypass other co-authors to raise their voice regarding authorship credit.

Dispute over authorship positions

When the senior author like principal investigator or thesis guide decides authorship positions by using their powerful status.

Scenario: A manuscript having senior professors as co-authors is a probable problematic case. Because they have much greater power and experience to dictating authorship order and who will be co-author without consulting others involved.⁵ In the most extreme scenarios, they may claim the first position and even all of the credit for novice research that was largely carried out by their students.⁶

CRITERIA OF DECIDING AUTHORSHIP CREDIT

Publications are central to academic life, enhancing the credibility of research and bringing recognition to the authors. An author is someone who meets all the established criteria for authorship.⁷ There is no fit for all guidelines to decide the order of authorship in publications and there are different schools of thought. Usually, the extent of involvement and the amount of participation decides the order of authorship. Each author must have made a significant contribution to the work to take. Here some positions of authorship are explained.

First authorship

The most common disputes regarding authorship order arise for the first author slot.⁴ Conservatively the publication papers are being cited by the first author's name. The first authorship should be considered for the author who has done most of the work and is available throughout the study. The order of authorship should not change abruptly without proper justification and obtaining other co-authors' consent. It affects the credibility of the manuscript too.⁸

Senior authorship

The last slot of the author's name in a paper given to the senior author implicitly take responsibility for the scientific accuracy of the study. The senior authors are those who usually direct, oversee, plan and ensure the authenticity of the work accountable for the entire project.⁹ Here a counter question arises that can be this role should be given to someone solely based on their seniority, rank or reputation in the field or depends on their contributions.

Corresponding author

The corresponding author bears significant moral and ethical responsibilities and must ensure accurate

authorship representation. However, the choice of corresponding author is crucial, as inexperienced students are sometimes assigned this role, which can be risky in critical situations, such as ethics investigations.¹⁰ The corresponding author should be carefully chosen, considering their ability to fulfill these obligations.^{2,4} The corresponding author is responsible for communicating with editors and readers, managing the submission process, and verifying authorship claims.¹¹ Typically, this role is held by the first or last author, who should be deeply involved in the research to address concerns and provide information on co-author contributions.

Counter view

Beyond the genuineness of the corresponding author's statements regarding authorship and contributions, the most significant weakness in academic publishing is the inability of editors and publishers to independently verify these claims, especially those concerning author contributions. In my view, unlike in the past, the role of the corresponding author may have lost its significance. The reliance on the honesty of the corresponding author, whose claims cannot be easily verified, could lead to a decline in trust in science. Therefore, new approaches to managing authorship are needed.

Middle or contributing authors

The individuals listed between the first and senior authors are middle order authors. The ordering of middle authors should reflect their relative contribution to the work. They also contribute significantly to the study, such as by collecting data, analyzing results, or writing sections, but do not lead or manage the project.³ While their work is essential, middle authorship often carries less prestige.¹² The order of middle authors may reflect their contribution level, though this varies. Disputes over authorship order can arise, so it's recommended to discuss and agree on criteria early in the research process to avoid conflicts. Clear communication before starting paper is key to resolving these issues.¹³

Honorary authorship

The distinction between "guest" authorship and "honorary" or "gift" authorship is minimal. 'Guest' authorship refers to credit given to individuals who have not contributed to the work but are included because their name might increase the paper's prestige and likelihood of acceptance by the journal.¹⁴ Surveys over the years have found that guest or honorary authorship occurs in 11-60% of cases. 1 Papers with more than five authors are more likely to include "honorary" authors compared to those with three or fewer. Authorship is often "gifted" to colleagues with lower academic ranks, friends, fewer recent publications, department heads or those who performed non-author tasks like reviewing the manuscript, providing care, recruiting study subjects or contributing illustrations.¹⁵

Ghost authorship

A particularly severe form of ghost authorship is known as "denial of authorship." There are several accounts of this type of authorship exploit I have encountered. It is important to emphasize that denial of authorship can be considered a form of plagiarism. Ghost authorship is when individuals contribute to the writing of a manuscript but are not credited in the paper as contributing author.³

Type I: Another instance of ghost authorship occurs when the contributions of a junior researcher or postgraduate student are suppressed. No wonder if they are excluded from the author list despite contributing in any of the aspects related to preparing of manuscript.

Type-II: When an individual not involved in the research writes the initial draft, serves as the author's editor and help to produces a higher-quality manuscript, thus saving the "author's" time.

Type-III: The third, and most dangerous, type of ghost authorship involves a medical writer employed by a pharmaceutical or device company who drafts the manuscript. The company then seeks approval from a reputable scientist to have their name listed as the author of the work and get it published by their name. Here the real author is one who was biased and wrote a "scripted" manuscript.

Young authors should recognize the significance of two key positions in authorship, the first and the last authorship. Both positions often carry the responsibility of the corresponding author. Early in a career, being both the first author and the corresponding author is ideal. As a career advances, being the last author and corresponding author indicates that the paper originates from one's unit, with the last author taking primary responsibility, while a younger colleague, credited as the first author, has made significant contributions.

Coercive authorship

Coercive authorship is a situation where someone is granted authorship due to their seniority or supervisory position over subordinate investigators. For example, a department chair may be engaging in coercion if they insist on being listed as an author on all papers published by their department, despite having little or no intellectual contribution to them.

CHOOSING A WRITING PARTNER

Selecting a writing partner and planning to collaborate can be an exciting or exhausting endeavor, aim to find similar mindset people with whom communication comfort and understating of writing a paper is a priority.¹⁶ Generally, we found working together as a task to create networking and expending possibilities of growth by learning from each other and finding exposers to different

centers, and people. In the beginning, it's easy to assume that everything will go smoothly and the majority of stakeholder contributes their efforts and time for discussion and planning. The choice of a writing partner might be influenced by work-related factors or institutional requirements, depending on the article's content.¹⁷

Author's input

As per my experience the partnership should be based on personal choice and likely driven by a shared interest in a particular subject, common work experiences, and aligned beliefs and values. It is essential to discuss authorship in detail and with flexibility. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommends that to claim authorship credit, all authors must have made important contributions to the research from the start, including planning the study, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the manuscript and final approval of the scholarly work.¹⁸

Issues of choosing a writing partner

Conflict arises between authors due to differences in beliefs and values and, the working style of their work. It's important to consider how understanding content and style of writing can influence teamwork. Commonly conflicts arise if these issues aren't addressed early on, co-writing can become challenging.¹⁹

AUTHORSHIP CARRIES SIGNIFICANT RESPONSIBILITIES

Writing a scientific paper means fully supporting the quality and content of the work. Authors can only accept this responsibility if they are intellectually involved in both the research and the writing of the manuscript. Authorship is not just an ethical obligation but also a duty to ensure a fair research environment.

SUBSTANTIAL CONTRIBUTION AND INTELLECTUAL INVOLVEMENT OF AUTHORS

A key question comes up when an author leaves a study before it's finished that should they still be credited as an author if they made significant contributions but didn't stay until the end. This issue is important for two reasons. First, transparency and accountability are crucial in research.⁹ If someone who played a major role leaves and isn't credited, it can create a false picture of who was involved. To keep things clear it's important to acknowledge everyone who contributed. Secondly, co-authorship is about giving credit where it's due. Leaving out a researcher who made significant contributions would be unfair and misrepresent their role, especially if their input was just as important as that of the others. So, giving proper credit through co-authorship is vital for ensuring transparency, accountability and fairness.

Author's input

Authorship isn't simply about making significant contributions to the research as a whole. Likewise, being part of the research group doesn't automatically entitle someone to co-authorship on every paper produced.

GUIDELINES OF AUTHORSHIP

The most widely accepted guidelines for authorship were created by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). This group had its first meeting in 1978 in Vancouver, city of Canada.²⁰ The joint efforts of this group resulted in the uniform requirements for manuscripts were released in 1979.³ These guidelines, which have been updated several times and adopted by many journals, state that authorship should be based on significant contributions to the research, such as designing the study, collecting or analyzing data or writing and revising the paper.

Simply providing funding or overseeing the project does not qualify someone for authorship. Every listed author must meet these criteria and take responsibility for their part of the work.

Substantial contributions

The authors should have participated in the conception of the study design, data collection, and analysis writing manuscript.

Drafting or revising

The work is not completed by writing the manuscript and uploading it to the journal platform, the authors have to be available for revisions requested by the journal.

Approval of the final draft

The authors have to provide their approval and consent to the journal for publication. If there is any conflict among participating authors, they have to resolve it before uploading the paper.

Accountability

The authors have to ensure accuracy and integrity of research work is intact and all possible shortcomings have been properly addressed. The order of authorship should reflect contribution made by authors.

The decision regarding whether the student should be listed as the first author can vary, some principal investigators place the student first, while others list themselves. This decision might best be determined by the overall efforts each individual invested in the project. The common practice of avoiding pronouns like 'I,' 'me,' and 'mine' in all publications is both reasonable and logical.

Even in single-author papers, is a team effort. Using plural pronouns acknowledges their vital contributions to our success. In a multi-author paper, the author has no choice but to refer to it as 'our work' instead of 'my paper'.

THE TACTICS OF AUTHORSHIP ABUSE

The recent surge in the 'publish or perish' mentality, along with the rush to increase publication numbers, has given rise to a new culture of authorship abuse. While the responsibility for determining authorship primarily relies on the researchers, editorial boards can play a crucial role in minimizing this abuse as much as possible.

The white bull effect

Author, encountered coercion in one authorship dispute. One of the co-authors from my paper was forced to withdraw an in-press manuscript unless authorship was granted. These disputes were driven by demands from the individual who did not meet the essential authorship criteria. Kwok refers to the practice of senior figures forcing themselves onto the publications of subordinates or junior researchers without making a significant intellectual contribution as the 'White Bull effect'.²¹

HOW TO ADDRESS AUTHORSHIP DISPUTES

Authorship issues and inevitable and working together comes with a lot of friendships turning into arguments. In my opinion, once the issues arise the trust of authors among them shaken and making it difficult to resolve. Although there can be an advisory committee or academic cell to mediate if they are too helpless no reputed journal will publish a paper having conflict among co-authors. Many universities and research institutions have set up their own guidelines for authorship to avoid such conflicts. All research institutions, journals, and scientific societies should develop and promote authorship policies.

Author believes that clear authorship policies if made a part of our scientific culture, would greatly reduce cases of authorship abuse and help resolve disputes more swiftly. An important way to prevent these issues is by carefully choosing your collaborators. Here are some recommendations to help you avoid conflicts. Clearly define authorship roles and task assignments at the beginning of the collaboration, ideally formalizing them in a written agreement. Do not involve authors just because they are "Friends" Criteria for choosing co-authors should be based on the requirement of research work. Authorship order, corresponding authorship senior authorship and publication fee should be discussed openly prior to starting work. Engage in collaborations driven by shared scientific passion, with a commitment to openly sharing ideas and resources.

Consider using "collaborators' agreements to outline the terms of the collaboration, helping to prevent

misunderstandings. Written agreements to foster trust and collegiality, serving as a safeguard against the unprofessional behavior of one or more authors. Mutual respect and teamwork work is crucial in any collaboration be assertive to smell any signs of disrespect, which could indicate potential issues.

Maintain open lines of communication to address concerns promptly and ensure that agreements are upheld. Periodic discussions help monitor progress and may necessitate renegotiating authorship as the project evolves. Acknowledge the contributions of those providing reagents or other support in the manuscript's acknowledgment section. Ensure that everyone involved in the project is making a meaningful contribution to its intellectual development.

Negotiating and influencing these changes required us to express our concerns honestly and directly. This flexible approach to writing helped us build trust in each other's abilities. Failure to agree on ownership can lead to complications and conflicts, resulting in unpleasantness and dissatisfaction for all involved.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PUBLISHING JOURNALS

A review study on authorship guidelines written by Elizabeth Wager reported that 41% of journals have no guidelines regarding authorship contributions, 29% followed ICMJE guidelines, whereas 14% of journals required authors to approve the manuscript and only 9% sought specific contributions of each author to approve the manuscript. The results were collaborated after examining 324 randomly selected journals.²² Although educating new authors about authorship and scientific research conduct guidelines is a difficult task journals have a moral responsibility to do so and make sure of the genuineness of authorship contributions.

CONCLUSION

To address authorship issues effectively, scientists, institutions, professional organizations and journals must collaborate to establish uniform authorship policies and educate students and fellows on publication ethics. By ensuring active participation from all co-authors, research integrity, quality and productivity can improve and misuse of the reward system can be prevented.

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